

LAGRIME D'AMANTE – al sepolcro dell'amata

By Franca Floris, Choir director and teacher

Madrigals, Book 6

Claudio Monteverdi's sixth book of madrigals for five (and in places up to seven) voices includes eight compositions as well as two complete cycles of madrigals: *Il lamento d'Arianna* (The Lament of Arianna) and *Lagime d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata* (Tears of a Lover at the Tomb of the Beloved), a sestina.

These cycles were composed in Mantua between 1609 and 1610, as can be seen from a letter that the singer Bassano Cassola sent to Cardinal Ferdinand on 26 July 1610, in which he states that Monteverdi was "... preparing a group of madrigals for five voices divided into three laments: that of Arianna with the usual song [which confirms the fame of the melody]; that of Leandro and Ero del Marini [missing]; and the third, given to him by Cardinal Ferdinando Gonzaga, that of the shepherd whose nymph has died, the words written by Scipione, son of Count Lepido Agnelli, after the death of Signora Romanina".

Later, in Cremona, Monteverdi reviewed and rearranged the compositions, eventually sending the manuscript to the Venetian editor Ricciardo Amadino. The manuscript would later be published, in 1614, only a few months after the composer's arrival and settling down in Venice. It is clear that the madrigals present in the sixth book cannot have been composed prior to the move to Venice, which happened just some months before the publication of the volume.

Il pianto di Leandro e Ero, a text by Marino, is missing. We cannot tell if this is due to the fact that Monteverdi

modified the project while working on it or if he composed and then destroyed it, as indeed he did with other music that he did not see fit to finish!

The title page of the volume contains the caption “master of music of the Venetian Republic of San Marco in Venice”. Since there is no dedication, it can be believed that the publication of the book was a business initiative born from collaboration between author and publisher, without the backing of patrons. This heralds an initial, progressive and well-deserved freedom from the orders of cardinals, patrons and wealthy gentlemen, making Monteverdi, the “master of music of the Venetian Republic”, a much freer composer.



As for the choice of texts and their distribution within the volume, according to an acute observation made by Claudio Gallico, “the distribution of the pieces is methodical. The more meditative and reflective texts are polyphonic throughout. The laments by Rinuccini, Agnelli and the two Petrarchs fall in that category. The other rhymes are delivered along with alternating volumes, having been split into rhetorical slopes or even referring to direct discourse, depending of course on their positioning within the text.”

Unlike the previous books, this volume is divided into two sections, each containing a polyphonic lament (Arianna and the sestina) followed by a madrigal (from the sonnets CCCX and CCLXVII, *Zefiro e Oimè* after the death of Laura, perhaps also due to the personal mourning of the composer following his

wife's death in 1607) on verses by Petrarch accompanied (and followed) by the *basso continuo*, but not arranged, that at the same time precedes a madrigal which is 'arranged' to a harpsichord.

As he had already tested in the fifth book, the composer adopted different ways of accompanying the madrigals with the bass:

- the "following"^[i] bass is optional when the song is strictly polyphonic;
- the "*basso continuo*"^[ii] is obligatory when the voices begin to have more elaborate solo lines within the polyphonic scaffolding;
- the "arranged" bass (on the harpsichord) is used when the performer must provide an instrumental interval that moves in dialogue with a voice that flaunts a rich and diverse ability to "colour" the composition with difficult solo passages, creating an emotional reaction and essentially being capable of responding, discussing and competing with the voice, not just following it and accommodating it.

Therefore not all the madrigals indicated are in fact arranged. In other compositions the texts inspired by Monteverdi's new architectural sound evidently require a more significant and arranged intervention precisely for the instrumental aspect.

In this most interesting volume the theme is of loss, of mourning for this loss, of farewell, of a terrible but composed grief. It is interesting to note that Monteverdi seems to take a definitive break from *a cappella madrigals* (another form of farewell, eh?). This form (now considered "archaic") was superseded by the advent of the monodic style. It does, however, demonstrate how this "old-fashioned form" could still be used and this "old-fashioned way" was still

present. It reaffirms the fact that a composer is traditionally inclined to respect trends but in the end will always prefer to do things his own way.



Lagrimae d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata

We have already made note of the fact that Scipione Agnelli was commissioned by Vincenzo to create a work as an eternal reminder of Caterina Martinelli, known as 'la Romanina'. Caterina was a young singer who arrived in Mantua from Rome at the young age of thirteen, already favoured by the duke, who obliged Monteverdi not only to educate her musically but also to allow her to stay in his home.

Caterina Martinelli, in possession of an extraordinary voice, lived with the Monteverdi family until she died suddenly and prematurely at the age of eighteen, after contracting smallpox. The entire court went into mourning for 'la Romanina'. It was as though she had been personally guided by the composer and had begun to impersonate the character of Arianna.

