Carlo Gesualdo de Venosa - 1560-1613

Gesualdo: Variations on a Musical Theme
Aldous Huxley

SPACE has been explored, systematically and scientifically, for more than five centuries; time, for less than five generations. Modern geography began in the fourteen-hundreds with the voyages of Prince Henry the Navigator. Modern history and modern archaeology came in with Queen Victoria. Except in the Antarctic there is today no such thing as a terra incognita', all the corners of all the other continents have now been visited. In contrast, how vast are the reaches of history which still remain obscure! And how recently acquired is most of our knowledge of the past! Almost everything we know about palaeolithic and neolithic man, about the Sumerian, Hittite and Minoan civilizations, about pre-Buddhist India and pre-Columbian America, about the origins of such fundamental human arts as agriculture, metallurgy and writing, was discovered within the last sixty or seventy years. And there are still new worlds of history to conquer. Even in such well-dug regions as the Near and Middle East literally thousands of sites await the burrowing archaeologist, and thousands more are scattered far and wide over Asia, Africa and the Americas. Moreover, there is work for the explorer in times and cultures much nearer home. For, strange as it may seem, it is only within the last generation that certain aspects of quite recent European history have come to be critically investigated. A very striking example of this failure to explore our own back yard is supplied by the history of music. Practically everybody likes music; but practically nobody has heard any music composed before 1680. Renaissance poetry, painting and sculpture have been studied in minutest detail, and the labours of five generations of scholars have been made available to the public in hundreds of monographs, general histories, critical appreciations and guidebooks. But Renaissance musical art which was fully the equal of Renaissance poetry, painting and sculpture has received relatively little attention from scholars and is almost unknown to the concert-going public. Donatello and Piero della Francesca, Titian and Michelangelo - their names are household words and, in the original or in reproduction, their works are familiar to everyone. But how few people have heard, or even heard of, the music of Dufay and Josquin, of Okeghem and Obrecht, of Ysaac and Wert and Marenzio, of Dunstable, Byrd and Victoria! All that can be said is that, twenty years ago, the number was still smaller than it is today. And a couple of generations earlier the ignorance was almost total. Even so great a historian as Burckhardt - the man who wrote with such insight, such a wealth of erudition, about every other aspect of the Renaissance in Italy - knew next to nothing about the music of his chosen period. It was not his fault; there were no modern editions of the music and nobody ever played or sang it. Consider, by way of example, the Vespers, composed in 1610 by one of the most famous, one of the most historically important of Italian musicians, Claudio

Monteverdi. After the middle of the seventeenth century this extraordinary masterpiece was never again performed until the year 1935. One can say without any exaggeration that, until very recent times, more was known about the Fourth Dynasty Egyptians who built the pyramids, than about the Flemish and Italian contemporaries of Shakespeare who wrote the madrigals.

This sort of thing, let us remember, has happened before. From the time of the composer's death in 1750 to the performance under Mendelssohn, in 1829, of the Passion according to St Matthew, no European audience had ever heard a choral work by John Sebastian Bach. What Mendelssohn and the nineteenth-century musicologists, critics and virtuosi did for Bach another generation of scholars and performers has begun to do for Bach's predecessors, whose works have been rediscovered, published in critical editions, performed here and there and even occasionally recorded. It is gradually dawning upon us that the three centuries before Bach are just as interesting, musically speaking, as the two centuries after Bach.

There exists in Los Angeles a laudable institution called the Southern California Chamber Music Society. This society sponsors a series of Monday Evening Concerts, at which, besides much fine and seldom-heard classical and contemporary music, many pre-Bach compositions are performed. Among these earlier compositions one group stands out in my memory as uniquely interesting - a group of madrigals and motets by an almost exact contemporary of Shakespeare, Carlo Gesualdo. Another English poet, John Milton, was an admirer of Gesualdo and, while in Italy, bought a volume of his madrigals which, with a number of other books, he sent home by ship from Venice. Milton's admiration is understandable; for Gesualdo's music is so strange and, in its strangeness, so beautiful that it haunts the memory and fires the imagination. Listening to it, one is filled with questioning wonder. What sort of a man was it who wrote such music? Where does it fit into the general musical scheme, and what is its relevance for us? In the paragraphs that follow I shall try, in the light of my sadly limited knowledge of Gesualdo's time and of Gesualdo's art, to answer, or at least to speculate about these questions.

