As Unit 3 (2010): Vocal Music
Anthology No. 35: Monteverdi, *Ohimè, Se Tanto Amate*

Background information and performance circumstances

Claudio Monteverdi was

- Born 1567 (Cremona, Italy)
- Died 1643 (Venice)
- Most important Italian composer of his generation, with a key part in the transition from Renaissance to Baroque music
- Based in Mantua 1590/1–1613, working for the aristocratic Gonzaga family

Ohimè, se tanto amate

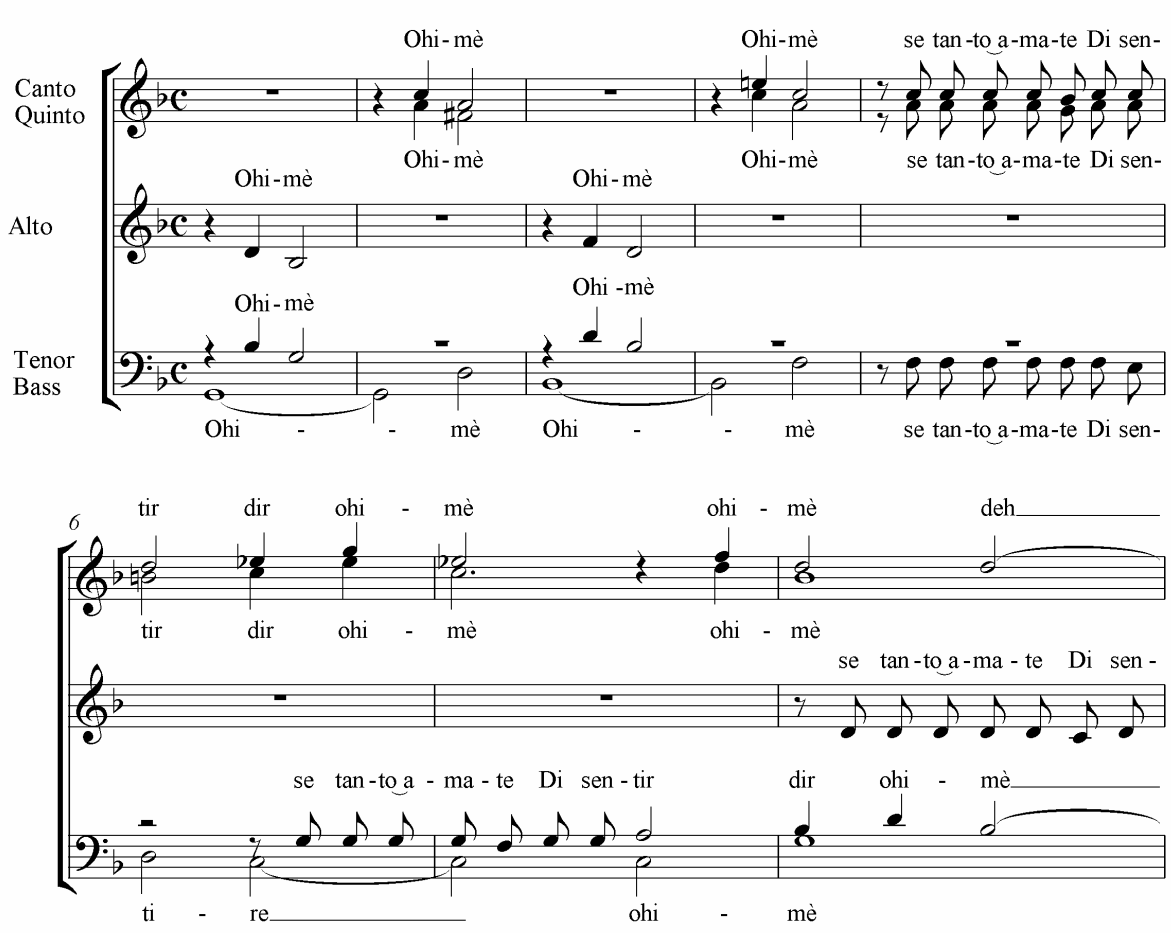
- Published Venice, 1603
    - in *Il quarto libro di madrigali* ('The Fourth Book of Madrigals')
    - probably performed at the Mantuan court by professional singers
- Text is a poem by Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538–1612)
    - Monteverdi set a number of texts by Guarini, who had close ties with Mantua.

