

Tasso on Music

Most of Torquato Tasso's prose works in dialogue form were composed in the years 1579-86 while in a comfortable place of confinement for the mentally ill at Ferrara. They deal largely with problems of literary aesthetics. One such, written around 1585 and published in 1587, is entitled "La Cavalletta". A *forestiero Napolitano* (*For.*), a foreigner from Naples, has come to Ferrara to continue a discussion about poetry in the Italian vernacular. This is the voice of Tasso, who was born in Sorrento. *Ors.* and *Herc.* are his admiring interlocutors, an imaginary couple named Orsina Cavaletta and Hercole Cavalletto.

In the pocket-sized edition of 1701 which recently came into my hands I found two interesting references to music. On page 47, after a discussion of articulations between verses based on terminology which goes back to Dante's Latin treatise on the same subject (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ca. 1305), we read:

For. Vorrei che ne chiedesse à Messer Alfonso della viola, alla Striggio: a l'Animuccio al Lucciasco, o al Fiorino, o à fra Iacomo Moro, o ad altro musico eccellente, dal qual udirei anch'io cantar questa canzone, o alcuna in guisa, ch'io sentissi inanzi la divisione la replicatione del modo, e dopoi non l'udissi. *Herc.* Voi farete per avventura simile à Socrate, ch'imparò musica nella sua vecchiezza. *For.* In questo vorrei assomigliarlo, o nella virtù de l'animo. (*Translation)

Alfonso della Viola was the ducal *maestro di cappella* in Ferrara for decades. I recently encountered him portrayed with Gioseffo Zarlino and Claudio Merulo visiting Adrian Willaert in the introduction to Zarlino's *Istitutioni Harmoniche*. "Animuccio" is probably Paolo Annuccia, a madrigalist at Urbino, brother of the St. Peter's *maestro di cappella* Giovanni. (Tasso had been the childhood playmate of the heir to the duchy of Urbino, and an aunt of Tasso's later Ferrara patron Duke Alfonso II, the brilliant Lucrezia d'Este, married this same Francesco Maria della Rovere after his accession in 1574.) "Fra Iacomo Moro" is Giacomo Moro di Viadana, about whom almost nothing is known; the passage reveals some connection to Ferrara, or at least to Tasso. Three other more famous Ferrara composers are listed: Gasparo Fiorino, Alessandro Striggio Sr., and Luzzasco Luzzaschi, Frescobaldi's revered teacher.

Then on pages 70-71, after the central discussion of the main lyric form, the *canzone*, there comes this interesting digression into musical aesthetics:

For. Ma le canzone hanno bisogno della musica quasi per condimento; ma quale cercherem noi, che sia questo condimento? qual piace a' giovani lascivi fra' conviti, e fra' balli delle saltatrici: o pur quello, che agli uomini gravi, ed alle donne suol convenire? *Ors.* Questo piuttosto. *For.* Dunque lascerem da parte tutta quella musica, la quale degenerando è divenuta molle, ed effeminata: e pregheremo lo Striggio, e Iacques, e'l Lucciasco, o alcuno altro eccellente Maestro di musica eccellente, che voglia richiamarla a quella gravità, dalla quale traviando, è spesso traboccata in parte, di cui è più bello il tacere, che il ragionare. E questo modo grave sarà simile a quello, che Aristotile chiama $\delta\omega\rho\iota\xi$, il quale è magnifico, costante, e grave, e sopra tutti gli altri accomodato alle cetera. *Ors.* Cotesto non mi spiace; ma pur niuna cosa, scompagnata dalla dolcezza, può essere dilettevole. *For.* Io non biasmo la dolcezza, e la soavità, ma ci vorrei il temperamento: perchè io stimo, che la musica sia come una delle altre arte pur nobili, ciascuna delle quali è

seguita da un lusinghiero simile nell'apparenza, ma nell'operazione molte dissomigliante: e come l'arte della cucina lusinga la medicina, il calunniatore l'oratore, il sofista il filosofo; così la musica lasciva, la temperata. *Ors.* Fra tanti lusinghieri sono in molto pericolo non solamente gli uomini, ma l'arti medesime, e quelli, e queste in gran parte contaminate. *For.* Dunque il nostro poeta dall'una parte si guarderà di non cadere nell'arguzie de' sofisti, le quali hanno ripiene molte composizioni, che piacciono al mondo: dall'altra, che il condimento della musica non sia stemperato, ne soverchio... (**Translation)

“laches” is Giaches de Wert, one of the most important composers of the period. He was officially employed at Mantua, but, burdened with scandal there, was spending as much time as possible in Ferrara with his lover, the famous singer and poet Tarquinia Molza who was a lady-in-waiting and member of the nobility, and therefore, like Pompeia, should have been above suspicion. That new scandal blew up two years after the publication of “La Cavalletta”.

