

## HARMONIC DARING IN THE 16th CENTURY

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THERE is still current today the notion that "chromatic harmony" is a characteristic of modern music acquired in the romantic period, an expression of the genius of Schubert, Chopin, Liszt and Wagner. This idea has gained support from the fact that the chromatic harmony of the romantics had no precedent in the works of the classical masters, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. But the conception of its recent discovery is nevertheless wrong, founded, perhaps, on a regrettable ignorance of the earlier stages of musical development. What lies back of the eighteenth century is but vaguely known to most musicians; Palestrina and Monteverdi are mere names without a distinct context. The growth of music remains a complete mystery to many otherwise able musicians and cultivated people who may possess a fair knowledge of the history of literature, of painting and architecture. The obvious consequence is a frequently mistaken critical attitude toward the aesthetic and technical problems even of our own age.

Bach, to illustrate our point most strikingly, though almost a century older than Beethoven, is far in advance of the later master in his use of chromatic harmony. Pieces like the *Chromatic Fantasy*, the *G minor Fantasy for Organ*, the *Crucifixus* from the *B minor Mass* and many others find no parallel in anything written by Beethoven. This alone should suffice to discredit the generally accepted theory of "progress" from epoch to epoch. The growth of art is apparently a fantastic yet very logical compound of progress and reaction. This achievement of Bach's is usually explained as that of a super-genius, one who is *hors de concours*, a marvel of nature. But modern historical research has revealed the natural growth, even the roots of his marvelous art, and, among other things, the fact that

he was not the discoverer of chromatic harmony though his genius so wonderfully exploited it.

Chromatic harmony is a product of the time of about 1600, fully a century before Bach. We can trace its gradual growth in the Italian and English madrigals and motets of the sixteenth century, during which age it gathered force for a brief burst of almost exotic splendor from 1600 to 1650, only to die out afterwards. The musical illustrations reproduced here will show several stages of this progress and it is my intention to establish the point that the year 1600 is much nearer to 1900 in the matter of chromatic harmony than the year 1800.

The great "revolution" of music towards 1600 usually refers to the rise of dramatic forms, opera, with its recitative style, its orchestral accompaniment and its solo-singing, and the abolition of polyphonic writing. Nevertheless there are certain innovations connected with this period, even preceding it which, in their significance for the development of music, are hardly less important than the big subject of opera. To these belongs chromatic harmony.

Passing over the earlier stages, I shall turn immediately to the three great madrigalists who have made chromatic harmony a powerful means of expression and of color: Luca Marenzio, Gesualdo, the Prince of Venosa, and Claudio Monteverdi.

The following quotations from Marenzio's *Ninth Book of Madrigals*, printed in Venice in 1599, will show to what a surprising degree this great, yet little known, master anticipated Wagnerian sounds by two and a half centuries. The famous Erda harmonies from Wagner's *Rheingold* and *Siegfried* are unmistakably foreshadowed in this admirable musical illustration of Petrarch's sonnet, *Solo e pensoso*:



Undoubtedly Wagner never saw this madrigal; in his day musicians had not even heard the name of Marenzio. There

is not the slightest question of imitation here, but without any doubt there is a close spiritual affinity between Marenzio and Wagner. Marenzio harmonizes the entire chromatic scale, ascending from G a whole octave up to A and descending again, half-tone by half-tone, to D. The effect of this gradual crescendo up to *fortissimo* and the corresponding *diminuendo* is indeed magnificent, a striking musical expression of the mood of a pilgrim wandering in lonely fields, who releases his voice in melancholy and bitter pain.

The so-called "cross-relation," so often forbidden by old-fashioned theory, is one of the most effective devices of modern harmony. But it is not by any means a modern invention, as the following quotation from a Marenzio madrigal, written before 1600, clearly shows:



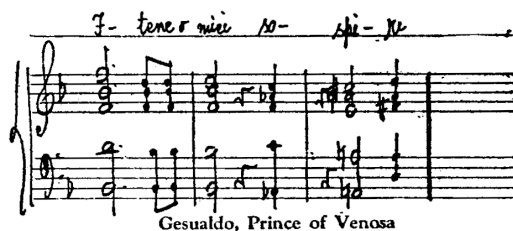
This is not a solitary exception, for many similar cases might be cited. The peculiar and charming effect here is due to the double echo of the cadence in the last three bars.

