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Gesualdo Madrigals (quintet arrangement)

Don Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, wrote some of the most startling, gripping, fiercely expressive music the world has ever known. His biography has lured many into curiosity about his music (he murdered his first wife and her lover, and most likely his second son as well, whose paternity he doubted), and there have been many discussions of his psychological profile. But in the end, the strength and unflinching audacity of his music alone is more than enough to draw us to him. Aldous Huxley, the great thinker and writer, wrote of listening to Gesualdo's music while under the influence of mescaline:

"These voices," I said appreciatively, "these voices—they're a kind of bridge back to the human world."

And a bridge they remained even while singing the most startlingly chromatic of the mad prince's compositions. Through the uneven phrases of the madrigals, the music pursued its course, never sticking to the same key for two bars together. In Gesualdo, that fantastic character out of a Webster melodrama, psychological disintegration had exaggerated, had pushed to the extreme limit, a tendency inherent in modal as opposed to fully tonal music. The resulting works sounded as though they might have been written by the later Schoenberg.

"And yet," I felt myself constrained to say, as I listened to these strange products of a Counter-Reformation psychosis working upon a late medieval art form, "and yet it does not matter that he's all in bits. The whole is disorganized. But each individual fragment is in order, is a representative of a Higher Order. The Highest Order prevails even in the disintegration. The totality is present even in the broken pieces. More clearly present, perhaps, than in a completely coherent work. At least you aren't lulled into a sense of false security by some merely human, merely fabricated order. You have to rely on your immediate perception of the ultimate order. So in a certain sense disintegration may have its advantages. But of course it's dangerous, horribly dangerous. Suppose you couldn't get back, out of the chaos..."
(from *The Doors of Perception*, 1954)

It would be hard to put it better. Gesualdo partakes of the aesthetic of the Mannerists, exaggerating color, proportion and gesture to reveal emotional truths. Think, for example, of the strained, elongated figures of El Greco. (And although mescaline is perhaps inappropriate in a public concert setting, the music alone may inspire such reveries in those with the right combination of attention and sensitivity.)

Startling juxtapositions and contrasts, discontinuities and disruptions had been a part of Gesualdo's expressive arsenal from the start. But, just as we all know of people of strong character who come to be more completely themselves as they age (in fact, it seems to be a truism), so do the madrigals in the final book, Book VI (1611), exhibit an even greater density of these characteristic moments such that they do, indeed, threaten to whirl into chaos. The amount of emotional turmoil we can precariously contain within our lives is on occasion fantastically large. At times we feel we just barely manage to cheat the forces of collapse. This is the volatile world of heightened experience these madrigals evoke, repeatedly holding us in the grip of the concentrated moment

We present here two madrigals from this final book in an instrumental setting. During Gesualdo's life the madrigals were sometimes performed instrumentally, on viols, accompanying theatrical performances of a melancholy cast; historical tradition is on our side.

The first of the madrigals, "Io parto" e non piu diesi says:
"I go." I can say no more because my grief has taken the life from my heart. In my suffering I lament "I live in pain. But may I never cease to suffer." I was dead but now I am alive, for even the dead would be brought back to life to hear my piteous cries.

The second, *Io pur respiro in cosi gran dolore* states:
Even in agony, I still breathe, and you still live, O pitiless heart. Ah, since there is no more hope of again seeing our beloved, Death, give us aid; take this life. Torture me not, but with a single stroke end my life and woe.

Note by Mark Steinberg