

Felix Cross
161589
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Dr G. Holgate

Gesualdo's Hidden Opera: A dramaturgical analysis of *Moro lasso*.
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"Words make you think a thought; music makes you feel a feeling; a song makes you feel a thought." Yip Harburg.

Introduction

This report is an early-stage study for a proposed larger thesis on musical dramaturgy, in which I will look at interpretations of dramatic narratives. I am particularly interested in exploring the circumstances where the demands of the emotional narrative collide with the traditions of compositional structures. In this regard, one might expect to see a possible music-drama line stretching backwards from Stephen Sondheim to include Leonard Bernstein, then Richard Wagner, Franz Schubert and Christoph Gluck. However, I would add a much earlier figure to this list; the Late Renaissance Italian composer Carlo Gesualdo (1566-1613).

For this report, I will focus on one particular work by Gesualdo: *Moro lasso*, the 17th madrigal in his Sixth Book of Madrigals published on 25 July 1611. Written, as were all his other madrigals, for five voices (S1,S2,A,T,B), it exemplifies his later chromatic approach to setting texts. As Watkins says,

Gesualdo has gone beyond the Mannerist principle of creating spectacular effects; he is an expressionist, deploying both words and music to summon buried psychological states (1991: p365)

I will show through music and text analysis that, whilst Gesualdo was a composer of his time in many ways (adopting many of the accepted madrigalisms such as word-painting) and who displayed highly competent techniques of voice-leading, he crucially employed several methods that were beyond the traditional norms of his period, in order to most effectively interpret his chosen text. As Reese explains, “Expression was his primary interest – emotional expression, not concerned with eye-music or musical description of individual words” (1959: p431).

I will show that Gesualdo used compositional techniques that set him apart to the extent that, as Gerald Place notes "even 20th century ears may take a moment to adjust". Most significantly, I will argue that *Moro lasso*, as an example of his later works, can be effectively analysed through the prism of

dramaturgy, following a narrative in ways that we might look at recognised lyric composers. As Alex Ross points out, “Even though he had no apparent contact with the world of opera, his madrigals have the vividness of dramatic scenes.” (2011: 84-92)

My interest in this particular aspect of his compositions stems from my own work as a composer/lyricist in musical–theatre. I am also an occasional composer of theological music, where the drive to find the most appropriate interpretation of narratives regularly tests the worth of musical structures. Much of Gesualdo’s later work exemplifies this, as Cohn notes: “In Gesualdo’s madrigals, death is experienced rather than witnessed; its uncanny potential is masked by anguish.” (2004: p292). Watkins explains in more practical terms, the emotional thru-lines at the heart of Gesualdo’s work:

...his musical language sprang from an exaggerated sensitivity to the emotional tone of the text. This in turn demanded a heightened capacity for making a striking and swift musical response to a whole catalogue of affects. (1991: p178)

However, in a brief essay such as this, I will focus on this single piece that perhaps has been regarded as a pinnacle of his musical achievements, both emotionally and technically. Ross calls it “one of Gesualdo’s greatest works”, whilst Palisca notes:

Moro lasso shows the extremities to which he was able to push chromatic motion and the concomitant wandering modulation without losing either individuality of part-movement or control of tonal direction. (1991: p48)

Gesualdo the man

Carlo Gesualdo was a Prince, a composer and a murderer. Inevitably much has been written about his life, his music and the extent to which the former influenced the latter. In his definitive study, Glen Watkins notes: “Perhaps no composer in history has invoked such puzzlement or gathered such an uneven press over the centuries as Carlo Gesualdo” (1991: p365). Whilst Alan Curtis notes the irony of the reverence his contemporaries had for him

partly because he was a famous Prince, compared to latter accusations of amateurism and dilettantism partly because he was a famous Prince.(1994)

Born in 1564 into a noble family, at the age of 22 Gesualdo married his first cousin Donna Maria D'Avalos. Arnold (1984), Ross (2011) and Watkins (1991) all note she was a great beauty and, at 25 years old, already a widow twice-over. All seemed well and a few years later a son, Don Emmanuele, was born. However, in 1590, Donna Maria began an affair with Don Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria. Gesualdo discovered this and responded by announcing he was going hunting for the weekend, certain that Maria would invite her lover to the marital bed. He returned that night, found the two of them *in flagrante delicto* and had them both savagely murdered.