Let us begin, then, with the biographical facts. Carlo Gesualdo was born in or about 1560, either at Naples or in one of his father's numerous castles in the neighbourhood of Naples. The Gesualdi were of ancient and noble lineage, had been barons for fifteen generations, counts for eight, dukes for four or five, and, for the past three generations, hereditary Princes of Venosa. Carlo's mother hailed from northern Italy and was a sister of the great Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, who died in 1584 and was canonized in 1610. In his later years Gesualdo could speak not only of my father, the Prince, but even (going one better) of my uncle, the Saint. Of the boy's education we know nothing and can only infer, from his later achievements, that he must have had a very thorough grounding in music.

Every age has its own characteristic horrors. In ours there are the Communists and nuclear weapons, there is nationalism and the threat of overpopulation. The violence in which we indulge is truly monstrous; but it is, so

to say, official violence, ordered by the proper authorities, sanctioned by law, ideologically justified and confined to periodical World Wars, between which we enjoy the blessings of law, order and internal peace. In the Naples of Gesualdo's day, violence was ruggedly individualistic, unorganized and chronic. There was little nationalism and World Wars were unknown; but dynastic squabbles were frequent and the Barbary Corsairs were incessantly active, raiding the coasts of Italy in search of slaves and booty. But the citizen's worst enemies were not the pirates and the foreign princes; they were his own neighbours. Between the wars and the forays of the infidels there were no lucid intervals, such as we enjoy between our wholesale massacres, of civic decency, but an almost lawless and policeless free-for-all in a society composed of a class of nobles, utterly corrupted by Spanish ideas of honour (Naples was then a Spanish colony), a small and insignificant middle class and a vast mob of plebeians living in bestial squalor and savagery, and sunk, head over ears, in the most degrading superstition. It was in this monstrous environment that Carlo grew up, an immensely talented and profoundly neurotic member of the overprivileged minority.

In 1586 he married Maria d'Avalos, a girl of twenty, but already a widow. (Her previous husband, it was whispered, had died of too much connubial bliss.) Gesualdo had two children by this lady, one of his own begetting, the other almost certainly not; for after two years of marriage, the lovely and lively Donna Maria had taken a lover, Don Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria. On the night of October 16, 1590, accompanied by three of his retainers, armed with swords, halberds and arquebuses, Gesualdo broke into his wife's room, found the lovers in bed and had them killed. After which he took horse and galloped off to one of his castles where, after liquidating his second child (the one of doubtful paternity), he remained for several months - not to escape the law (for he was never prosecuted and, if he had been, would certainly have been acquitted as having done only what any injured husband had the right and even the duty to do), but to avoid the private vengeance of the Avalos and Carafa families. These last were outraged, not so much by the murder (which was entirely in order) as by the fact that the killing had been done by lackeys and not by Gesualdo himself. According to the code of honour, blue blood might be spilled only by the possessor of blue blood, never by a member of the lower classes.

Time passed and the storm, as all storms finally do, blew over. From his feudal keep in the hills Gesualdo was able to return to Naples and the cultivated society of madrigal-singing amateurs and professional musicians. He began composing, he even published. Second and third editions of his madrigals were called for. He was almost a best seller.

The Prince of Venosa, the Serenissimo as he was called by his respectful contemporaries, was now an eligible widower, and sometime in 1592 or 1593 his paternal uncle, the Archbishop of Naples, entered into negotiations with Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, with a view to securing for his nephew a princess of the great house of Este. Suitable financial arrangements were made, and in February

1594, the nuptials of Carlo Gesualdo and Donna Leonora d'Este were celebrated at Ferrara with all the usual pomp. After a short stay in the south, Gesualdo returned to Ferrara with his bride, now pregnant, rented a palace and settled down for a long stay.