La Molza was involved with the renowned *concerto delle donne*, a shifting group of virtuosic female singers which attracted attention from all over Europe from its founding in 1580 until its dissolution with the fall of the Ferrarese state in 1598. I suspect their lavishly ornamented music was the kind Tasso disapproved of as “degenerating, and become weak and effeminate”, especially since his preferred “Dorian” style, a concept which he is lifting from Aristotle’s *Politics* (Book 8, section 1342b), is described by the Stagirite as “manly”.

Luzzaschi and Fiorino must also have been suspect in Tasso’s eyes because of their involvement with the composition and performance of grand *balletti* at the court of Ferrara. These were among the first attempts in Italy to imitate Catherine de’ Medici’s new Parisian *ballet de cour*, large-scale choreographed spectacles which were the direct ancestors of Petipa, Nijinsky and Balanchine.

Tasso’s reference to the *cetera*, (if, as I think, the author does not mean the cittern, which was undergoing a revival in Italy just then, but the Greek Κιθάρα, as is Marini’s *Tempo la cetra*) is a nod to the humanism that Tasso idealized, and to the discussions of the revival of ancient Greek music which were percolating all over northern Italy just then. These led to the efforts which failed in their intent, but which spawned, for better or worse, a new genre called “opera”.

The *forestiero*’s admission of a degree of *dolcezza* and *soavità* to the music he considers suitable for *canzone* saves him from overmuch pedantry. But one wonders what Tasso would have thought of the greatest setting of any passage from his most famous work, the epic poem *La Gerusalemme liberata* — Monteverdi’s *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, which premiered in Venice in 1624. (Nobody seems to know for sure what the *cavallo Mariano* was, mounted upon which Tancredi entered at the first performance in the Palazzo Mocenigo — a live animal or a hobby-horse?)

* *For.* I wish we could inquire of Mr. Alfonso della Viola, or Striggio, Animuccio, or Fiorino, or brother Giacomo Moro, or another excellent musician about this, one of whom I would like hear sing this *canzone*, or something similar, so that I could first hear the division and the repeat of the mode, and afterwards not hear them. *Herc.* Then in that you might resemble Socrates, who learned music in his old age. *For.* In that I would wish to emulate him, or in strength of soul.

*** For.* But *canzone* need music, like a kind of condiment; but what kind of condiment shall we seek? That which pleases lascivious boys at their parties, or at balls with acrobats? — or that which usually suits grave men and ladies? *Ors.* Rather the latter. *For.* Then let us leave aside that music which is degenerating, and become soft and effeminate: and let us ask Striggio, and Giaches, and Luzzasco, or some other excellent master of excellent music, to reclaim for it that seriousness, straying from which it has often partly broken its banks, in ways about which it would be better to be silent than to speak. And this serious style will be similar to that which Aristotle calls Dorian, which is magnificent, solid, and grave, and above all others suitable for the kithara. *Ors.* This doesn't displease me; and yet nothing can be delightful which is deprived of sweetness. *For.* I don't put blame on sweetness or tenderness, but one wants moderation: because I think that music is one of those arts which, although noble in itself, is each pursued by a temptation which is similar in appearance but very different in its operation: and just as the art of the kitchen tempts medicine, the libeler the orator, the sophist the philosopher; thus also does lascivious music tempt the moderate. *Ors.* Amongst all these temptations not only men, but the arts themselves are in great danger, and both the latter and the former are contaminated to a considerable degree. *For.* Therefore let our poet be sure on the one hand that he doesn't fall into the witticisms of the sophists, which have filled many compositions which please the world: and on the other, that the condiment of music not be immoderate, nor excessive.