Watkins (1991) notes the prevailing aristocratic culture of the time in Italy and suggests it was incumbent upon the Prince to enact some sort of revenge and, indeed, it would have been strange were he not to have carried out the killings. Whatever the truth, Gesualdo was not prosecuted for his actions, though he prudently moved to Naples. Three years later he married Dona Leonora d'Este in Ferrara. By all accounts it was not a happy union but the Este family were famous patrons of the arts and the marriage brought him to the musical hothouse that was the Ferrara court, where he lived for the next two years.

In 1595 he returned to his castle home where he remained until his death in 1613. His years there were marked with emotional and psychological instabilities, manifested in masochistic and deviant sexual behaviour. Ross relates a popular story:

According to one chronicler, Gesualdo was 'afflicted by a vast horde of demons which gave him no peace, for many days on end, unless ten or twelve young men, whom he kept specially for the purpose, were to beat him violently three times a day, during which operation he was wont to smile joyfully.' (2011: 84-92)

Watkins looks at the juxtapositions of love and grief, oxymoronic style in his work and gives a modern psychological analysis of Gesualdo's condition; "We are all but forced to conclude that the isolated exuberance near the end of his

final book reflects the fleeting, manic expression of a bipolar personality.”
(2010: p48) Watkins continues in this vein, explaining Gesualdo’s melancholy:

“Given the evidence of a life riddled with guilt, betrayal, murder, ill health and perhaps a search for sexual identity, Gesualdo clearly suffered under various degrees of mental distress for most of his mature life.” (ibid: p62)

However, it would be overly simplistic to solely follow the route of Gesualdo the guilt-ridden murderer fighting the demons in his soul by writing dark, dissonant music. Arnold explores other explanations;

His madrigals are the work of an outsider among outsiders. His social position was the first element of alienation. True, the nobility were encouraged by the ‘courtesy books’ to practise music: but the nobleman was never expected to be so skilled that he could compete with the professional. That would be as demeaning as involving oneself in ‘trade’ was to the Victorian gentleman. (1984: p16)

Arnold also suggests that Gesualdo’s wealth and position enabled him to avoid having to compose ditties for publishers’ commercial interests. He adds that his upbringing in the culturally remote South was also a strong influence, “Gesualdo was in a better position than the professionals of Mantua and Ferrara to experiment, since he had not been confined by conventional techniques.” (1984: p23)

Gesualdo the Composer

Though he is mostly celebrated for his madrigals, Gesualdo composed much religious music. However, his idiosyncratic approach is never far below the surface, as the choices of texts for his *Sacrae Cantiones* show. Watkins notes when examining the motets: “Anyone inclined to connect Gesualdo’s texts, which, as Einstein says, ‘consist of nothing but cries of anguish, self-accusation and repentance,’ with his life will find ample evidence here.” (1991: p252) Nevertheless, he adds, “In spite of certain audacious harmonic passages that have been cited, Gesualdo’s sacred music tends to be more diatonic than his secular.” (ibid: p255)

Interestingly, in the context of this particular study, it is in his *Tenebrae Responsoria*, a setting of Christ's Passion, from trial, torture to execution and burial, where the expressionist found his full voice. Ross describes a moment in *Tristis est anima mea*:

... begins with desolate, drooping figures that conjure Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane ("My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death"). It then accelerates into frenzied motion, suggesting the fury of the mob and the flight of Jesus' disciples. There follows music of profound loneliness, radiant chords punctured by aching dissonances, as Jesus says, "I will go to be sacrificed for you. (2011: 84-92)

If, as it seems, with sacred themes, Gesualdo needed a vivid narrative – a story full of emotional twists, peaks and troughs - in order to musically explore the extremes of his chromatic vision, then he needed no such inspiration for dramatic interpretation in his secular works – the madrigals.