Ferrara in 1594 was a setting sun, still dazzling, but on the brink of darkness. Three years later, on the death of Duke Alfonso without a male heir, the city, which was a papal fief, reverted to its overlord, the Pope, and was incorporated into the States of the Church. The glory that was Ferrara vanished overnight, forever.

That Ferrara should ever have become a glory is one of the unlikeliest facts in that long succession of actualized improbabilities which make up human history. The ducal territory was small and, in those malarious days, unhealthy. Its material resources were scanty, and the most important local industry was the smoking of eels, caught in the winding channels of the delta of the Po. Militarily, the state was feeble in the extreme. Powerful and not always friendly neighbours surrounded it and, to make matters worse, it lay on the invasion route from Germany and Austria. In spite of which Ferrara became and for a hundred and fifty years - from the middle of the fifteenth to the end of the sixteenth century - remained not only a sovereign state of considerable political importance, but also one of the most brilliant intellectual centres of Western Europe. This position the city owed entirely to the extraordinary ability and good taste of its rulers, the dukes of the house of Este. In the game of international and interdynastic politics, the Estensi were consummately skilful players. At home they were not too tyrannical, and had a happy knack, when discontent ran high, of blaming their ministers for everything and so maintaining their own popularity.

Their domestic life was relatively harmonious. Unlike many of the ruling families of Italy, the Estensi seldom murdered one another. True, a few years before Carlo's marriage to Leonora, the Duke had had his sister's lover strangled. But this was an exceptional act and anyhow he refrained from strangling the lady; the integrity of the clan was preserved. But from our present point of view the most remarkable thing about the Dukes of Ferrara was their steady patronage of talent, especially in the fields of literature and music. The greatest Italian poets of the sixteenth century - from Ariosto at the beginning to Guarini and Tasso at the end - were summoned to Ferrara, where the dukes either gave them jobs in the administration of the state, or else paid them a pension, so that they might devote the whole of their time to literature. Musicians were no less welcome than poets. From 1450 to 1600 most of the greatest composers of the time visited Ferrara, and many of them stayed at the court for long periods. They came from Burgundy and Flanders, the most productive centres of early Renaissance music; they came from France, they came even from faraway England. And later, when the Italians had learned their lesson from the North and had become, in their turn, the undisputed leaders in the field, they came from all over the peninsula. The huge square castello at the heart of the city, the ducal hunting lodges, the summer palaces by the sea, the mansions of the

nobles and the foreign ambassadors - all of them resounded with music. Learned polyphonic music and popular songs and dances. Music for lutes (there was a functionary at the ducal court whose sole duty it was to keep the lutes perpetually in tune) and music for the organ, for viols, for wind instruments, for the earliest forms of harpsichord and clavichord. Music performed by amateurs sitting around the fire or at a table, and music rendered by professional virtuosi. Music in church, music at home and (this was a novelty) music in the concert hall. For there were daily concerts in the various ducal palaces, concerts in which as many as sixty players and singers would take part. On grand occasions - and at Ferrara there seems to have been a grand occasion at least twice a week - there were masques with choral interludes, there were plays with overtures and incidental music, there were performances, in those sunset years of decline, of the first rudimentary operas. And what wonderful voices could be heard at Alfonso's court! Ferrara's Three Singing Ladies were world famous. There was Lucrezia Bendidio, there was Laura Peperara and, most remarkable of the trio, there was the beautiful, learned and many-talented Tarquinia Molza. But every Eden, alas, has its serpent, and, in Tarquinia's musical paradise, there was not merely a reptile to rear its ugly head; there were several Adams as well.

Tarquinia married and was widowed; then, in her middle thirties she fell under the spell of that most charming and romantic of men, Torquato Tasso. The poet, who wrote a great deal about love, but very seldom made it, was alarmed, and, putting up a barrage of platonic verse, beat a hasty retreat. Tarquinia had to be content, for several years, with lovers of less exalted intellectual rank. Then, in her forties, she found another man of genius, the great Flemish composer, Giaches Wert, who was in the employ of the Duke of Mantua. Their passion was reciprocal and so violent that it created a scandal. The unhappy Tarquinia was exiled to Modena and Wert returned, alone, to the court of the Gonzagas.

