

The "Second Practice"

The new freedom of early Baroque composition was received with suspicion by conservative musicians. One such was Giovanni Maria Artusi, who in 1600 published a savage attack on certain madrigals by Monteverdi (unfairly, before the offending works had been published), in which the unnamed composer, the greatest musician of his age, was accused of vaingloriousness and even incompetence because of the licenses he allowed himself in his part writing.

Such composers, in my opinion, have nothing but smoke in their heads if they are so impressed with themselves as to think they can corrupt, abolish, and ruin at will the good old rules handed down from days of old by so many theorists and excellent musicians, who are the very ones from whom these modern musicians have learned awkwardly to put a few notes together. But do you know what generally befalls works like these? As Horace says:

'Tis the tall pine that oftenest is tossed by winds:
Lofty towers fall with heaviest crash;
Lightnings strike the mountain's peak.

In the end, since they lack a good foundation, they are eaten away by time and fall to the ground, and those who put them up are made a laughingstock.

Of course I recognize that new discoveries are not only a good thing but a necessary one. But first tell me why you want such clashes as they have written? If you would answer, "I wish them to be heard clearly, but not so as to offend the ear," then why not prepare them in the conventional way, as reason dictates? Now, even if you want dissonances to become consonances, they will always remain the opposite of consonant; they are naturally always dissonant and can become consonant, therefore, only if consonances become dissonances. We have reached the point of absurdity, but it is altogether possible that these modern composers will so exert themselves that in time they actually will find a way to turn dissonances into consonances and vice versa. But if one's purposes can be achieved by following the teachings and the good old rules handed down by authority and followed by musicians everywhere, why then go beyond their bounds in search of extravagant novelties? Don't you know that all the arts and sciences have long since been regulated by theorists and that their basic principles and rules have been handed down to us so that, as long as they are kept to, we shall be able to understand one another? Horace says:

There is a moderate measure in things, there are definite limits
Which sensible conduct should neither exceed nor fall short of.

Compositions like these, then, are the product of ignorance. For such composers it is enough to set up a great roar of sound, an absurd confusion, an array of defects, and it all comes from the ignorance which keeps them benighted.

L'Artusi, ovvero, Delle imperfezioni della moderna musica (Venice, 1600), fols. 42-43. Trans. R. T. *The Odes of Horace*, trans. A. D. Godley (London, 1898), 37. *The Satires and Epistles of Horace*, trans. Smith Palmer Bovie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 37.

It is Artusi, of course, who has become the laughingstock. Monteverdi's answer, which he issued through his brother Giulio Cesare as a "Declaration" appended to his first book of *Scherzi musicali* (1607), stresses the overriding import of the text and its expression. The phrase "the words [are] the mistress of the harmony" was to become one of the chief slogans of the era, and the term *seconda prattica* (second practice), which Claudio Monteverdi had coined in the preface to his fifth book of madrigals (1605), has been taken over by modern scholars to designate everything that sets early Baroque music apart from that of the Renaissance. (By "harmony" Monteverdi means what we would call polyphony; his *melodia*, which refers to the way the music carries the words, is translated here as "setting.")

My brother says that his works are not composed at random, for, in this kind of music, it is his goal to make the words the mistress of the harmony and not its servant, and it is from this point of view that his work should be judged. But in the event Artusi takes a few details, or, as he

calls them "passages" from my brother's madrigals, without any regard for the words, which he ignores as if they had nothing to do with the music. By judging these passages without their words, my brother's opponent implies that all merit and beauty lie in following exactly the rules of the First Practice, in which the harmony is mistress of the words.

"First Practice" refers to that style which is chiefly concerned with the perfection of the harmony; that is, in which harmony is not ruled, but rules, is not the servant but the mistress of the words. Its founders were the first to write down music for more than one voice, later followed and improved upon by Ockeghem, Josquin des Prez, Pierre de la Rue, Jean Mouton, Crequillon, Clemens non Papa, Gombert, and others of those times. It reached its ultimate perfection with Messer Adriano [Willaert] in composition itself, and with the extremely well-thought-out rules of the excellent Zarlino.

"Second Practice"—which was originated by Cipriano de Rore, later followed and improved upon by Ingegneri, Marenzio, Giaches de Wert, Luzzasco, still more by Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, and finally by yet more exalted spirits who understand even better what true art is—is that style which is chiefly concerned with the perfection of the setting; that is, in which harmony does not rule but is ruled, and where the words are mistress of the harmony. This is why my brother calls it "second" rather than "new," and "practice" rather than "theory," for its understanding is to be sought in the process of actual composition. Thus, it is my brother's aim to follow the principles taught by Plato and practiced by the divine Cipriano and those who have followed him in modern times, which are different from the principles taught and laid down by the Reverend Zarlino and practiced by Messer Adriano.

Claudio Monteverdi, *Tutte le opere*, ed. G. Francesco Malipiero, X (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1929), 69–72. Trans. R. T.

Monteverdi's account of how he invented the *tremolo* well illustrates the basic tenets of early Baroque neoclassical musical philosophy: the aim of the composer, no less than of any other artist, is *imitazione della natura*, the imitation of reality. For musicians the way to do this was to copy speech, which was the embodiment of the passions of the soul. And the principles by which this was accomplished were those of the orator—music became once again an art of rhetoric. The spectacular results Monteverdi obtained with his discovery may be heard in his *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* from the eighth book of madrigals (*Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi*, 1638), from whose preface the following extract is taken:

It has seemed to me that the chief passions or affections of our mind are three in number, namely anger, equanimity, and humility. The best philosophers agree, and the very nature of our voice, with its high, low, and middle ranges, would indicate as much. The art of music clearly

points to these three in its terms “agitated,” “soft,” and “moderate” [*con-citato, molle, temperato*]. In the works of past composers I have been able to find examples of the soft and the moderate, but I have never found an example of the agitated style, although Plato describes it as “the harmony which would fittingly imitate the speech and inflections of the brave man going to war” [see p. 9]. In view of this I have exerted myself with no little diligence and effort to recover this style.

Since according to all the best philosophers the fast pyrrhic foot was used for agitated, warlike dances, and the slow spondaic foot for their opposites, I took the whole note and proposed that one whole note correspond to one spondee. Dividing this into sixteen sixteenth-notes, struck one after the other and joined to words expressing anger and scorn, I could perceive in this brief example a resemblance to the emotion I was seeking.

At first, the musicians, especially those whose task it was to play the basso continuo, thought it ridiculous to strike a single string sixteen times in one measure, and so they reduced it all to one stroke per measure, thereby producing the spondee instead of the pyrrhic foot, and destroying all resemblance to agitated speech. Be assured, therefore, that the basso continuo must be played just as written, along with the other parts.

Monteverdi, *Tutte le opere*, VIII (1929), unpaginated. Trans. R. T.