His six books of madrigals are a useful reflection of his developing style, beginning with the first two published in 1594 – the year of his marriage to Leonora D'Este and the beginning of his extended stay in Ferrara. Watkins notes Gesualdo's compositional abilities at this stage:

There can be no question that Gesualdo knew and had studied the masters extensively, and in spite of a few traits which are openly personal, the care he exercised in voice-leading reveals a composer well versed in the traditions of contrapuntal practice. (1991: p134)

Books three and four were published in 1595 and 1596 respectively and marked a distinctive move towards his more idiosyncratic style. By this time he had met and worked with such influential musicians as *Luzzascho Luzzaschi* as well as the celebrated *Concerto delle Dame*. As I mention elsewhere, although Books five and Six were published in 1611, it is highly probable they were written as early as 1596, making his time in Ferrara highly fertile artistically. And it is with these last two books that we really experience the full range of Gesualdo's creative expressionism. As Stevens points out:

With the sixth and last book the flood-gates have burst open. The turbulent harmonic flow is not without its patches of scum and its

almost bewildering variety of flotsam, but for sheer force and intensity it would be hard to equal. (1962: p332)

Although Brown describes it in a different light, whilst illustrating the contradictions in assessing Gesualdo's work: "Books 5& 6 contain the music that has established Gesualdo's reputation for waywardness and disequilibrium" (1976: p360). These conflicting viewpoints are typical and can be seen in Watkins' analysis of Gesualdo's *Ardo per te* in Book VI. He describes the drama in Gesualdo's choices as: "...a swift and striking contrast according to the most extreme implications of the text" (1991: p177). Watkins then quotes Cecil Gray's *The History of Music* (P97-8):

"the most conspicuous fault of all Gesualdo's work lies in its stylistic inequality. He seldom succeeds in reconciling his harmonic manner with the traditional polyphonic style, and perpetually oscillates between the two (ibid: p177)

Surely however, Gray is assessing Gesualdo according to the rules of *Prima pratica*, of *Ars perfecta*, which was not the game the Prince was playing. It's like blaming a cricketer for not kicking the ball into the goal. Gesualdo was writing dramatic music, following an emotional line or narrative; opera if you like.....although it hadn't been invented yet.

The Musical Context of the Times

The Madrigal developed in Italy through the early-mid 16th century. As a poetic form, its usefulness to composers lay in its flexibility of structure. Unlike say, the sonnet, it could contain any number of lines – as Watkins points out, Gesualdo "used madrigal texts as short as four lines but never longer than eleven" (1991; p115) – and there was no cardinal rule as to line length or rhyme scheme. Particularly significant were the oxymoronic juxtapositions of emotions, which gave composers opportunities to soar and descend, play with the contrasts of light and shade, texture and tone. Watkins describes them as "the pleasure-pains, the bitter-sweets, the dolorous sighs and the rapturous breathing, and especially death in life and life in death." (ibid. p124)

The madrigal poem was non-strophic, which further allowed musical

exploration uninhibited by strictures of verse/chorus repetitions. The subject matters were always secular - love, desire, death, despair, etc. Unlike their sacred counterparts, motets, which were written in strict Latin, madrigals used the language of the vernacular.

Madrigals largely functioned as private entertainment for intimate gatherings of technically accomplished but amateur musicians. Termed "*Musica reservata*", there was a sense of exclusivity about these pieces, their composers and the audiences they were written for. In Gesualdo's case, as Watkins describes in *The Gesualdo Hex*, this music was:

"Not for sale, unsigned, and printed in limited quantities, his first four books of madrigals were intended primarily for courtly consumption. The extraordinariness of the final two books made them an even more private matter, and Gesualdo had kept them unprinted and restricted for personal use." (2010: p40)¹

However, in the latter half of the 16th century, professional singers emerged – such as Ferrara's celebrated *concerto delle dame*, employed by the royal patron Duke Alfonso II (Leonora D'Este's uncle) - whose technical abilities allowed them to sing complex ornaments, dissonant intervals and encouraged composers to write more ambitiously and, in some cases, more dramatically.

In the timeline of the High Renaissance, Gesualdo sits in an interesting position. The older composers of madrigals, such as Ockeghem and Josquin des Prez, worked in the *Prima pratica* era, where the purity of the music was everything and there was no allowance made for textual meaning. As Arnold describes:

¹ As it turned out, Gesualdo was forced to publish books V&VI when he discovered other composers had begun to copy parts of his work and publish them as their own. Hence the possibility that these final two books were in fact composed as early as 1596, even though they weren't published until 1611.