For a man of Gesualdo's gifts and sensibilities, Ferrara combined the advantages of a seat of higher education with those of a heaven on earth. It was a place where he could simultaneously enjoy himself and learn. And learn he certainly did. The madrigals he composed before 1594 are admirable in their workmanship; but their style, though his own, is still within the bounds of sixteenth-century music. The madrigals and motets written after his stay at Ferrara are beyond those bounds - far out in a kind of no-man's land.

Gesualdo left no memoirs and, in spite of his high contemporary reputation and his exalted position in the world, very little is known of his later life, except that he was unhappy and dogged by misfortune. His son by his second wife died in childhood. His son by the murdered Donna Maria, the heir to all the family titles and estates, grew up to loathe his father and long for his death; but it was he who died first. One of Gesualdo's daughters went to the bad and presented him with several illegitimate grandchildren. Meanwhile, he was constantly tormented, says a contemporary gossip writer, by a host of demons. His lifelong neurosis had deepened, evidently, into something like insanity. Apart from music, which he went on composing with undiminished powers, his only pleasure seems

to have been physical pain. He would, we are told, submit ecstatically to frequent whippings. These at last became a physiological necessity. According to that much persecuted philosopher, Tommaso Campanella, the Prince of Venosa could never go to the bathroom (cacare nonpoterai) unless he had first been flogged by a servant specially trained to perform this duty. Remorse for the crimes of his youth weighed heavily on Gesualdo's conscience. The law might excuse, public opinion might even approve; but Holy Writ was explicit: Thou shalt not kill. A few years before his death in 1613 he endowed a Capuchin friary in his native town of Gesualdo and built a handsome church. Over the altar hung a huge penitential picture, painted to the prince's order and under his personal direction. This picture, which still survives, represents Christ the Judge seated on high and flanked by the Blessed Virgin and the Archangel Michael. Below Him, arranged symmetrically, in descending tiers, to right and left, are Saint Francis and Saint Mary Magdalen, Saint Dominic and Saint Catherine of Siena, all of them, to judge by their gestures, emphatically interceding with the Saviour on behalf of Carlo Gesualdo, who kneels in the lower left-hand corner, dressed in black velvet and an enormous ruff, while, splendid in the scarlet robes of a Prince of the Church, his uncle, the Saint, stands beside him, with one hand resting protectively on the sinner's shoulder. Opposite them kneels Carlo's aunt, Isabella Borromeo, in the costume of a nun, and at the centre of this family group is the murdered child, as a heavenly cherub. Below, at the very bottom of the composition, Donna Maria and the Duke of Andria are seen roasting everlastingly in those flames from which the man who had them butchered still hopes against hope to be delivered.

So much for the facts of our composer's life - facts which confirm an old and slightly disquieting truth: namely, that between an artist's work and his personal behaviour there is no very obvious correspondence. The work may be sublime, the behaviour anything from silly to insane and criminal. Conversely the behaviour may be blameless and the work uninteresting or downright bad. Artistic merit has nothing to do with any other kind of merit. In the language of theology, talent is a gratuitous grace, completely unconnected with saving grace or even with ordinary virtue or sanity.

From the man we now pass to his strange music. Like most of the great composers of his day, Gesualdo wrote exclusively for the human voice - to be more precise, for groups of five or six soloists singing contrapuntally. All his five- or six-part compositions belong to one or other of two closely related musical forms, the madrigal and the motet. The motet is the older of the two forms and consists of a setting, for any number of voices from three to twelve, of a short passage, in Latin, from the Bible or some other sacred text. Madrigals may be defined as non-religious motets. They are settings, not of sacred Latin texts, but of short poems in the vernacular. In most cases, these settings were for five voices; but the composer was free to write for any number of parts from three to eight or more.

