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# THE MADRIGAL

By ALFRED EINSTEIN

THE Madrigal is that form of musical art in which the art-spirit of the Italian Renaissance attained its purest expression. To-day it seems worth while to give our minds to this art-form of a *cappella* song—an art that has to express the essence of personality with impersonal means, through the medium of polyphony; that by reason of its subjection to this medium is withheld from touching even the confines of the emotionalism wherewith later and more plebeian times have favored us. It is worth while on account of the stimulating actuality of the historical problem bound up with the conception and nature of the Madrigal and with its growth and decay. The problem of the Madrigal, with all its vitality, with its perfection as an art-form, resides in the arbitrariness of its creation, in its being intended for a narrowly restricted social circle, in its artificiality, unoriginality, conventionality. The Madrigal is not at all rooted in the “folk-soul,” and still is “healthy,” albeit with an aristocratic, not thoroughly robust health. It could not have its roots in the Italian folk-soul; the Madrigal, though one of the fairest flowers of Italian music, was the creation of *oltramontani*—of musicians native to the Netherlands and to France; and throughout the entire century such *oltramontani* (Lasso, Monte, Luython, Giaches de Wert) determined or at least aided in determining the changing phases of its character, unhindered and, in fact, applauded. Happy times, when chauvinism in art was unknown! The Madrigal became the universal form in which all progress in the field of music was incorporated. No matter whether Italians, Netherlanders or Frenchmen, Germans or Englishmen, made it the vehicle for the exploitation of every artistic venture, so long as the Italian artist-will secretly directed all these steps and spoke the decisive word. In a space of barely seventy years the entire course was run, from the beginnings up to the culminating point and the following descent; the circle was closed of a creation of unique newness that offers no point for a new departure and hardly permits even of imitation, and yet is filled with an abounding vitality down to its least fibre. In its broader aspects, although

not in all details—for who could assimilate the enormous output of madrigals from the printing-presses of Venice, Rome, Milan, Ferrara and Antwerp from about 1540 to 1610!—we can summarize this development. And it is to our advantage to catch the reflection of a development which moves us so realistically, in a clear, historical mirror; who, at the present time, could discuss the topics of the “rootlessness” of artistic creation, of nationality and internationality, without perversion of one’s own judgment and obscuration of criticism?

The Madrigal did not originate, but was (in the strictest acceptance of the term) made, constructed—and constructed by foreigners, northlanders, at that. Among the names of its earliest artificers, Willaert, Arcadelt, Verdelot, Layolle, Gero, only a few Italians are to be found—Costanzo Festa of Rome, and Alfonso della Viola of Ferrara. The Madrigal was not merely the creation of imported musicians; it lacks all popular (folk-) elements, it hovers, so to speak, in the air; as the solo song was later brought into being, to use Peter Gast’s expression, by “reactive” musicians, the history of the formation of the Madrigal is, similarly, a process of conscious reaction. About the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth there existed a comparatively indigenous music in Italy, the so-called *Frottola*;—comparatively, because it was nothing more than a prettification and simplification of the then predominant Franco-Netherlandish, international art-form, the *Ballade*. These *Frottole* were short strophic songlets with refrain, just suited for unambitious improvisation, for which a host of Upper Italian musicians provided the musical investiture, and frequently the words, as well; the melodies mostly unpretentious, though rhythmically charming and cleaving closely to the text-form, with a pseudo-polyphonic instrumental accompaniment. This art-form, however, despite its unobtrusiveness and its by no means elevated tone, was anything but folk-music—the Venetian nobility, an Isabella of Mantua, a Beatrice of Este, found their delight and gratification therein. It is remarkable that we know practically nothing with regard to Italian folk-music from the time of Dante down to the eighteenth century, and that we must exhume its scanty remnants from the most tortuous driftways. Such remnants are discoverable in the *Frottola*, for it employs both the folk-song and the street-ballad as refrain, using either indifferently as an object of ridicule and mockery, in farcical contrast to its own half-frivolous fundamental tone. How fondly, on the contrary, has the German part-song cherished its traditional inheritance of folk-song!