In Josquin's Mass Pange lingua, for example, there is no more dissonance at the setting of the words 'Crucifixus etiam pro nobis, passus, et sepultus est' (He was crucified, suffered and was buried) than at the setting 'et ascendit in caelum' (and ascended into heaven). (1984: p18)

The parallel to visual art in the High Renaissance was clear: paintings and sculptures followed rules of proportion and ideal beauty. Musically, this period was followed by the *Seconda pratica* when composers such as Gesualdo, as Watkins notes: "held counterpoint and rhythm as subordinate to the text, and harmonic dissonances unacceptable in the *prima pratica* were now rationalized by the fact they were inspired by and joined to a text." (2010: p56). These musical complexities and chromaticisms were the core values of the Mannerist's style and would lead musically straight into the Baroque era.

Alongside this development are the 'madrigalisms' that permeate the overall style. These very literal "word paintings" included such devices, as Harman describes in the Oxford Book of Italian Madrigals, as:

'wavy' vocal lines to denote 'sea' or 'flight', white and black semibreves to the words 'day' and 'night' respectively, triple metre when dancing was mentioned, and semi-tonal rises and falls or chromatic chords to express anguish... (1983: pvii)

But by the beginning of the 17th century the madrigal form was near the end of its days; its core musical attribute – polyphony – was at increasing odds with the trend towards the text's "first-person textual sentiments" (1991: p125). Watkins adds, "This induced an expressive crisis. The solo madrigal was the first step in its resolution. Thereafter it was only a short distance to monody and the opera." (ibid.)

Indeed, about the same time Gesualdo was being inspired and artistically challenged in Ferrara, just 70 kilometres North West, in Mantua, Monteverdi was working and preparing the ground for his first operas. Reese notes:

"The search after expression led composers to the highest refinement and ultimate exhaustion of the madrigal form. The desire for ever more

vivid expression brought about increased use of chromaticism; a trend away from constructivism toward free designs dependent upon the changing content of the text; and the suggestion of dramatic recitative.” (1959: p400)

Analysis of Moro lasso

Moro Lasso is written for 5 *a cappella* voices (S1,S2,A,T,B) and sets to music the following text (as sung):

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo *(I die, languishing of grief)*
E chì mi può dar vita *(And the person who can give me life)*
Ahi, che m'ancide *(Alas kills me)*
e non vuol darmi aita! *(And does not want to give me help)*
e non vuol darmi aita!
Moro, lasso, al mio duolo
E chì mi può dar vita
E chì mi può dar vita
Ahi, che m'ancide
e non vuol darmi aita!
e non vuol darmi aita!
O dolorosa sorte *(O woeful fate!)*
O dolorosa sorte
Il: Chì dar vita mi può, *(That the one who can give me life)*
ahi, mi dà morte! *(Alas, gives me death!)*
ahi, mi dà morte!
ahi, mi dà morte!
ahi, mi dà morte!:Il

The piece is composed in a mixture of homophony, near-homophony and polyphony. It contains extensive chromatic movements in all parts, but with tonal cadences at the ends of lines/verses. Viewed from a modern perspective of chord progressions, one can also see a succession of chromatic mediant relationships throughout the piece. Palisca describes Gesualdo's skills in controlling the chromaticism thus:

“Moro lasso shows the extremities to which he was able to push chromatic motion and the concomitant wandering modulation without losing either individuality of part-movement or control of tonal direction.”(1991: p48)

These dramatic juxtapositions of chromaticism and diatonic tonality were dynamically functional; each sharply contrasting with and shining a light on the other. Brown saw it as a matter of a delicate architectural challenge:

“He managed, barely, to keep his polyphonic structures from disintegrating completely into separate and unrelated clauses and to give his harmonic progression, tending at times towards ‘floating atonality’ (Lowinsky’s phrase)², coherence and direction.” (1976: p360)

The harmonic progression is highly unusual for its time, or indeed for any other: the piece is ostensibly – judging by the key signature - in A minor. Indeed the authentic cadence at the end of the opening line confirms this, as does the Picardy cadence at the close of the whole piece. But Gesualdo begins with a C# chord – totally unrelated, with not a single note of the key involved. As we shall see below, throughout the piece there are similar non-key related chords and progressions that challenge the orthodoxy, not only of the time but of centuries to come. A significant clue to this approach lies with Philip Heseltine’s (better known as the composer Peter Warlock) perceptive comment, here quoted by William Ober:

*The form of Gesualdo's madrigals is almost invariably conditioned by verbal antitheses. The harmonic and contrapuntal styles seem to have been sharply differentiated in his mind, quite apart from any consideration of the notes . . . employed in either; he pits one style against the other according as the **sentiment** of the text provides him with opportunities for sudden change (my **bold**). (1973: p639)*

Gesualdo starts with the texts; and where their emotional trail leads, he follows. Ober, looking more generally at Gesualdo’s madrigals, makes a very simple and clear point about how he went about creating the emotional narratives in his music.