The madrigal came into existence in the thirties of the sixteenth century and,

for seventy or eighty years, remained the favourite art form of all composers of secular music. Contrapuntal writing in five parts is never likely to be popular, and the madrigal made its appeal, not to the general public, but to a select audience of professional musicians and highly educated amateurs, largely aristocratic and connected for the most part with one or other of the princely or ecclesiastical courts of the day. (One is amazed, when one reads the history of Renaissance music, by the good taste of Europe's earlier rulers. Popes and emperors, kings, princes and cardinals - they never make a mistake. Invariably, one might almost say infallibly, they choose for their chapel masters and court composers the men whose reputation has stood the test of time and whom we now recognize as the most gifted musicians of their day. Left to themselves, what sort of musicians would our twentieth-century monarchs and presidents choose to patronize? One shudders to think.)

Gesualdo wrote madrigals, and a madrigal, as we have seen, is a non-religious motet. But what else is it? Let us begin by saying what it is not. First and foremost, the madrigal, though sung, is not a song. It does not, that is to say, consist of a tune, repeated stanza after stanza. Nor has it anything to do with the art form known to later musicians as the aria. An aria is a piece of music for a solo voice, accompanied by instruments or by other voices. It begins, in most cases, with an introduction, states a melodic theme in one key, states a second theme in another key, goes into a series of modulations and ends with a recapitulation of one or both themes in the original key. Nothing of all this is to be found in the madrigal. In the madrigal there is no solo singing. All the five or more voices are of equal importance, and they move, so to speak, straight ahead, whereas the aria and the song move in the equivalent of circles or spirals. In other words, there are, in the madrigal, no systematic returns to a starting-point, no recapitulations. Its form bears no resemblance to the sonata form or even to the suite form. It might be described as a choral tone poem, written in counterpoint. When counterpoint is written within a structural pattern, such as the fugue or canon, the listener can follow the intricacies of the music almost indefinitely. But where the counterpoint has no structural pattern imposed upon it, where it moves forward freely, without any returns to a starting-point, the ear finds it very hard to follow it, attentively and understandingly, for more than a few minutes at a stretch. Hence the brevity of the typical madrigal, the extraordinary succinctness of its style.

During the three-quarters of a century of its existence, the madrigal underwent a steady development in the direction of completer, ever intenser expressiveness. At the beginning of the period it is a piece of emotionally neutral polyphony, whose whole beauty consists in the richness and complexity of its many-voiced texture. At the end, in the work of such masters as Marenzio, Monteverdi and, above all, Gesualdo, it has become a kind of musical miracle, in which seemingly incompatible elements are reconciled in a higher synthesis. The intricacies of polyphony are made to yield the most powerfully expressive effects, and this polyphony has become so flexible that it can, at any moment, transmute

itself into blocks of chords or a passage of dramatic declamation.

During his stay at Ferrara, Gesualdo was in contact with the most 'advanced' musicians of his day. A few miles away, at Mantua, the great Giaches Wert, sick and prematurely old, was still composing; and at the same court lived a much younger musician, Claudio Monteverdi, who was to carry to completion the revolution in music begun by Wert. That revolution was the supercession of polyphony by monody, the substitution of the solo voice, with instrumental or vocal accompaniment, for the madrigalist's five or six voices of equal importance. Gesualdo did not follow the Manruans into monody; but he was certainly influenced by Wert's essays in musical expressionism. Those strange cries of grief, pain and despair, which occur so frequently in his later madrigals, were echoes of the cries introduced by Wert into his dramatic cantatas.

At Ferrara itself Gesualdo's closest musical friends were Count Fontanelli and a professional composer and virtuoso, Luzzasco Luzzaschi. Like Gesualdo, Fontanelli was an aristocrat and had murdered an unfaithful wife; unlike Gesualdo, he was not a man of genius, merely a good musician passionately interested in the latest developments of the art. Luzzaschi was a writer of madrigals, and had invented a number of expressive devices, which Gesualdo employed in his own later productions. More important, he was the only man who knew how to play on, and even compose for, an extraordinary machine, which was the greatest curiosity in Duke Alfonso's collection of musical instruments. This was the archicembalo, a large keyboard instrument belonging to the harpsichord family, but so designed that a player could distinguish, for example, between B flat and A sharp, could descend chromatically from E, through E flat, D sharp, D, D flat, C sharp to a final C major chord. The archicembalo required thirty-one keys to cover each octave and must have been fantastically difficult to play and still harder, one would imagine, to compose for. The followers of Schoenberg are far behind Luzzaschi; their scale has only twelve tones, his, thirty-one. Luzzaschi's thirty-one tone compositions (none of which, unfortunately, survive) and his own experiments on the archicembalo profoundly influenced the style of Gesualdo's later madrigals. Forty years ago, the Oxford musicologist, Ernest Walker, remarked that Gesualdo's most famous madrigal, Mow lasso, sounded like 'Wagner gone wrong.' Hardly an adequate criticism of Gesualdo, but not without significance.