We can tell approximately in what circle the vulgar tone of the Frottola must have first become distasteful; it was the literary coterie gathered around the cardinal and poet Pietro Bembo, the moving cause being a sort of revival of Platonism in the treatment of love-affairs;—Platonism as it was understood by the Renaissance, i. e., a matter exclusively for the cultivated classes, even if not humanistic. Verses of a new, more polished style, were written, and musicians engaged for their setting. We happen to have documentary evidence for a celebrated example in some letters of Michelangelo. To his friend Luigi del Riccio in Rome he sent, at the latter's urgent request, two madrigals, a love-song and a political poem, to be given to Arcadelt for composition in the new style. Michelangelo is unable to judge how Arcadelt performs his task; he leaves it to Riccio to decide upon the musician's compensation. These two pieces ("Deh, dimmi, Amor" and "Io dico che fra voi") are extant.—A vast flood of madrigal poems according to Bembo's recipe overflows all Italy, bringing this species into everlasting disfavor in Italian literary history. That may possibly be an injustice, for in this case we have to do, not with pure poetry, but rather with poetry *à la mode*, a *poesia per musica* created to supply a special demand—almost without exception Platonico-lackadaisical addresses, serenades, aubades, serving as practical points of contact and connection for noble lovers. It is significant, that the great majority of the earliest madrigals were composed for men's voices. It would be a mistake—and seemingly has been such in previous historical research—to consider the madrigal too abstractly, as a mere object of study in the evolution of purely musical forms. It was, for all its aristocratic leanings, an intensely live art for intensely live people. Just how far it may have been "occasional" music, music dedicated to and written for particular persons and special occasions, cannot now be determined; but there are whole books of madrigals containing nothing but dedicatory music.

Aside from this, however, the madrigal is in the highest degree a form of free art—of artists' art, if you will—cultivated by musicians for the improvement of art, and intended solely for an intimate circle of connoisseurs and amateurs like those assembled at the courts of princes and in the academies. We still possess a few such works that bear the stamp of the *odi profanum* on their face, one of them being Luca Marenzio's Madrigal Book of 1588, dedicated to Conte Bevilacqua and his academy in Verona. The creators of this free madrigal very soon became dissatisfied with the gallant psychology of the verses that were forced upon

them; they unconditionally recognized the requirements of literary style and eminence, and even intensified them by proscribing pieces of a coarser (never obscene) cast that occasionally occur among the earlier madrigals; they survey with their own eyes the garden of Italian poesy. Willaert, in his book of madrigals entitled "Musica nuova" (1559)—which, to be sure, was published only three years before his decease—was the first to give a prominent place on his programs to the poet who thereafter occupied the storm-centre of madrigal-composition—Petrarch. From the middle of the fifteenth century onward this poet's verses had not seldom been set to music; following Willaert's precedent, however, from about 1550 to 1580, there was literally not a single one of his *canzone* or *sestine*, of his sonnets or madrigals, that escaped a musical setting, and some poems were composed not only once, but dozens and scores of times. This apotheosis of Petrarch in the music of the sixteenth century is comprehensible—the Madrigal was the predestinate, ideal musical vestment for the poetry of this sensual-supersensual wooer, of this lover with an uneasy conscience, who, a hundred years after the religious indifference, or rather frivolity, of the Frottola succeeded in opening the portals for the spiritual composition of the period of reaction against the Reformation, because, to him, sensuality in love seems a fetter, an enemy of the spiritual nature.—Alongside of the sentimental poetry of Petrarch and the host of his imitators, the *Canzoniere* (collection of canzone) and more especially the epic song of Ariosto take their place; individual stanzas find favor wherein the sunny and sprightly worldly wisdom of this, the greatest poet of the Renaissance, finds expression; but picturesque or humorous or highly emotional passages, which fall in with the latent dramatic bent of the later madrigal, are also utilized. And with Ariosto comes forward Sannazaro with canzone and sonnets, and, notably, with his "Arcadia," which inspired the favorite fiction of the Renaissance until the discovery of the pseudo-Anacreontic lyricism about the middle of the century altered and gave new point to the tone of the Pastorale. Withal, the relation of the musician to the poet was changed toward the end of the century; the musician began to make definite demands on the poet—an epigrammatic turn to the closing line, combinational contrasts (*oxymora*) in phraseology, which the musical fantasy developed. The madrigals of Tasso—who, be it noted, was the friend of the, harmonically, most venturesome of all madrigal composers, Prince Gesualdo di Venosa—together with the poems of Battista Guarini, and later those of Marino, were resuscitated for the service of