² Lowinsky, E.E. “Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-century Music.” University of California Press 1961. P38

“Gesualdo's expressive effects are achieved by slow progressions of chromatic chords and short, piercing cries of melody, which express pain, suffering, and thoughts of death-they alternate with brilliant contrapuntal passages to match words of joy, love, or any sort of active movement.” (ibid: p639/640)

Thus we are looking at a composer whose core business it is to transpose meanings from words into music. To discover how he manages this, we must look at the music in more detail.

The four syllables of the two opening words – *Moro Lasso (I die languishing: b1-4)* – are, for the top line (sop2), a chromatically descending semibreve line from F-D, with a harmonic progression of C#-a-G-B. With these first four chords he uses 11 of the 12 chromatic notes – omitting just the Bb. He has set out his palette from the beginning showing the full range of the colours of his story; the tones of his drama. In these first three bars the syllables are sung slowly and hauntingly, in semibreves; each one a different tonal direction, but always heading downwards, darker (he uses just four singers: S2,A,T,B). Gesualdo uses both words and music as tools to dig out as much emotional and dramatic meaning as he can. Arnold asks the same question about that opening C# and wonders why at least it didn't then follow a route through F# or some other related chord. He answers his own question by concluding, “that this apt musical image does illuminate the word” (1984: p40).

However, the rest of this brief opening line – *al mio duolo (in my grief: b4-6)* - moves more conventionally, marginally less homophonic, whilst confirming the key of A minor with an authentic cadence.

This first phrase contrasts dramatically with the next line – *E chi mi può dar vita (and the person who can give me life: b6-12)*. Whilst the first is a lament; unique, slow, homophonic, with a single syllable to each note, intensely chromatic and using just four voices (S2,A,T,B); the second is hopeful; less original, dynamic, polyphonic, with the inevitable madrigalism of 7-note

melismas on the first syllable of “vi-ta”, completely diatonic and written in the full five-parts on the Aeolian mode, ending on a simple plagal C-G.

Like all good storytellers, Gesualdo keeps his listeners alert to the change of emotional direction. So the sudden leap as this new optimism is juxtaposed with the despairing third line – *Ahi, che m’ancide, (alas kills me: b13-16)* - brings an equally instant musical change: to yet another completely unrelated chord - Eb. There follows a series of chromatic mediant movements, from c-e-C-A-C#. The last two chords, on the word - “*m’ancide*” (*kills me*) – are reminiscent of the opening phrase. Though Arnold (1984: p40) describes them as, “a devious chromatic progression”, they are possibly best explained as an imperfect cadence in f# (the following chord, opening the next line, is B – the dominant of f#). This hanging, dominant chord is the sound of pleading, not yet abandoned, but begging; for love? Salvation? The poetry of madrigals often played with the duality of sex and death and Gesualdo was no stranger to them, as Ross notes, “The text of ‘Moro, lasso,’ like Arcadelt’s ‘Il bianco e dolce cigno,’ plays on the double meaning of morte, earthly and sexual release.” (2011: 84-92).

The line that follows – *e non vuol darmi aita, (and does not want to give me help: b17-22)* – is brief; just three bars long, but adds another juxtapositional twist in emotion. So to emphasise its narrative importance and to play upon the despair, Gesualdo plays it twice. Interestingly, he places an exclamation mark only at the end of the second *aita!*, as though urging the intensity of the anguish. It is in near homophony and moves from B-G – another chromatic mediant change – before a plagal and thus almost spiritual cadence, with 4th suspension on the final D. The effect is to raise the emotional temperature of the word ‘help’ and lead us to expect something climactic.

