

The poetry of Petrarch, the Flemings and Philippe de Monte

by Cecilia Luzzi

Over the last few decades Petrarch's key role in the history of the madrigal has often been stressed by musicologists. While the reassessment of his poetic style as a model for imitation, as proposed in Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), created the conditions for the birth of this musical genre, the diffusion of Petrarch's *Rime* through the numerous printed editions gave ready access to his works. In this way the madrigalists, confronted with the images of his poetry, were able to elaborate refined techniques of representing the text and to arrive, for the first time in the history of music, at creating a vocal musical genre in which poetry and music were intimately united.

It was only after 1540, however, that the circulation in music of Petrarch's *Rime* became a phenomenon of sensational proportions, to which the great Flemish composers active in Italy made an important contribution. Of these the most prolific was Philippe de Monte (73 texts set between 1554 and 1597, making a total of 133 madrigals); followed by Giaches Wert (65 texts), Orlando di Lasso (57), Cipriano de Rore (47), Adrian Willaert (25) and Jacques Arcadelt (21). Among the Italian composers the leading positions were taken by Matteo Rampollini (48), Luca Marenzio (44) and Palestrina (22). One naturally wonders why Petrarch's arduous, complex and refined language should be so successful precisely in the hands of composers who were conspicuously not native Italians. A convincing hypothesis is offered in an article written in 1989 by Martha Feldman, who argues that the dense polyphonic style was the medium best suited to translating into music the complex syntactic structures found in the texts of Petrarch and his imitators. In support of this conjecture we could also add that the severe style of Flemish polyphony was felt to be the most appropriate to reflect the 'gravity' of Petrarchan poetry. In fact, from the production of Willaert and Rore onwards, the madrigals using Petrarch's texts assumed the various traits generally associated with sacred music (in particular the motet): i.e. dense polyphonic writing; the continuous movement of short motifs from one voice to another and the shifting of metrical accents; the close concatenation of phrases thanks to the frequent instances of *fuggir la cadenza* (avoiding the cadence); and the measured pace in broad note values, often accompanied by syncopation and suspension.

The case of Philippe de Monte is typical of how Petrarch's poetry was exploited. In his first madrigal books he resorts almost exclusively to the *Canzoniere*, setting certain texts like the *doppia sestina* "Mia benigna fortuna e 'l viver lieto" and in particular the second stanza, "Crudele, acerba,

inesorabil Morte”, which (as Alfred Einstein observed in his classic study of the Italian madrigal), almost every 16th-century composer chose, just like every painter painted a Madonna and Child and every sculptor made a Crucifixion or Pietà. In the books issued after 1570 the number of Petrarchan texts declined progressively until it broke off altogether in 1580. After over a decade, they were resumed exceptionally, to open his Fifteenth Book of five-voice madrigals (1592), as a means of imparting gravity and solemnity to the whole book, in which the serious manner typical of the Flemish contrapuntalists finds a point of equilibrium with the joyful style typical of the *canzonetta*, an idiom that the composer adopted after 1586 in an effort to satisfy the tastes of the imperial Habsburg court.

The themes illustrated – the lover’s plight and his search for a love destined by literary tradition to remain unrequited; the fair looks of Laura, which ravish the soul of the poet who gazes on her; the contrast between his past happiness and his anguish and despair after her death; and finally, the repentance for his “youthful error” and his conversion – find an ideal expressive climate in the elevated, serious style of the Monte’s music. By following in the tracks of Willaert and Rore, the Flemish master creates a language that aims at a heightening of the poetic qualities and addresses (then as today) the refined connoisseurs capable of grasping its profundity.