

The 'stile osservato' in Milan in the late 16th century: some preliminary observations

The interest in Italian sacred music in the second half of the 16th century, and particularly in the decades after the conclusion of the Council of Trent, is unfortunately still today plagued by prejudices of various kinds (which I will not go into here) and by a historiographical approach that is still widely followed, in spite of the increasing number of studies that have totally undermined it. And yet, the variety of solutions that the composers adopted to 'conciliate' the new requirements (only partially derived from the Tridentine debate, of which – it is worth repeating – there is hardly a trace in the official decrees) with the more 'traditional' compositional habits should by itself be a sufficient inducement to study and perform the works of composers such as Vinci, Ponzio, Asola and finally Porta (the least neglected of the group). Moreover, a broader and less prejudiced vision of the individual situations, would enable us to revise (if not eradicate altogether) certain commonplaces that still exert a strong hold: for example, the idea that the *a cappella* style is synonymous with voices-only performance typical of the Roman environment (just one of the meanings the term still retained in the 18th century); contrapuntal composition with conservatism; the 'stile osservato' with the 'Palestrina style'; and so on.

One of the environments still strongly affected by such opinions is unquestionably Milan, widely viewed as the stronghold of the Counter-Reformation, thanks to the work of Cardinal Carlo Borromeo and the musical 'demands' imposed on the cathedral's *maestro di cappella*, Vincenzo Ruffo. Borromeo, however, died in 1584, and his first worthy successor was Federico Borromeo, who became archbishop in 1595, after a rather insignificant interlude with Gaspare Visconti. Though influenced by the work of his cousin, Cardinal Federico had a different cultural formation and a different taste, which influenced his attitude to sacred art as a whole. We need, therefore, to consider the diversity existing in the music composed at and for Milan according to who was archbishop at the time. And we must also remember that the cathedral, though the most important venue, was not the only place where music was performed, and that the practices consolidated for its musical chapel (e.g. the use of the organ as the only instrument alongside the voices) were not binding for the others. Finally, the last years of the century were a period of particular experimentation in the field of sacred music (instrumental, vocal and mixed): not only in works for two or more choirs (in which the Milanese musicians adopted different solutions from those of the Venet-

ian ambit), but also in the more traditional forms of composition for four, five and six voices. In these we find a wide variety of contrapuntal styles, without no concessions to the consistently homorhythmic declamation in the Ruffo manner. The works are written in the pure ‘stile osservato’, taking as models either Lasso or Palestrina; rhythmic figures of a more specifically instrumental quality are used; vocal textures and instrumental styles are juxtaposed in that particular genre, the *canzone-mottetto*. And it is precisely the motet that is the principal vehicle of this experimentation: compared to the Mass and the works based on psalms or hymns, the motet allowed more scope for creating ever-new solutions, also because it was a form that always wavered between the liturgical and devotional contexts.

The subject is extremely wide and problematic, partly also because of the absence of an adequate bibliography on the subject, not to mention the almost complete lack of modern editions. The next issue of this journal will include a contribution that develops the points outlined here and, more particularly, focuses on some of the results of an analysis of the *Milanese* music repertory, with reference to a particularly important collection (or at least so it seemed): the four-voice motets by Giovanni Paolo Cima of 1599. As a foretaste of this paper, and as an anticipation of the quality of this music, I present here a small selection of five complete motets. All use the ‘stile osservato’, yet each adopts a different technical approach. Apart from Cima, the composers chosen are the *maestro di cappella* of the cathedral Giulio Cesare Gabussi, and Benedetto Binaghi, Orfeo Vecchi’s successor as director of the chapel of Santa Maria della Scala, after having been organist at Settala (a small town close to Milan) and Novara. The pieces are drawn from the following editions:

- *Iulii Caesaris Gabutii bononiensis, Ecclesiae Maioris Mediolani magistri musices, motectorum liber primus, quae partim quinque, partimque senis vocibus concinuntur*, Venezia, Angelo Gardano, 1586 (no. 1 *Sperent in te omnes*);
- *Libro primo delli motetti a quattro voci, di Gio. Paolo Cima organista della Madonna presso S. Celso*, Milano, Agostino Tradate, 1599 (no. 2 *O crux benedicta* e no. 3 *Hodie Christus natus est*);
- *Illustrissimo reverendissimoque D. D. Federico Borromaeo Sanctae Romanæ Ecclesiae presbytero cardinali, & Sanctae Mediolanensis Ecclesiae Archiepiscopo vigilantissimo. Pontificalia Ambrosianae Ecclesiae ad vespertas musicali concertui accomodata. Libri quatuor*, Milano, Giorgio Rolla, 1619 (no. 4 *Pater noster*);
- *Benedicti Binaghi in ecclesiae s. Ambrosii capite plebis Septalae organistae. Sacrarum cantionum quinque vocum liber primus*, Milano, Agostino Tradate, 1598 (no. 5 *Tres sunt*).

To conclude, a short note on the edition of the music. The original note values and their respective signs have been retained for various reasons. First, the real pulse governing the music is a semibreve tactus, though obviously we must allow for all the variants suggested by not only the notation, but also the liturgical function of the piece (and also, if necessary, the acoustics of the building in which they are performed). Second, in this way one respects “the semantic principle expressed by a semiography evidently linked to the concept of ‘a cappella’ sacred vocal practice”¹. Remembering that the term ‘a cappella’ indicates a compositional style (the ‘stile osservato’) as well as a practice (that does not necessarily do without the organ or other instruments),² the external (though not necessarily least important) elements used to indicate this compositional typology are: the white notation, the breve bar, and the indication \emptyset . In that respect they are always used when this style is intended. Here we need only mention the many times Bach makes use of \emptyset in the B minor Mass of the *Musical Offering* or the *Art of Fugue*, or even Brahms in the *German Requiem* (just to cite a few illustrious examples).

The semiography does not present particular problems. But one element of interest worth mentioning is the extensive use of *color temporis* in the motet *Hodie Christus natus est* as an alternative to the standard indications of triple time. And with that meaning it applies not so much to the traditional *sesquialtera*, but rather to the *tripla*;³ more correctly, it indicates a somewhat brisk triple time that cannot be related to the duple section in the ‘traditional’ proportional way (so though the semiography it uses is of the traditional type, calculated on the breve tactus, its meaning should be related to the semibreve).⁴

(Engl. trans. Hugh Ward-Perkins)

¹ FRANCESCO LUISI, “Nota all’edizione”, in CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI, *Missa “In illo tempore” a 6 (7) voci miste (1610)*, transcription and preface by Francesco Luisi, Arezzo-Roma, Fondazione “Guido d’Arezzo”-Pro Musica Studium, 1984 (Musica Rinascimentale in Italia, 10), p. 7.

² On this point I dwell briefly in my article (to which I refer), “‘Alla Palestrina’: una Messa di Giacomo Gozzini autografa di Giovanni Simone Mayr”, in *La recezione di Palestrina in Europa fino all’Ottocento*, ed. Rodobaldo Tibaldi, Lucca, LIM, 1999 (Strumenti della ricerca musicale – Società Italiana di Musicologia, 6), pp. 127-155: 152-155.

³ See the broad study in UWE WOLF, *Notation und Aufführungspraxis. Studien zum Wandel von Notenschrift und Notenbild in italienischen Musikdrucken der Jahre 1571-1630*, 2 vols., Kassel, Merseburger, 1992, above all vol. 1, pp. 102-105 and 112-127.

⁴ A fairly similar point of view is expressed in DANIELE SABAINO, “Ancora sul dilemma ‘tripla’ o ‘sesquialtera’ nel repertorio tardo-rinascimentale. Nuove osservazioni tra ecdotica, semiografia e prassi esecutiva”, in *Problemi e metodi della filologia musicale. Tre tavole rotonde*, ed. Stefano Campagnolo, Lucca, LIM-Una cosa rara, 2000 (Didattica della filologia musicale, 2), pp. 69-83.