music; the high tide of the Madrigal subsided, and, instead of the *canzone* and *sestine* of Petrarch, composers turned to the love-laments in the favorite works of the period, in which Romantic quietism and the reaction against the Reformation find most masterly expression—the *Aminta* of Tasso and, in fuller measure, the *Pastor fido* of Guarini. The Madrigal approaches the confines of the pastoral opera, although it never succeeds in encroaching on them.

Musical production in the sphere of the Madrigal assumed incredible scope and proportions; in this respect its only possible counterpart is the song-production of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but this latter is far surpassed by the former as regards taste and uniformity of artistic merit. Among the madrigals many an indifferent piece may be found, but none that are ill made or unbalanced. It is indeed strange that the character of such a reactionary, virtually arbitrary creation should have been fixed from the outset and retained its basic traits down to the extinction of the entire species with the revulsion of “national” Italian productive art to the accompanied solo song on a new declamatory, arioso-like foundation. The Madrigal—in contrast to the Frottola, which was an art-song with accompaniment—is essentially a *cappella* music, and this in a much higher degree than the contemporary parallel phenomenon in the field of church-music, the Motet. One might, of course—for the century was tolerant in such matters—consign a single part (most likely the highest part) to the human voice, while degrading the others to an instrumental accompaniment; but that is a perversion of style. Clever critics have remarked how, after the comparative freedom and flexibility of the Frottola, the “melody” of the highest part in the early madrigals (whose structure was generally homophonic and by no means polyphonic) is harmonically “weighted down”; this being accepted as a primitive limitation. Rightly observed, but not rightly interpreted. The lower parts were not added simply for the benefit of the “melody”; the melody is in all the parts, and each singer takes his full share in the upbuilding of the whole. It is in view of this art-spirit, that later, in the nineteenth century, inspired the new chamber-music, that all peculiarities of the Madrigal must be explained. Paradoxically stated, it is not intended for the hearers, but only for the singers; it is monody in polyphony; the art-spirit of Italy accepted this yoke, and even bore it gracefully, developing a most delicate and individual style of expression within these restrictive limitations till finally liberating itself by main force.

At the time of this forcible liberation, the Florentine Hellenists and purists launched the phrase *laceramento della poesia* ("laceration of poetry") with special reference to the madrigal—a reproach which may apply to polyphony in general, but not distinctively to the madrigal. One of the laws governing this form is, that the most accurate and untrammelled declamation must be observed in each part; it is positively affecting to see how impartially they are treated; hardly a piece can be found, in which each part does not get the entire text. This was a matter of course in the earlier, homophonic madrigal, in which all the parts declaim together; but even in the more actively imitative passages the leading part may repeat the line of verse or soar away in a melisma, so as to allow the others time and to gather its strength for the cadence. For this reason one may find, in the four-part madrigal, short two-part responses, but no lengthy passages in three parts; it is "closely woven." Later, at the culmination of the form, when five-part work had become the norm and six parts the limit for chamber-music proper, began that delicate dividing-up of the chorus in which single parts had to assume double functions in imaginary semi-choruses—and in this case, again, to give to each part its due measure of "completeness." Furthermore, as regards completeness, each singer was entitled not merely to the entire text, but equally to the entire expression. The Madrigal is *alive* with new, hitherto undreamed-of expression. At first it contents itself with declamatory effects, with delicate harmonic devices, with emphasizing some prominent flight of fancy by a somewhat uncommon "chromatic" coloration, e.g., by introducing an E-flat or an A-flat. At a very early period, and habitually in the case of Cyprian de Rore, there commenced a curious chase after colorful or picturesque effect, in which the esthetic theory of that period of the *imitazione della natura* doubtless had its share. For this purpose either harmonic expedients culminating in most venturesome experiments, or melodico-graphic agencies, were utilized; the former in homophony, the latter in imitation, and very rarely both together; the one for expression, the other mostly in description. It was thought that, by means of such "imitation," the content of the text was exploited to the utmost; the tone-painting is naïve, and may be so of right, because the madrigal in general, as an organ of expression, bears a sentimental character. A chief charm of the madrigal resides in this "impossible" unity and separation of nordic, Gothic and southron stylistic elements—a thing theoretically inconceivable, that nevertheless has existed, and that became the parent of living things. The "imitation of nature"

