

Susan McClary. *Modal Subjectivities: Self-Fashioning in the Italian Madrigal*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xii + 374 pp. index. append. illus. \$45. ISBN: 0-520-23493-6.

In *Modal Subjectivities* Susan McClary advances an exciting new premise: namely, that the sixteenth-century Italian madrigal, long valued by historians for artfully converting lyrics into music, actually “serves as a site . . . for the explicit, self-conscious construction *in music* of subjectivities” (6). By crediting madrigal composers with having expressed in their musical settings some astonishingly modern insights into the introspective and self-divided complexities of Renaissance poetry, McClary challenges the traditional assumption that meaning in the verbal arts of this period trumps any significance to be found in the musical works ensuing from them. Instead, she suggests that madrigals provide far greater evidence of cultural change in early modern Europe than has been recognized: indeed, she proposes that the genre may be taken as a starting point, a resource in which to track the emergence of early modern subjectivity.

The trick, of course, lies in knowing how to read or hear these works. To this end, McClary first provides the reader with a brief tutorial on the modes, the musical system that served as the structuring principle, the grammar and syntax of Renaissance counterpoint. Just as tonality was to supply a “sense of centered subjectivity” for Mozart’s compositions in the eighteenth century by establishing certain goals and expectations for their musical rhetoric, so did modal structures account for the logical flow and cohesiveness of sixteenth-century works. McClary then proceeds to demonstrate convincingly how madrigal composers deployed modes in the service of “a new cultural agenda that sought to perform dynamic representations of complex subjective states.” By conforming to or defying conventional modal parameters, she maintains, the madrigal did much more than imitate and animate the poetic text; it also highlighted “the fundamentally unstable status of the Self” (16).

A case in point is Monteverdi’s notorious setting of Mirtillo’s speech “Cruda Amarilli” from Guarini’s *Pastor fido*, a madrigal criticized in its day for the composer’s purposeful defiance of the rules of counterpoint in the service of text expression. Typical of the genre, the work is for five voices which have the capacity either to blend together into a single vocal persona or to subdivide into smaller groups, each representative of a different protagonist or of the conflicting, shifting subjectivities of a single protagonist — in this case Mirtillo, who is at once vulnerable, resentful, hysterical, and accusatory. Scholars have long explained Monteverdi’s unorthodox inclusion of grinding dissonances as an amplification of Mirtillo’s bitterness, but McClary also sheds new light on the modal irregularities of the piece, attributing the many cadences on C (in a modal environment that should privilege G and D) to the composer’s allegorizing in music the paradox of Mirtillo’s “warring factions between fervent love and vituperative loathing” (187).

Because the book is aimed at interdisciplinary readers, McClary initially presents only the minimum amount of information necessary to understand her

commentary on the twenty-two works she treats in succession, wisely leaving for the final chapter an explanation of the more technical aspects of modal theory and a summary of each mode's characteristics. At the same time, she uses this final chapter to review the salient features of each case study and retrospectively demonstrates the logic behind the composer's choice of mode for a particular text, whether for its capacity to underline paradox — as with the Mixolydian mode of "Cruda Amarilli," for example — or to evoke anguish or mimic a troubled inwardness. Happily, an appendix supplies the complete scores of the works discussed, and interested readers will find that most of them are readily accessible in recorded performances.

There are other things to be said about the emergence of subjectivity in the madrigal: for example, the very phrase appears in the title of a recent article by Mauro Calcagno that focuses on an early composer of madrigals, Jacques Arcadelt (in *Pensieri per un maestro: Studi in onore di Pierluigi Petrobelli*, ed. Stefano La Via and Roger Parker [2002], 35–52). But here Susan McClary aptly demonstrates how the modal ambiguities of the polyphonic madrigal repertory — attributed by some scholars to the breakdown of the Renaissance rules of composition under the teleological strain of moving toward a new, seventeenth-century, and ultimately tonal practice — qualify instead "as a deliberate and highly complex set of strategies for delineating self-divided subjectivities" (199). *Modal Subjectivities* was recognized by the American Musicological Society in 2005 with its coveted Kinkeldey Award; however, the book's engaging style, bold premise, and persuasive argument will reward and gratify the reader who possesses a modicum of music literacy and a general interest in Renaissance poetics, regardless of discipline.

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