Thus, we recognise that, although commissioned by a count infatuated with Caterinuuccia, the Lagrimae is not in any way artificial. We know that Monteverdi was still mourning the loss of his wife (who had died some months earlier), and that

he had yet to overcome this loss. He must have found it natural to use his work as an outlet after both deaths.

Duke Vincenzo had given the task of writing the text to Scipione Agnelli (1586-1653), an orator, poet, theologian and famed historian. Entitled *Lagrime d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata* (Tears of a Lover to the Tomb of His Beloved), it is a long and solemn text composed of little more than mediocre verses of eleven syllables per line. In the lament "of the shepherd whose nymph has died" the shepherd Glauco is the Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, the nymph Corinna is Caterina Martinelli.

The Duke mourns his favourite, the musician, his performer. He mourns her so much that, when obliged to find a replacement for Arianna, no singer is good enough. None can be compared to la Romanina. Indeed, for the première of *Arianna*, Monteverdi chose Virginia Ramponi Andreini (1583-1630), a good singer but above all an outstanding actress of the *commedia dell'arte*, showing that the dramatic interpretation of the text should be fundamental to its execution; having even an exceptional voice was not enough.

In a performance that attempts to respect the music, text, and context, we must bear in mind that it is dedicated to la Romanina: although written in the old-fashioned way and with a predominantly homorhythmic and composed polyphonic scheme (from which agonizing pain interwoven with intimate religiousness emerges rather than anger about such an unjust and untimely death), the presence of this singer in the six madrigals is constant.

The composition of the sestina, obviously after *Arianna* was drafted, reminds us that when composing these madrigals Monteverdi could not help but think of the singer's extraordinary ability to move the affections of the court. Therefore, although it was written in the old-fashioned way, this important aspect must be taken into account to

“correctly” execute the part. Although there are no stage directions, we must ensure that the listener is moved and is able to “hear” and “see”, to experience theatre, simply by listening to the voices.

Six recurring rhyming words in each sestina “trap” the poet in an literary device from which he cannot escape. These words would have made work very complicated for any other musician, but this quite average text came into the hands of Monteverdi, who succeeded, through his music, in exalting and dignifying it beyond anything Agnelli could ever have imagined.

1. “Incenerite spoglie” (“Remains turned to ashes”): The solo tenor opens in a low tessitura and passes the baton to other singers who immediately declare the gravity and solemnity of this beginning, between bars 6 and 7, by the semitone intervals of *cantus* (f#-g) and *altus* (a-b flat) that embody the lament^[iii] and the fleeting momentum on the words “Sol” and “Cielo”; and by the first composed cry of pain “Ahi, lasso!” and the return to the low tessitura with the image of the shepherd/Duke Glauco/Vincenzo that bows over the grave (katabasis). “Con voi chius’è il mio cor a marmi in seno” (“With you is my heart buried deep in a marble vault”) is recited by the three higher voices; the tenor, followed by the bass, echoes the same words. These support the new phrase “E notte e giorno vive in pianto in foco” (“and night and day lives in flames, in sorrow”) that comes alive in the subsequent “in duolo, in ira, il tormentato Glauco” (“in pain, in anger, the tormented Glaucus”). If the five voices manage to sing the three different phrases and melodies at the same time, it will be the last, the most dramatic, phrase that will prevail in an expressive rhythmic excitement that grows ever closer, with “in duolo, in ira, il tormentato Glauco” sung by the five voices, closing the first part of the sestina.

2. The second madrigal opens with the address “say it, o rivers ...”: nature is called to testify to the pain of Glaucus in a first section moderately animated by the “cries” of the sopranos (“L’aria ferir di grida in su la tomba erme campagne”). These cries dissolve and we move on to what I find to be one of the most intense yet calm passages of the entire sestina: the three low voices introduce the next phrase in which the unfortunate shepherd tells of the sadness of his life, first one after the other, then joining together at “poi che il mio ben coprì gelida terra” (“since my beloved was laid in frozen earth”), a compact statement, almost murmured, that closes this second part with a natural reduction in volume.
3. The beginning of the third madrigal is proposed in a chordal way: in the fifth bar, the contralto and the tenor, to which are added, from bar 6, the melody and the bass, the volume increases, giving more prominence to the sentence. At bar 16, at the phrase “prima che Glauco, di baciare, d’onorar lasci quel seno che nido fu d’amor, che dura tomba preme” (“ere Glaucus cease kissing and honouring that breast wherein Love nested, and which now lies crushed in a sad grave”), while the bass holds long notes repeating “prima che Glauco”, the higher voices proceed in thirds, interspersed with pauses that indicate *suspiratio*, repetitions (“quel seno, quel seno”) as intensifiers, while, first the contralto then the tenor alternate the repetition of the same words. These small interventions are also interrupted by sighing pauses, after which the music progresses downwards.
From bar 28, with the return of the phrase “prima che Glauco ...”, the two higher voices proceed in long notes while the lower voices continue their broken, sobbing, breathless declamation. From bar 34, the melody and the fifth part progress in thirds, with the tenor and bass