even resorts to "music for the eye," to the substitution of the sense of sight for that of hearing; for instance, instead of symbolizing "darkness" by descending into a low register, it is graphically illustrated in the singer's part-book by means of blackened notes. —Great masters have been guilty of this esthetic aberration, which, as a highly significant symptom, must be mentioned. Another remarkable circumstance is, that this tone-painting was always positive; even when the quiescence of an object was to be illustrated, the object itself was at least outlined. This graphomania was frequently an end in itself; from it, however, there arose the expressively sculptured musical motive, which, in contrast to other motives, begins to be developed in a semi-concerted style; here a stage of induration, of petrification, has been reached—a stage of widest historical significance, but no longer in keeping with the genuine Madrigal.

The chief distinguishing mark, the patent of nobility, of the ideal Madrigal is its free rhythmic flow, the opulent interweaving of its parts. Its purest form is found in the works of the greatest masters—of the austere Rore, of the wealthy Venetian, Andrea Gabrieli, of Marenzio, whose generous talent overflows into virtuosity, of Croce and Ingegneri, and of their pupil, Monteverdi, who already trenches on the realm of dramatic and bizarre effect. The Madrigal recognizes no rigid rhythmical limitations, acknowledges no law of rhythmic connection and consistency; it follows the metre of the verse with unerring flexibility, it oscillates between duple and triple measure or slow and rapid tempo according to the demands of expression. In this respect, too, an evolution is evident; the movement of the whole piece is quieter, the form more close-knit, than at the beginning in the works of Arcadelt, Verdelot, Willaert; the evolution proceeds to extremest freedom, almost to the dissolution of the general formal construction, with Marenzio and Gesualdo. To this rhythmic flow corresponds the interfusion of homophony and polyphony. In some early madrigals (alongside of entirely "chordal" pieces) we find a remarkable and intentional avoidance of homophony, a predetermined mobility of the parts for its own sake. But very soon the imitation becomes a freely and artistically treated agency; and it is surprising that such imitation is nowhere ampler or stricter than necessary—that an approximate imitation suffices; in all the literature of the madrigal there are not two dozen pieces that feature strict imitation, such as the canon and similar artificialities. The transition in various pieces from homophonic texture to polyphonic, and vice versa, is of an inexpressible delicacy and poetico-rhetorically