The mention of Wagner is fully justified; for the incessant chromaticisms of Gesualdo's later writing found no parallel in music until the time of Tristan. As for the 'gone-wrongness' - this is due to Gesualdo's unprecedented and, until recent times, almost unimitated treatment of harmonic progression. In his madrigals successive chords are related in ways which conform neither to the rules of sixteenth-century polyphony, nor to the rules of harmony which held good from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. An infallible ear is all that, in most cases, preserves these strange and beautiful progressions from seeming altogether arbitrary and chaotic. Thanks to that infallible ear of his, Gesualdo's harmonies move, always astonishingly, but always

with a logic of their own, from one impossible, but perfectly satisfying, beauty to another. And the harmonic strangeness is never allowed to continue for too long at a stretch. "With consummate art, Gesualdo alternates these extraordinary passages of Wagner-gone-wrong with passages of pure traditional polyphony. To be fully effective, every elaboration must be shown in a setting of simplicity, every revolutionary novelty should emerge from a background of the familiar. For the composers of arias, the simple and familiar background for their floridly expressive melodies was a steady, rhythmically constant accompaniment. For Gesualdo, simplicity and familiarity meant the rich, many-voiced texture of contrapuntal writing. The setting for Wagner-gone-wrong is Palestrina.

Every madrigal is the setting of a short poem in the vernacular, just as every motet is the setting of a short passage from the Vulgate or some other piece of sacred Latin literature. The texts of the motets were generally in prose, and the early polyphonists saw no obvious reason for imposing upon this essentially rectilinear material a circular musical form. After the invention of the aria, the composers of music for prose texts habitually distorted the sense and rhythm of their words in order to force them into the circular, verselike patterns of their new art form. From Alessandro Scarlatti, through Bach and Handel, to Mozart, Haydn and Mendelssohn - all the great composers from 1650 to 1850 provide examples, in their musical settings, of what may be called the versification of prose. To do this, they were compelled to repeat phrases and individual words again and again, to prolong single syllables to inordinate length, to recapitulate, note for note, or with variations, entire paragraphs. How different was the procedure of the madrigalists! Instead of versifying prose, they found it necessary, because of the nature of their art form, to prosify verse. The regular recurrences of poetry - these have no place in the madrigal, just as they have no place in the motet. Like good prose, the madrigal is rectilinear, not circular. Its movement is straight ahead, irreversible, asymmetrical. When they set a piece of poetry to music, the madrigalist set it phrase by phrase, giving to each phrase, even each word, its suitable expression and linking the successive moods by a constant adaptation of the polyphonic writing, not by the imposition from outside of a structural pattern. Every madrigal, as I have said, is a choral tone poem. But instead of lasting for a whole hour, like the huge, spectacular machines of Liszt and Richard Strauss, it concentrates its changing moods into three or four minutes of elaborate and yet intensely expressive counterpoint.

The Italian madrigalists chose their texts, for the most part, from the best poets. Dante was considered too harsh and old-fashioned; but his great fourteenth-century successor, Petrarch, remained a perennial favourite. Among more recent poets, Ariosto, though set fairly frequently, was much less popular than Guarini and Tasso, whose emotional tone was more emphatic and who took pleasure in just those violent contrasts of feeling which lent themselves most perfectly to the purposes of the madrigalist. In their shorter pieces (pieces written expressly to be set to music) Tasso and his contemporaries made use of a kind of epigrammatic style, in which antithesis, paradox and oxymoron played

a major part and were turned into a literary convention, so that every versifier now talked of dolorous joy, sweet agony, loathing love and living death - to the immense delight of the musicians, for whom these emotional ambiguities, these abrupt changes of feeling offered golden opportunities.