But instead, the dramatist in him returns to the opening line – *Moro Lasso (I die languishing: b23-26)* – with the same descending movements, but this time a fourth higher - F#-d-E-C – and with a different combination of four singers. By omitting the bass, the effect is brighter, more charged; even though the original slow, homophonic dynamics are there; and this is further

emphasised by the authentic cadence ending on a D major (b28). It's the storyteller's adage: if you're going to repeat something, make sure it's bigger the second time around. And this principle is also clearly there when we return to the line – *E chi mi può dar vita (and the person who can give me life: b28-35)* – as the melismas on the word “vita”, which were spread over six bars the first time, are now squeezed into just two bars (b30-31); but then the text is immediately repeated and the polyphony continues, squeezed melismas and all, to make one long hopeful Aeolian passage, moving from d-F-a-C-d-a-C-F-a-C-d-F, none of which is particularly remarkable or original, but serves to prepare us for the next chromatic passage - *Ahi, che m'ancide, (alas kills me: b36-38)*.

Now it shifts from the final F of ‘vita’ to the wholly unrelated Db (the whole passage is a tone below its originator) to start the polyphony of the word ‘*alas*’. The music quickly returns to order with D minor, before setting on yet another dynamic chromatic mediant journey through BbM7-G to end on B (b38).

Again, the short, three-bar phrase – *e non vuol darmi aita, (and does not want to give me help: b39-44)* is played twice, transposed a tone lower than the first time; again, the exclamation mark is on the second time of the word ‘*aita!*’

On bar 41 we find a completely new line - *O doloroso sorte (O woeful fate! b45-52)*. Sop1 is omitted and the harmonic progression – d-F-G7-FM7-Bb-F-BbM7-E takes us back to the brink of the original key. All four parts descend through the four syllables of ‘*dolorosa*’, just as they did for *Moro lasso*, and onto a Neapolitan cadence for ‘*sorte*’, which takes us to the dominant E. For this line is sung twice and now, the second time, we are in A minor – home at last! However, Gesualdo is still on his narrative journeying and again descends through ‘*dolorosa*’, this time a fifth higher and with Sop1 instead of the bass and with some minor changes in voicing to add more energy to the pleading. The line ends, again via the Neapolitan cadence – but this time to the dominant B.

For we are in new territory yet again - *Chi dar vita mi può*, (*That the one who can give me life: b53-55*) – is a quick homophonic phrase in E minor, again nothing startling. However, it is followed by - *ahi, mi dà morte!* (*Alas, gives me death!: b56-69*), which is a strongly chromatic and polyphonic torturous journey through augmented chords resolving first to A minor, then to G minor, before another chromatic mediant progression through-A-F-d-F-A as ‘*ahi, mi dà morte!*’, is repeated contrapuntally in all parts. If this seems heady stuff with no let-up, then it is accurately tracing the emotional line of the text.

The final four bars, in stately chromatic minims, with a general movement downwards, contain a transposed reversal of the opening harmonic clashes: C minor for ‘*gives me*’, followed by E major resolving to the Picardy cadence of A Major for his last word – *morte!*’ (note the exclamation mark). Ober says the last line, “is given its “dying fall” by a series of dissonant suspensions in slow tempo which are not resolved until the final chord.” (1973: p643). This final line (*b56-69*) is repeated exactly and ends the composition.

It is also interesting to note that, throughout, the highest notes – top G – are reserved for just two words: *può* (‘can’, in the line ‘and the one who can give me life’) and *ahi* (alas). Thus he highlights the dual poles of hope and despair with these two brightest moments.

We can gather from the above analysis that Gesualdo was beyond word-painting as such, for there are few literalist madrigalisms apart from, perhaps, the melismas on ‘vita’. In Michael Burdick’s terms, what Gesualdo was achieving was, “Phrase paintings” (1982: p19), which he describes as:

....directed melodic movement, often involving chromaticism, toward the final goal note of a phrase of text. The goal note is almost always a note of relative repose, and is usually diatonic, regardless of the amount of chromaticism found within the phrase as a whole. (ibid)

Then, crucially he continues:

Thus the term 'phrase painting' is meant to reflect the actual manner of speaking a phrase, with a gradual falling off (cadence) as the end of a phrase approaches. (ibid)