regulated diversity; for a full analysis of these details one would have to write a book. For the grouping of the parts, five is the ideal number; six-part writing inclines to a more formalistic subdivision into sharply delimited semi-choruses, not to mention the passages in a greater number of parts that are employed principally for coarser and rougher antiphonal effects. To bring out the full and perfect expressiveness of each part, there was a special technique for the madrigal, which may be best elucidated by comparison with the technique of painting;—it is the art of “glazing.” The musician applies one delicate color over the other, removes or thins it here and there; he changes from the brighter, simpler colors to increasingly deep and rich shades; nothing is blurred or faded, but there are infinitely delicate intensifications and attenuations in minute, but always distinctly recognizable gradations. Manifestly, this art-style admits of no strong and pathetic emotional dynamics in the several voices, although, even without this, the combinations are inexhaustible wherein all the charm of the ancient vocal music is displayed. To gain a true impression of this magical charm, one should hear a composition like Lasso’s setting of Petrarch’s canzona “Standomi un giorno solo alla finestra” (1559). Lasso set the entire six-part poem to music; it is a madrigal-symphony, a culminating point of the art; it unites individuality with the style of the period, the spiritual with the intellectual; the work is at once epic, lyric, and dramatic. It is not a solitary example; there are single pieces of equal elevation; Marenzio wrote a whole book of twenty cyclically connected madrigals. Those who desire to acquaint themselves with the vast expressional scope of the madrigal, from elegance to profoundest seriousness, from greatest simplicity to most astounding boldness, should study a selection of madrigals by Monteverdi or, still better, by Marenzio.

This art—which, after all, was only an artificial art, being nothing more than a compromise between southern genius and Gothic art-devices—actually lived for seventy years. It was an art that formulated subjective emotion through systematized art-speech; it had so to formulate it, and could not give free course to the latent dramatic idea, because the requisite medium was still lacking. Strangely enough, the opposition to the abnormality, the anti-naturalness, of the madrigal, wherewith a lofty sincerity of expression readily comports itself, first bestirred itself around 1600; though the opposition to its tone, to its sentimentality, was manifested soon after the inception of the style. In the true spirit of the Renaissance, this opposition assumed an artistic form, that

of a parody by means of the Villanella. Literally translated, the Villanellas were peasant songlets; yet one finds but little of the folk-spirit in them, and that little not for long; the same people who composed and sang the madrigals, likewise wrote, produced and consumed the Villanellas—a sharp corrective for their own artificiality and conventionality. For a considerable period, some forty years, the Villanella remained a satire on the Madrigal. In text and music it caricatured its sentimentality; with the increasing inclusion of bucolic, and also Anacreontic, motives and with a growing delight in naïve tone-painting, the objective scope of attack diminishes; the Villanella merges further and further into the art-form of the Canzonetta, and at the end of the century Madrigal and Canzonetta show a disconcerting likeness. In the printed volumes of madrigals, too, the two species begin to appear side by side; finally, masters like Orazio Vecchi of Modena (otherwise one of the greatest) and Adriano Banchieri of Venice, degrade them to the rank of recreations—Vecchi in the more delicate style, Banchieri more obviously. With these composers the madrigal is no longer a live thing, but a plaything. Another symptom of the disintegration of the true madrigal spirit is the coming into vogue of the song-virtuoso with his complement, the passive listener, the public, represented first of all by a prince and his court. Florence led in this matter, closely followed by Ferrara with its celebrated “three ladies,” songbirds of coloratura, for whom Giaches de Wert wrote five-part madrigals (three concerted sopranos with two supporting male voices). In Florence, where the dramatic tendency was stronger, they cultivated a sort of pseudo-monody; the latent spirit of drama had recourse to choral dialogue, echoes, laments. The edifice is tottering. Its downfall is brought about by esthetic argumentation, whose weapons, invincible in the opinion of the period, were taken from the arsenal of ancient musical theory.

So we have reached the end without having written a history and without intending to write one. A history would demarcate the epochs in the development of the Madrigal, and characterize the various schools and the various masters—assuredly a most absorbing and much needed description of the natal hour of modern music. That would be history; what is memorable in such a history, however, is the process of assimilation, the gaining the ascendancy over foreign elements, by the Italian art of the sixteenth century; the winning-through to freedom, however primitive, in an art-form which, renewing the freedom of the unaccompanied song, was still a form of *art*. Memorable, too, is the

coöperation of non-Italians in the assimilation, the internationality of problem and process. Thrilling national melody makes its first appearance in monody in the course of the seventeenth century and, quite characteristically, in that witches' melting-pot, Naples; the Madrigal knows as little of such melody as it does of the Haydn quartet, the Mozart opera, and the Beethoven symphony.

*(Translated by Theodore Baker.)*