Another Marenzio madrigal, published in 1593 in Antwerp, *O voi che sospirate*, contains all sharps and flats up to A $\sharp$  and G $\flat$ , and, a special curiosity—the chord of G $\flat$  written G $\flat$ , D $\flat$ , C $\sharp$ , F $\sharp$ , B $\flat$ . This piece was published in score and in modern notation by Karl von Winterfeldt in his important book, *Gabrieli und sein Zeitalter*, nearly a century ago, but it is as unknown today as it was then.

In the last decade quarter-tone music has become part of the radical modern movement. But Alois Haba's modern quarter-tone piano had several predecessors in the sixteenth century. The Roman priest, Nicola Vicentino, constructed a cembalo with several manuals which permitted the playing of the diatonic, chromatic and what at that time were called enharmonic scales, and all sorts of chords founded on these three "genders," revived in the Renaissance epoch according to the

ancient Greek theory. C $\sharp$ , D $\flat$ , D $\natural$ , etc. could be distinguished clearly on this "arcicembalo" of Vicentino, which he described in detail in his curious book *L'antica musica, ridotta alla moderna prattica* (1555), whose title seems so strangely familiar to the eyes of 1927. He also constructed an enharmonic-chromatic organ with quarter-tones, which he discussed in a rare treatise of 1561: *Descrizione dell'archiorgano*.

Vicentino's chromatic and enharmonic ideas were hardly successful during his lifetime, when the general ideal was Palestrina's pure diatonic art. But in the following generation Marenzio, Monteverdi and especially Gesualdo (1560-1614) found a practical solution for some of Vicentino's theories. Gesualdo's six books of madrigals were published separately (1594 to 1611) and came out in a complete edition in score in 1613, today among the rarest possessions of our greatest musical libraries. A modern reprint of Gesualdo's complete works is still lacking, though some of his madrigals may be found scattered here and there in historical studies of our time. Gesualdo's bold and expressive chromatic harmony was unequalled till almost three centuries had passed. A few examples will show how nearly Gesualdo approaches our own day in his harmony. A modulation from B $\flat$  major to D major has a startling effect with the F minor chord mixed in:



And in the madrigal, *Dolcissima mia vita*, closing thus:



it is apparent that tonality has been considerably effaced by chromatic progressions of the very boldest nature.



How modern the sound of this beginning, with its sudden jumps into the distant chords, B major and C# major, immediately after D and E major!



Gesualdo

Gesualdo divined, what has been re-discovered since 1900, that all chromatic tones, and even all imaginable chords may be inserted into every major or minor key,—the quintessence of modern harmony. When Chopin uses an A major chord in an E $\flat$  minor cadence, Opus 10, No. 5, and when Reger colors a C major cadence by the F# major triad, they unconsciously follow the example set by Gesualdo centuries ago.

The great master Claudio Monteverdi appears no less surprising in his harmony. In his second book of madrigals (1590) we find the following charming, novel and extremely modern effect of parallel fifths, sanctioned in our day by Debussy and Puccini:



Claudio Monteverdi

The chromatic innovations of 1600 quickly spread from Italy to other countries, especially Germany and England. The great madrigalists of the Elizabethan epoch offer particularly interesting specimens of eminently "modern" chromatic writing. These are, moreover, easily accessible in excellent and complete modern editions that have come out in England recently, edited by E. H. Fellowes. As Mr. Fellowes' valuable and exhaustive

book, *The English Madrigal Composers*, discusses these harmonic problems in detail, only one example will be given here.

Thomas Weelkes, one of the most consummate masters of chromatic harmony, writes the following bars (in his *Madrigals of Five and Six Parts*, published in 1600), which contain all the sharps up to A#, besides two flats, in fact, the entire chromatic scale. The passage is also interesting for its use of deceptive cadence, avoiding the expected tonic chord in a manner resembling the practice of Wagner:



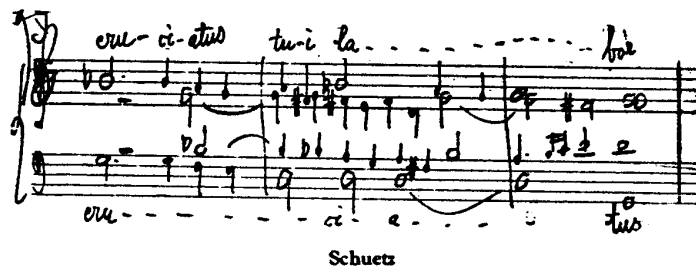
The problem of "enharmonic" harmony was an agitating one for a full century after Vicentino. "Enharmonic" is understood here not in our modern sense as substitution of one note by another, equally sounding, but differently written. The sixteenth century, in true Renaissance spirit, revives the ancient Greek term of the "enharmonic" gender, differing from the diatonic and chromatic genders by its use of very small intervals, quarter-tones and even smaller intervals. Up to 1650 and later, we find traces of this strange system of quarter-tones, examples which seem absurd at first glance and can only be explained by the use of quarter-tone intervals. When Heinrich Schuetz wrote the following strange bars in his *Cantiones sacrae* of 1625:



it is certain that the queer discords B $\flat$  and C in the soprano

against B $\sharp$  in the bass do not indicate the sounds of our tempered tuning but some enharmonic quarter-tone intonation together with a *diminuendo* to faintest *pianissimo* in the top voice. These *Cantiones sacrae* (Volume 4 of Spitta's complete edition of Schuetz' works) are, in fact, full of the most surprising chromatic combinations.

The following bars from Number 5 show the harsh dissonance of parallel seconds, so dear to the musician of 1925, intended of course as expressive tone-painting for the text: *Cruciatus tui labor*:



Parallel major thirds occur at the close of a very remarkable chromatic toccata by the Roman organist Michael Angelo Rossi, printed in Rome in 1657:



Another aspect of Vicentino's enharmonic influence is apparent in a school of Florentine composers of the early seventeenth century, whose strange harmonic methods go even beyond Monteverdi. The very names of these composers, Benedetti, Belli, Saracini and many others, were entirely unknown before the writer of these lines had the good fortune to discover some of their representative works and the opportunity to explain their art in his revised and completed edition of the fourth volume of Ambros' *History of Music*. The cantata for solo voice with *basso continuo* for the cembalo is the form cultivated by these composers with a refinement, a luxurious wealth and subtlety of harmonic treatment, unknown until the twentieth century. A frequent effect in these compositions is the use of

most astounding cross-relations, which appear absurd when only the solo-voice and the bass are considered, but not after the *basso continuo* is worked out properly. Here are some samples of my solution of these problems, solutions justified by the already quoted examples from Marenzio, Monteverdi, Gesualdo and Schuetz. Domenico Belli in Number 2 of his *Libro primo dell'arie a una e a due voci per sonarsi con il chitarrone* (Venice, 1616) writes the following bars:



Domenico Belli

The solo-voice is written in that declamatory style which was the novel trait of opera. The accompaniment for the bass-guitar (only the bass is printed in the original edition) frequently shows those strange disagreements between bass and melody which give the piece its modern aspect. The art of modulation (from C major to D and E major) is also admirable in its subtle refinement and romantic sound. Note especially the surprising Chopinesque entrance of B $\sharp$  in the bass three bars before the close.

An example from Saracini's *Le Seste musiche* (Venice, 1624) reveals the same style, still more pronounced. Especially the strange cross-relations in the third and fourth bars. (B $\flat$  in the bass against B $\sharp$  in the solo-voice, F $\sharp$  against F $\natural$ .) These seem at first glance so extravagant that most critics will think of misprints, forgotten sharps or naturals. There are, however, no misprints at all; the Italian music of this style abounds in



To sum up these points, it may be said that from 1590 to about 1630 music had achieved a perfection of harmonic art which was lost in the two centuries following, and slowly re-acquired by the romantics and impressionists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It would be interesting, perhaps quite possible, to answer the question as to why this art of harmony, so splendid and highly developed, should fall even temporarily into utter oblivion. But such a discussion would far transgress the limits of this article. The latter's aim has been to present the reader with facts that show how much of nineteenth and twentieth century harmony had been anticipated by the period around 1600. Of course it should be remembered that, in spite of striking similarities, the harmonic style of 1900 rests on a different basis from that of 1600, has risen out of different precedents, and has a different emphasis in the totality of elements combining to make a musical work of art. These aesthetic questions are problems of style bearing on the relation of means to effect and on a comparison of the essential characteristics of modern style with those of the Renaissance. Chromatic harmony is one of the most striking of the modern traits and for that reason demands a thorough investigation of its sources and development.