Gesualdo was a personal friend of Torquato Tasso and, during the last, mad, wandering years of the poet's life, helped him with money and letters of introduction. As we should expect, he set a number of Tasso's poems to music. For the rest he made use of anything that came to hand. Many of his finest madrigals are based on snatches of verse having no literary merit whatsoever. That they served his purpose was due to the fact that they were written in the current idiom and contained plenty of emphatically contrasting words, which he could set to appropriately expressive music. Gesualdo's indifference to the poetical quality of his texts, and his methods of setting words to music, are very clearly illustrated in one of the most astonishing of his madrigals, Ardita laniaretta, a work, incidentally, whose performance at Los Angeles in the autumn of 1955 was probably the first in more than three hundred years. This extraordinary little masterpiece compresses into less than three minutes every mood from the cheerfully indifferent to the perversely voluptuous, from the gay to the tragic, and in the process employs every musical resource, from traditional polyphony to Wagner-gone-wrong chromaticism and the strangest harmonic progressions, from galloping rhythms to passages of long, suspended notes. Then we look at the text and discover that this amazing music is the setting of half a dozen lines of doggerel. The theme of Ardita laniaretta is the same as the theme of a tiny poem by Tasso, tasteless enough in all conscience, but written with a certain elegance of style. A little mosquito (janiaretta) settles on the bosom of the beloved, bites and gets swatted by the exasperated lady. What a delicious fate, muses Tasso, to die in a place where it is such bliss to swoon away!

Felice te,felice,
piu che nel rogo oriental Fenice!
(Oh happy, happy bug - more happy than the Phoenix on its oriental pyre!)

Gesualdo's nameless librettist takes the same subject, robs it of whatever charm Tasso was able to lend it, and emphasizes the bloodiness of the mosquito's fate by introducing - twice over in the space of only six lines the word string ere, meaning to squeeze, squash, squelch. Another improvement on Tasso is the addition of a playful sally by the lover. Since he longs to share the mosquito's fate, he too will take a bite in the hope of being squashed to death on the lady's bosom. What follows is a literal translation of this nonsense, together with a description of the music accompanying each phrase. "A bold little mosquito bites the fair breast of her who consumes my heart." This is set to a piece of pure neutral polyphony, very rapid and, despite its textural richness, very light. But the lady is not content with consuming the lover's heart; she also "keeps it in cruel pain." Here the dancing polyphony of the first bars gives place to a series of chords moving slowly from dissonance to unprepared dissonance.

The pain, however unreal in the text, becomes in the music genuinely excruciating. Now the mosquito "makes its escape, but rashly flies back to that fair breast which steals my heart away. Whereupon she catches it." All this is rendered in the same kind of rapid, emotionally neutral polyphony as was heard in the opening bars. But now comes another change. The lady not only catches the insect, "she squeezes it and gives it death." The word morte, death, occurs in almost all Gesualdo's madrigals. Sometimes it carries its literal meaning; more often, however, it is used figuratively, to signify sensual ecstasy, the swoon of love. But this makes no difference to Gesualdo. Whatever its real significance, and whoever it is that may be dying (the lover metaphorically or, in a literal sense, a friend, a mosquito, the crucified Saviour), he gives to the word, morte, a musical expression of the most tragic and excruciating kind. For the remorseful assassin, death was evidently the most terrifying of prospects.

From the insect's long-drawn musical martyrdom, we return to cheerfulness and pure polyphony. "To share its happy fate, I too will bite you." Gesualdo was a pain-loving masochist and this playful suggestion of sadism left him unmoved. The counterpoint glides along in a state of emotional neutrality. Then comes a passage of chromatic yearning on the words, "my beloved, my precious one." Then polyphony again. "And if you catch and squeeze me..." After this, the music becomes unadulterated Gesualdo. There is a cry of pain - ahi! and then "I will swoon away and, upon that fair breast, taste delicious poison." The musical setting of these final words is a concentrated version of the love-potion scene in Tristan - the chief difference being that Gesualdo's harmonic progressions are far bolder than any attempted, two and half centuries later, by Richard Wagner.