entering soon after, while the contralto continues with “quel seno” in a diminuendo that leads up to the climax, at the end of which the two higher voices and the tenor, arranged in chords and singing the last sentence in a resigned and composed way, join the contralto and the bass to emphasize the excruciating pain of loss, in an inevitable increase in volume.

4. That deep emotional pain is followed by the calm resignation of the fourth madrigal, expressed with harmonised voices in *B flat* (the only one of the six madrigals to have *B flat* in the key signature) in a low tessitura. After a brief but expressive pause, the voices repeat the phrase “ma te raccoglie, o Ninfa” (“yet heaven gathers you, o Nymph”) creating the same strong expressive effect, as all the repetitions in the sestina.

From bar 9, the “Glauco” tenor guides and anticipates the other voices (modulation from *D major* to *D minor*, then to *A major*) in telling the story of how this death is also mourned by the ground and by the “deserti boschi” (“deserted woods”). Attractive madrigalism (by the two upper voices, in thirds and before and after in *bicinium*, in the same way as the contralto and the tenor) is carried out by favouring the natural agogics of the text (“e correr fium’ il pianto”) and is present at the same time as the melody in long notes, with some faint hints of colour on “deserti boschi” (between bar 22 and 23 in the melody and the fifth part, still a diatonic semitone to symbolize the sighing). There are sudden and brief modulations from *G major* to *C major*; from *G major* to *G minor* and in bar 25, the tenor again invites all the other voices to come together in homorhythm for the phrase “e correr fiumi il pianto” (“and tears flow in rivers”).

Still with a chordal structure the first story of how Glaucus’ laments were understood everywhere and even

told by the Dryads (nymphs of trees and forests) and the Napee (the nymphs of the valleys and meadows) is proposed in a low voice and at low volume (three voices) so that the same phrase quickly and forcefully reasserts itself with five voices.

That force is immediately tempered by a sinking down of the three lower voices on “e su la tomba cantano i pregi dell’amato seno” (“and over your tomb sing the praises of his beloved’s heart”) that Monteverdi splits into two short melodies: one that goes downwards to create the madrigalism on “tomba”; the other more animated for “cantano i pregi dell’amato seno”.

Even in this case and continuing until the end of the madrigal, the two melodies are paired and superimposed in a continuous exchange and intensification.

5. The fifth madrigal begins in *A minor* with all five voices singing the physical qualities of the girl (“chiome d’or, neve gentil”) and the descent of a diatonic semitone in the bass voice to emphasize the lament. At bar 8, “o gigli de la man...” (“o lily-white hand...”), all sing together in *A minor*. (The previous phrase closes in *A major*.) Again there is a semitone descent, this time in the bass and tenor voices, but it is a passage with a light movement and rhythmic excitement on “... ch’invido il cielo ne rapì” (“that envious heaven has stolen”).

The central episode of “quando chiuse in cieca tomba chi vi nasconde?” (“though locked in this blind tomb, who can hide thee”) uses a low vocal register and homophony to evoke the tomb that contains the beloved (bar 15 *G major* up to 18 in *D major*; from 19 in *C* then *A minor* and 22 closes in *G major*).

And here, with a modulation in *E major*, the laceration, the pathetic cry is echoed in the two higher voices while others recite the rest of the text (cadence in *A major* in bar 30).

“Ah muse qui sgorgate il pianto” (“ah muses, shed your tears”) is rendered by Monteverdi with the literary device of the address and by the progressive excitement portrayed by the verbal rhythm of the phrase and with the usual diatonic semitone intervals to signify the lament that becomes more and more intense as the voices continue to repeat, alternating with a decrease or an increase in the thickness of the voices, a phrase to which the musician obviously wants to give greater prominence.

6. For eighteen bars, the sixth and final madrigal of the sestina comes across as a serious, solemn, religious recitative.

From bar 20, the five voices imitate each other and insist on “rissonar Corinna”, echoing the name of the beloved that becomes once again an agonizing cry with a double echo of the melody and the fifth part with barely murmured imitations but with the strong and excited pace of the remaining voices (“dicano i venti ognor, dica la terra”).