The translation of Guarini's poem at http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/get_text.html?textid=21607 is more literal than the anthology translation, and perhaps preferable in showing exactly what particular words or phrases mean. Monteverdi would have chosen his text in the knowledge that Benedetto Pallavicino (*c*.1551–1601), a now little-known rival, had published a setting in 1600. This is available on the *Consort of Musicke*'s CD 070976; it is interesting, but Monteverdi's setting is much more striking.

For a lively performance of Monteverdi's madrigal by the Consort of Musicke, with acting (possibly but not necessarily what the composer envisaged) see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm-wquziaic (starting at about 6'00").

The original singers sang from separate part-books not from a score: see a facsimile of the 1615 edition at http://imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/ab/imslp37018-pmlp82326-Monteverdi_madrigals_book_4.pdf. This edition, typically for its time, has no bar-lines, and some parts have C-clefs.

Ohimè, se tanto amate is an example of the then new *seconda pratica*. Its emotional intensity (arising partly from daring use of dissonance) must have made it seem very 'modern', even shocking, to people accustomed to the late Renaissance *prima pratica* of such composers as Palestrina.



Performing forces and their handling

Monteverdi wrote in five parts, almost certainly expecting performance by five soloists rather than a choir with several singers on each part. *Ohimè, se tanto amate* was a secular piece, and was almost certainly sung by a mixed ensemble of women and men (not by men and boys like church music).

In the anthology the five voices are labelled:

- Canto (Italian for 'song')
  - Soprano range
  - Middle C to G a 12th above
- Quinto (Italian for 'fifth [part]')
  - More second soprano than alto or contralto, it crosses above the canto when given an idea previously sung by that part (bars 10 and 14)
  - Range: D to F a 10th above
- Alto
  - Almost certainly high tenor (or low male alto or countertenor) not contralto
  - Range: F sharp below Middle C to A a 10th above
- Tenor
  - Baritone rather than genuine tenor; occasionally crosses above alto

  - Range: D below Middle C to F a 10th above
- Bass
  - Range: low F to B flat an 11th above

The very top notes of the canto, alto and tenor parts (G, A and F) are reserved for the first syllable of *ohimè* (= 'alas') in bars 6 and 9: in one sense at least the singers are crying out at the tops of their voices.

Texture

Number of parts:
- Often all five voices sing together, but
- There are passages for various three-voice groupings
  - With antiphony early in the final (*havrete mill'e*) section:
    - Canto, quinto, bass; then alto, tenor, bass
- Four-part writing is little used
  - Because not differentiated sharply enough from five-part or three-part writing?

Relationship of parts:
- Often all voices share the same rhythm
  - ie *chordal* (or *homorhythmic*) texture
    - eg at first hearing of *se tanto amate*
- Sometimes parts have different rhythms simultaneously
  - Commonly just employing a freer homophonic style
  - Occasionally in counterpoint
    - With a little imitation, eg at *ma se cor mio*.

Structure

Where a poem has several stanzas, a composer may use the same music for each. This is
- *strophic* setting.

Monteverdi sets a single stanza, and does not repeat note-for-note entire passages of music. His setting is
- *through-composed*.

It may be convenient to think of the madrigal as having three sections. Textural change is a major means of articulating the structure.

Section 1: *ohimè…morire*

bars 1–19
texture builds up: 3-part (with antiphony), briefly 4-part, full 5-part

Section 2: *s'io moro…sentire*

bars 20–38 (balancing section 1 in length)
Two equal sub-sections, each with the same text; the second is a varied and transposed repeat (down a 5th) of the first
texture: 3-part; then mainly 5-part

Section 3: *ma se cor mio…mille dolci ohimè*

bars 39–67
texture: much is 5-part, but with 3-part passages at *havrete mill'e*, involving varied repetition (with varied scoring) of a passage featuring parallel 3rds or parallel $^{6}_{3}$ chords.