Should pictures tell stories? Should music have a connection with literature? In the past the answer would have been, unanimously, yes. Every great painter was a raconteur of biblical or mythological anecdotes; every great composer was a setter-to-music of sacred or profane texts. Today the intrusion of literature into the plastic arts is regarded almost as a crime. In the field of music, this anti-literary reign of terror has been less savage. Programme music is deplored (not without reason, considering the horrors bequeathed to us by the Victorian era); but in spite of much talk about 'pure music,' good composers still write songs, Masses, operas and cantatas. Good painters would do well to follow their example and permit themselves to be inspired to still better painting by the promptings of a literary theme. In the hands of a bad painter, pictorial storytelling, however sublime the subject matter, is merely comic-strip art on a large scale. But when a good painter tells the same story, the case is entirely different. The exigencies of illustration - the fact that he has to show such-and-such personages, in such-and-such an environment, performing such-and-such actions - stimulates his imagination on every level, including the purely pictorial level, with the result that he produces a work which, though literary, is of the highest quality as a formal composition. Take any famous painting of the past - Botticelli's Calumny of Apelles, for example, or Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne. Both of these are admirable illustrations; but both are much more than

illustrations - they are very complex and yet perfectly harmonious and unified arrangements of forms and colours. Moreover, the richness of their formal material is a direct consequence of their literary subject matter. Left to itself, the pictorial imagination even of a painter of genius could never conjure up such a subtle and complicated pattern of shapes and hues as we find in these illustrations of texts by Lucian and Ovid. To achieve their purely plastic triumphs, Botticelli and Titian required to be stimulated by a literary theme. It is a highly significant fact that, in no abstract or non-representational painting of today, do we find a purely formal composition having anything like the richness, the harmonious complexity, created, in the process of telling a story, by the masters of earlier periods. The traditional distinction between the crafts and the fine arts is based, among other things, on degrees of complexity. A good picture is a greater work of art than a good bowl or a good vase. Why? Because it unifies in one harmonious whole more, and more diverse, elements of human experience than are or can be unified and harmonized in the pot. Some of the non-representational pictures painted in the course of the last fifty years are very beautiful; but even the best of them are minor works, inasmuch as the number of elements of human experience, which they combine and harmonize, is pitifully small. In them we look in vain for that ordered profusion, that lavish and yet perfectly controlled display of intellectual wealth, which we discover in the best works of the 'literary' painters of the past.

In this respect the composer is more fortunate than the painter. It is psychologically possible to write 'pure music' that shall be just as harmoniously complex, just as rich in unified diversities, as music inspired by a literary text. But even in music the intrusion of literature has often been beneficent. But for the challenge presented by a rather absurd anecdote couched in very feeble language, Beethoven would never have produced the astonishing 'pure music' of the second act of Fidelia. And it was Da Ponte, with his rhymed versions of the stories of Figaro and Don Giovanni, who stimulated Mozart to reveal himself in the fullness of his genius. Where music is a matter of monody and harmony, with a structural pattern (the sonata form or the suite form) imposed, so to speak, from the outside, it is easy to write 'pure music,' in which the successive moods shall be expressed, at some length, in successive movements. But where there is no structural pattern, where the style is polyphonic and the movement of the music is not circular, but straight ahead, irreversible and rectilinear, the case is different. Such a style demands extreme brevity and the utmost succinctness of expression. To meet the demands for brevity and succinctness, the musical imagination requires a text - and a text, moreover, of the kind favoured by the madrigalists, paradoxical, antithetical, full of

> All things counter, original, spare, strange,
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who know how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.

Contemporary musicians, who aspire to write 'pure music' in forms as rich, subtle and compact as those devised by Gesualdo and his contemporaries, would do well to turn once more to the poets.