This focus on taking natural speech patterns and exaggerating them to expose the emotional state of the source is pure dramatic composing and that is central to Gesualdo's approach in *Moro lasso*. Watkins has noted, responding to Gray's criticisms of Gesualdo's compositional unity with his contrasting juxtapositions:

If his style persistently vacillates between the diatonic-melodic allegro and the chromatic-harmonic adagio, it is not because he was incapable of amalgamating his materials into a unified whole, as Gray suggests, but because his musical language sprang from an exaggerated sensitivity to the emotional tone of the text. This in turn demanded a heightened capacity for making a striking and swift musical response to a whole catalogue of affects. (1991: p178)

Moro lasso may not be a plot-led story, with a linear narrative and a succession of scenes and characters, but it is music that has been composed with a dramatist's technique and ear. It can be seen that Gesualdo approached his interpretations of the text in the same way as opera composers considered theirs. Ross notes that, "even though he had no apparent contact with the world of opera, his madrigals have the vividness of dramatic scenes." (2011: 84-92) It is indeed ironic that whilst Gesualdo was in Ferrara composing these extraordinary madrigals, Monteverdi was barely a day's ride away, in Mantua, beginning his own musical monodic journey that would lead shortly to *L'Orfeo* and the beginnings of opera. In fact, Ross quotes a commentary of 1628, describing the moment in *L'Orfeo* when Orpheus is told of the death of his beloved Eurydice; "the harmony takes a sudden dismal turn, as if catching the Gesualdo chill" (ibid.).

In an essay on the 19th century musicologist Ignaz Franz Mosel, Ernest Newman inadvertently brings us closer to our understanding of the dramatic core of Gesualdo's work. Mosel was a follower of the opera composer and pedagogue Christoph Gluck and much of his writings anticipated Wagner. Newman describes Mosel's credo: "Mosel insists very strongly that the stage

demands a style of music of its own. The aim of dramatic music, he says, being to intensify the poet's emotion" (1912: p781). Newman notes further tenets including this one: "When the composer has a succession of ideas to express, he must forget that he is a musician, and remember that he is only a translator from poetic speech into musical speech." (ibid)

It is probable that Gesualdo wrote the text of *Moro lasso* himself. Alex Ross (2011: 84-92) suggests that if he was not the author then he certainly prescribed the content. It is certainly no pinnacle of poetic form, it is not particularly original nor does its initial idea develop much more beyond the opening line. However, it functions to provide ample opportunities for compositional interpretation. "I die!", "grief", "life", "Alas", "kills", "woeful fate", "death"; these are the templates for dramatic musical construction that Gesualdo and other madrigal composers thrived on. Oxymoronic juxtapositions allow for huge and sudden swings of mood: from the uplifting, "*The person who can give me life*", straight to the grieving, "*Alas kills me*".

Conclusion

Composing a sonata, rondo, 32-bar AABA song or twelve-bar blues are all acts of using a pre-existing form or framework to shape the composition. But for many composers since Gesualdo, the creative process has involved the conflict between form, structure and narrative.

As I have shown, Gesualdo was concerned with exploring avenues to express the emotional content of the text and used dissonance and unexpected harmonic twists to interpret the discordant natures of his subject matter. Where there was a clear narrative – as in his *Tenebrae Responsoria* – he followed it, but when there no delineated character-led journey, emotional or otherwise, he acted as though it was there and composed accordingly; as though there was a *hidden opera*.

Today we can point to the musical, the opera and other forms of music-theatre as established structures within which dramatic compositions sit comfortably. Yet of course, for Gesualdo, these didn't exist; he was a dramatic

composer without a form (the opera) to sustain his creative approach. In this context, his use of the madrigal is not a surprise, its non-strophic, flexible nature certainly allowed him freedoms of interpretation other poetry didn't.

My analysis of the structure of *Moro lasso* shows that, in this case at least, conventional forms play a secondary role in his compositional process. And whilst it is entirely possible to study his work through the prisms of mainstream musical analysis, the use of dramaturgy as the core analytical tool gives us new and useful insights to the Prince's work.

Finally, as I indicated in my *Introduction*, I am looking forward to further studying within this area. The struggle between form and narrative is an exciting one and follows, I suspect, a basic creative evolution from the age of *Ars Perfecta*, when the ability to distinguish between composers was based largely on the quality of the counterpoint, to the emergence of individual self-expression and artistic idiosyncrasy.