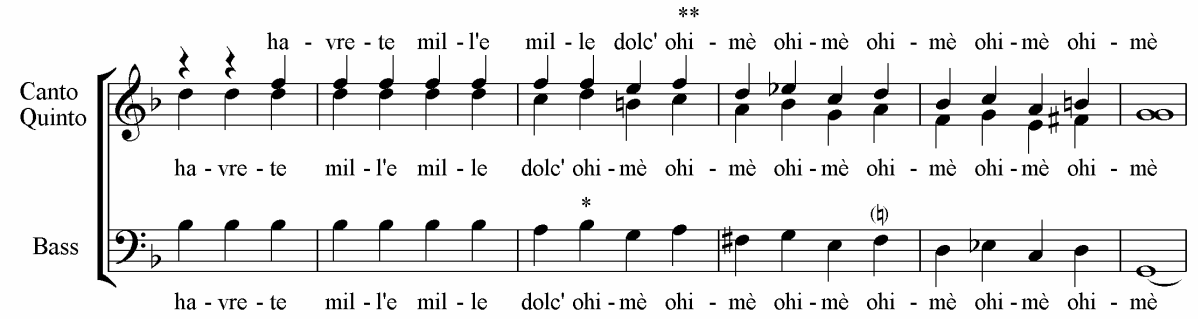
Text is not treated at a uniform rate. Section 2 is as long as section 1 despite shorter text – partly because of the internal repeat, but also because of the fairly slow treatment prompted by the words *languido e doloroso* ('languid and sorrowful'). Section 3 begins with rapid word-setting, probably in response to *vita* ('life'). The last six words are treated at greater length (24 bars), with much repetition to fit with *mill'e mille* ('thousands and thousands').

Tonality

Ohimè, se tanto amate predates the type of 'functional' tonality which emerged in the late Baroque. The latter was based on

- Two types of diatonic scale – major and minor
- Pre-eminence of primary chords, especially tonic (I) and dominant (V)
- Systematic use of modulation, as an important structural method

For Monteverdi several types of diatonic scale, called *modes*, were available. In O*himè* we can identify the Dorian mode transposed to G with key signature of one flat), but, as was customary, the composer 'blurred' the mode by often altering E naturals to E flats, F naturals to F sharps. In section 3 this accounts for a number of *false relations*, 'contradictions' which were avoided in many later styles because they were considered to unsettle the tonality too much.



* false relation: B flat (bass) and following B natural (quinto)
** false relation: F natural (canto) and following F sharp (bass)

Now identify the other false relations

Nevertheless, in O*himè*, as in much other music composed *c*.1600, we find that

- Tonic and dominant notes (G and D) are sometimes emphasised – note the bass pedals in section 3
- Chords I (G minor) and V (D major) are important – especially at cadence points (see 'Harmony' below)

But neither tonic and dominant notes or chords have the tonal force and power that they were to enjoy in much later music.

Monteverdi was also aware of the value of tonal contrast. The music sometimes cadences away from G (notably on D at the end of section 1 and on B flat soon after the start of section 3), but there is nothing similar to the immensely purposeful tonal architecture of (e.g.) much music by J S Bach. Look for example at Monteverdi's brief assertion of B flat part way through section 3 (with three 5-part chords lying between two 3-part sections of different tonality).

Harmony

Monteverdi's harmony consists principally of

- Root-position triads ($^5_3$ chords)
    - Notably early in section 3 (*havrete, havrete*)
- First-inversion triads ($^6_3$ chords)
    - Unusually, there are long chains of these in section 3, with several false relations

Dissonant (or non-chord) notes are sometimes plentiful, and used with a freedom that was

- Different from the cautious approach in most late 16th-century music
    - Where a non-chord note almost always proceeded by step (suspensions downwards, passing notes upwards or downwards) to resolve to a chord note
- Offensive to some traditionalist critics, notably Giovanni Maria Artusi (*c*.1540–1613).

For Monteverdi, this freer handling of dissonance was fully justified by the highly-charged text (*ohimè* means 'alas', *doloroso* means 'sorrowful', etc).

