

Similar Yet Unique: Perspectives on Madrigal Text-Painting

Giaches de Wert and Luca Marenzio, in their unique responses to the challenge of setting the text of Petrarch's *Solo e pensoso* to music, arrive at separate yet often converging solutions. Both composers, seeking to demonstrate aurally the intricate mannerisms of Petrarch's poetic imagery, use imaginative text-painting gestures popular in the then-evolving tradition of the 16th-century madrigal. The two composers realize similar ideas in many sections of their madrigals, while other sections reveal the ways that de Wert and Marenzio differed in their reading of Petrarch's text. Whereas de Wert uses radical gestures to bring life to Petrarch's words, Marenzio goes one further and tends to expand upon the text's original meaning, offering his own unique perspective on the poem. But in the end, de Wert and Marenzio, while having diverse goals, achieve their common pursuit of bringing *Solo e pensoso* to musical life through unique expressions of melodic gesture, texture, harmony, and rhythm.

Both de Wert and Marenzio utilize odd melodic gestures to illustrate the odd, "outside" position the poet holds at the outset of *Solo e pensoso*; however, the unique gestures they use show differing perspectives. While de Wert's madrigal begins with two descending fifths adding up to a 9th rather than the usual octave (prima parta m. 1-2), Marenzio goes one further and opens his piece with a full chromatic sequence and then some (m. 1-24) – a very bold move indeed. These gestures, while sharing the same goal – portraying the poet as a pensive vagabond – and while using similarly "odd" methods to do so, sound unique and generate diverse images in their own rights. De Wert's usage of "open" intervals generally falling and rising slowly in a network of voices (prima parta m. 1-10), suggest a poet's eyes cast downward as he descends a misty valley; Marenzio's steadily climbing chromatic sequence, however, implies the plodding ascent of a searching poet up a similarly crepuscular mountainside; the web of

voices weaving beneath suggest his wandering thoughts just as much as they reflect his reflective, wide-open setting. This expands upon Petrarch's text in a way that suggests details not yet revealed, whereas de Wert takes us step-by-step as if revealing the poem as it precedes; Marenzio's interpretation almost seems to assume prior familiarity to the concepts presented in the text for its meaning to be entirely clear, and is thus quite enticing to a first-time listener as it offers a certain mystique in its (initially) inexplicable text-extrapolations.

De Wert and Marenzio both illustrate the poet's "slow, measured steps" with literal melodic steps; however, whereas de Wert's setting of this text (prima parta m. 12-26) appears largely independent and diatonic, Marenzio's occurs simultaneously with other lines of text and ascends chromatically, showing the differing degrees of elaboration on Petrarch's original text. De Wert's quite literal interpretation suggests a stricter adherence to the poem's imagery, while Marenzio's mish-mashing of the first two lines displays a more broad, personal, and elaborate interpretation given to greater freedom of individual personal reaction to the text.

The next line shows how both de Wert and Marenzio use rhythm to illustrate similar intents through diverse compositional methods. De Wert, in his setting for the third line of text (prima parta m. 27-30), increases rhythmic density to communicate the poet's nervous, darting eyes and fraught spirits; Marenzio does similarly (m. 25-32). However, whereas de Wert's setting seems to move fluidly out of the preceding line, Marenzio's version begins only after a clear cadence closing the previous line of text, creating expectation of more divergent material. This increases the emphasis on the feelings of uncertainty that the text's poet holds in his mind and eyes.

Whereas both Marenzio and de Wert employ texture to nobly illustrate Petrarch's poetry, Marenzio often offers subjective discourse as well, imaginatively adding to the

textual meaning with textural gesture. First of all, in some obvious cases, both men use similar techniques to reflect the text: both begin their madrigals with a single voice (both m. 1), reflecting the *Solo* nature of the poet in his setting; both men use jagged, angular melodic language to depict the “rough and wild” terrain of line 12 (de Wert, seconda parta m. 12-23; Marenzio, m. 112-121); and both men employ fluid melismatic accents in multiple voices (de Wert, seconda parta m. 3-7; Marenzio, m. 93-96) to depict a flowing river, to offer a few examples. However, Marenzio often uses texture to expand the initial meaning of the text with his own perspective. For instance, the line “when laughter and cheer are spent” appears to encircle or enclose the line “from outside can be read my inner flame” (m. 76-84), suggesting that the poet’s obsessive fear of mockery from the outside world has led him to retreat inward, hiding from the thoughts flitting invisibly around his head like imagined gnats or wasps. Marenzio often implies interpretatively (connotation) in addition to what de Wert chooses to express more directly and textually-grounded (denotation).

Marenzio also seems to have a penchant for dramatic, bold moves even more than de Wert (whose gestures themselves were quite removed from traditional harmonic practice in the first place). In a particularly touching display of pathos, Marenzio sets a single line homophonically in three voices – “such is made my life, hidden from others” (m. 107-111). The line appears only once, as a dramatic declaration, resolute in its apathy, glorious in its finality. The fact that it appears only in three voices rather than the full chorus of voices further adds to the sense of it being a dramatic “aside,” simultaneously bashful, candid, and melancholic.

De Wert, on the other hand, uses textural moves somewhat more subtlety, logically, and fluidly. The text “spenti” appears to spend itself breathlessly at its end (m. 56-57); text suggesting the poet’s state of being “hidden from others” seems to duck

behind the beginning of the next line in an elided fashion (seconda parta m. 11-12); when the poet expresses a desire to escape Love's discourse amongst rough terrain, the melodic line concerning Love's pursuit appears to hide itself heterophonically within the text concerning rough terrain (seconda parta, m. 12-23), thus literally suggesting the poet's concealment within his surroundings until he is overtaken by his own neuroses at the end (seconda parta, m. 24-28). Although these gestures may initially appear obvious or even clichéd, these impressions are negated by the gentle, logically pleasing manner in which they present themselves.

De Wert tends towards objectivity whereas Marenzio often sets the text in a personal, subjective style; de Wert chooses to set in a more or less passive voice what Marenzio depicts in more movement-based, action-oriented terms. De Wert, as I have mentioned previously, depicts the poet as hiding from Love within his surroundings, huddled and viewed from a somewhat objective standpoint. Marenzio, however, sets the same text to a galloping chase: Love rides fiercely in pursuit of his target (m. 122-130), thus giving aural strength to Petrarch's usage of personification and allowing the listener to imagine the struggle as it appears to the poet, rather than as a purely objective observer.

Despite the differences between de Wert and Marenzio, both composers reach a similar conclusion at the end of the piece – both logically illustrate the futility of the poet's interior struggle personified as Love (Cupid), and his failure to escape his own painful thoughts and feelings. In both madrigals, the voices homophonically recite over a "final" sounding harmony until eventually "fizzling out" (de Wert, seconda parta m. 24-28; Marenzio m. 131-139) in a manner that suggests the vanity of any true resolution to the poet's journey.