This central episode is the most dramatic of the sestina and perhaps the only one with some extra chromatic passages, which are very languid and joined with some dissonance that bring to the fore the expression of pain, the true *leitmotiv* of the entire work.

The final triplet, in which all six keywords of the sestina are present: (“cedano al *pianto* i detti: amato *seno*, a te dia pace il *ciel*; pace a te *Glauco*, prega onorata *tomba* e sacra *terra*”) could only be presented in an oratorical style, almost a prayer, with the voices always strictly in chordal style to finally emphasize the choice of distension, of resignation to a cruel fate, as had occurred at the beginning with “incenerite spoglie.”

Lagime al sepolcro dell'amata is a unique cycle of madrigals

due to its expressive capacity base solely on the power of the words that makes it theatrical without a stage.

The sestina is as much a dramatic expression as the *Lamento d'Arianna* and, although not intended for the stage, when performing it this should always be clear to the group of singers that interpret it.

Theatre, yes, but the sung words need to be able to touch the hearts of listeners, in fact, to move their affections; singers must be able to transmit the text (understandable to most even without the "help" of the libretto), to bring life to it, emphasizing with all the vocal and musical techniques the passages from joy (which are few, indeed, since it is a poignant lament) to pain, agony, cries, and resignation – and all this with only the power of the word combined with the ability to perform, without any trace of action on stage!

Singers had different specialties: there were the singers for chapels, singers for large cathedrals, where the size of the location required power and strength of voice (the *sforzata* voice, i.e. strong, powerful); and chamber music singers who primarily specialised in expression and agility, in *cantar dolce e soave!*

Such specialization, documented by reporters, theorists and musicians of the past, is also necessary today for a consistent execution of the musical and literary language so clearly expressed by the composer in his Sestina, in order to allow you to enjoy this jewel of Italian *musica reservata*.

I conclude by quoting a passage from the letter that the monk, poet and philosopher Angelo Grillo wrote to Claudio Monteverdi after receiving the gift of the sixth volume of madrigals by the composer: "... And what a harmonious gift, I can surely confirm, as I consider it an excellence that comes not so much from the earth while I receive it, but rather it seems to me that it has come to me from heaven while I listen to it ..."

iv

Ma te raccoglie, o Ninfa, in grembo il *cielo*.
Io per te miro vedova la *terra*,
Deserti i boschi, e correr fiumi il *pianto*.
E Driade e Napee del mesto *Glauco*
Ridicono i lamenti, e su la *tomba*
Cantano i pregi de l'amato *seno*.

v

O chiome d'or, neve gentil del *seno*,
O gigli de la man, ch'invido il *cielo*
Ne rapì, quando chiuse in cieca *tomba*,
Chi vi nasconde? Ohimè! Povera *terra*!
Il fior d'ogni bellezza, il sol di *Glauco*
Nasconde? Ah muse, qui sgorgate il *pianto*.

vi

Dunque, amate reliquie, un mar di *pianto*
Non daran questi lumi al nobil *seno*
D'un freddo sasso? Ecco l'afflitto *Glauco*
Fa rissonar Corinna il mar e 'l *Cielo*!
Dicano i venti ogn'hor dica la *terra*,
Ahi Corinna! Ahi morte! Ahi *tomba*!
Cedano al *pianto* i detti, amato *seno*;
A te dia pace il Ciel, pace a te *Glauco*
Prega, honorata *tomba* e sacra *terra*.

*Translated by Kiri Tontodonati, UK/Italy, and Mirella Biagi,
UK/Italy*

Edited by Anita Shaperd, USA

Footnotes

^[i] In the first phase of accompaniment of the vocal pieces with keyboard instruments (particularly common in Venice in the sixteenth century), although this part was not specified in the printed scores, he used to accompany the melody with the return of the bass enriched with simple tonal harmonies. This way of accompanying it is called “following bass”.

^[ii] “Continuous bass” is a more independent way of accompanying a melody than the “following bass” method, making sure that there is continuity in the execution and no interruptions whenever the bass line is silent. This part was also included in the printed scores with a separate line.

It reminds us of Agostino Agazzari’s 1607 treaty “Playing on the continuous bass for all sorts of instruments” indicating that not only keyboards were used to create continuous bass.

In particular, to strengthen the accompanying line, theorbos, chitarroni and horns could be added to the keyboard instrument with excellent results. Then as now, the continuous basses for keyboards were often written in “encrypted bass”: on a single bass sound numbers were used to indicate the chords to be used following a procedure similar to the one used for intervals.

^[iii] Even in the incipit of *Lamento di Arianna*, Monteverdi uses the diatonic interval *A – B flat* that is then be repeated several times and is a feature of the entire madrigal (Did the author, in this way, want to immediately recall the mourned Arianna/Romanina?).