Two examples

- Section 1 (as shown in the first musical quotation above), at the second *ohimè*:
    - Over bass G, quinto and canto sing A and C without any preparation
    - the A and C fall a 3rd each to F sharp and A, over bass D
        - The unprepared a and c are not really appoggiaturas because they do not resolve by step
- Section 1, *deh perchè fate*:
    - The impassioned top F in quinto (bar 14) forms a seventh as the bass moves to G,
        - A suspension that never resolves?

Melody

Each voice has

- Much conjunct (stepwise) movement
- Plenty of repeated notes (useful in projecting text clearly)
    - Especially near the end
- Small leaps, in particular
    - Descending 3rds
        - The word *ohimè* is widely characterised by a melancholy *descending* 3rd
        - In section 1, *ohimè* is usually sung twice in succession, with two descending 3rds in sequence, the second a step lower than the first (as in canto and quinto (bars 6–7) or with 'octave displacement' (bars 1–4: alto and tenor, followed by canto and quinto)
        - This idea is built on in section 3, where descending 3rds often come in prolonged and relatively rapid *descending sequences* as the word *ohimè* is repeated over and over

Monteverdi also has

- Leaps of a 4th or 5th
    - Notably 5ths where the bass outlines perfect cadences and other chord successions with roots a 5th apart
- Occasional larger leaps
    - Normally *between* phrases – notably the descending minor 7ths between *doloroso* and *e doloroso*
        - These are again octave displacements – the tenor would struggle if his descending 7th (bar 25) were a rising 2nd, as would the bass in bar 35.

Melodic outlines are sometimes more adventurous than those of such composers as Palestrina, as befits the more passionate *seconda pratica*, and there is striking use of repeated notes. However, the old and new styles have important melodic similarities.

Plentiful stepwise movement and small leaps are common to both. Monteverdi, like Palestrina, balances ascending and descending movement carefully: for example, a leap in one direction is often countered by stepwise movement in the other.

Rhythm and metre

Ohimè, se tanto amate is rhythmically very diverse. How different from the usually smooth rhythmic style of the *prima pratica*!

We find that

- Some passages are slow moving, with minim chords or with few if any notes shorter than the crotchet
    - Minim chords are sung at *(s'io) moro* (section 2) – presumably in response to the meaning of *moro* ('I die'), at *(sen)tire* (end of section 2) and *(ha)vrete* (more than once in section 3)
    - The opening *ohimè's*
    - *E doloroso, e doloroso ohimè* (section 2)
- Some passages are rapid, with repeated quavers, no notes longer than a crotchet, and perhaps a few semiquavers
    - Almost at the start *se tanto amate* has continuous quavers in all three parts, to convey passion and urgency ('if you love so much')
    - *Ma se cor…vita…* (start of section 3): many quavers and a few semiquavers are a response to *vita* ('life')

As a result

- Slow-moving and rapid passages may occur in close proximity, e.g.:
    - The opening *ohimè's* and *se tanto amate*
    - The slow, drawn-out ending of section 2 (*…sentire*) and the rapid start to section 3

Diversity also means that

- While some phrases are very varied rhythmically, others rely heavily on strings of equal notes
    - Contrast *ma se cor…e voi da me* and *havrete mill'e mille…*

As we've seen, the rhythm of entire passages is sometimes influenced by the *meaning* of the text. The rhythm of individual melodic phrases is a response to the *speech rhythm* of the words (as in almost every type of vocal music).

- Accented ('strong') syllables normally come on a strong beat
    - NB: for Monteverdi *ohimè* is *ohimè*, not *ohimè*
- Unaccented ('weak') syllables normally come on a weak beat
    - eg *-gui-* in *languido*:
        - Several times, as with *lan-gui-do*, a weak syllable is the second note of a dotted rhythm

Syncopation (with long notes starting on weak beats and thereby receiving special stress) is not widespread but does feature in more contrapuntal passages (eg the end of section 1) and where a cadence has a suspension (same place). Generally Monteverdi wants rhythms with an obvious beat, as in the dance.

Monteverdi used the time signature **C**. Barlines have been supplied by an editor, and the music is in modern parlance in $^{4}_{4,}$ 'common time', or simple quadruple time.

Web-sites active at time of publication