

*Lamento della ninfa* (1638)

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The *Lamento della ninfa*, included by Monteverdi in his Eighth Book of Madrigals, the *Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi* (1638), has been a focus of hot debate over aesthetic and expressive issues in the composer's Venetian secular music. It was identified by Ellen Rosand in 1979 as a prototypical example of a ground-bass pattern moving from tonic to dominant through a descending minor tetrachord – the so-called 'emblem of lament' that then, in diatonic or chromatic form, and with or without a cadential extension, permeated Baroque music, via Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (Dido's concluding 'When I am laid in earth') to the Crucifixus of Bach's B minor Mass, even extending into the Classical period and beyond (the opening of Mozart's D minor string quartet, K. 421). In 1987, Gary Tomlinson sought to reconcile his disparaging view of Monteverdi's apparent decline from Renaissance subtlety into Baroque sterility with his undoubted sense of the power of this 'through-composed dramatic *scena*': the *Lamento della ninfa* is 'a brilliant anomaly' – 'In it, from the foundation of Marinism, with materials touched by memories of lighter styles, Monteverdi erected an enduring monument to the Petrarchism of his youth.' In 1991, Susan McClary picked up on Tomlinson's notion of it being a 'dramatic *scena*' and explored the piece as a prototypical (again) mad-scene, worthy of comparison with Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Richard Strauss's *Salome*, and Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. More recently, the debate has hinged on how Monteverdi's use here of a triple-time aria style (if it is) signifies a shift of emphasis from recitative to aria as the prime form of musical expression – clearly significant for what would emerge in later Baroque opera and cantata – and even from a 'second practice' to a 'third'.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, the *Lamento della ninfa* is a very odd piece. The text is a relatively straightforward canzonetta by Ottavio Rinuccini that must have been written before its first musical setting appeared in print, a solo song by Antonio Brunelli published in 1614. Brunelli's monody, plus a duet by Johann Hieronymus Kapsberger (1619) and an anonymous solo voice setting

in a Florentine manuscript, treat the text fairly straightforwardly. Rinuccini's poem is in ten stanzas, each ending with the same two-line refrain:

Non havea Febo ancora	Phoebus had not yet
recato al mondo il dì,	brought the day to the earth,
ch'una donzella fuori	when a maiden out of
del proprio albergo uscì.	her own house appeared.
<i>Miserella, ahì più, no, no,</i>	<i>Wretched girl, ah, no, no more</i>
<i>tanto giel soffrir non può.</i>	<i>can she suffer such coldness.</i>

These three settings treat the poem strophically, with the same music for each subsequent stanza. A fourth setting, for solo voice by Giovanni Battista Piazza (1631), takes an altered version of just the first stanza and turns it into a tripartite structure: a regular duple time for 'Phoebus had not yet / brought the day to the earth / when a maiden out of / her own house appeared', then a brief recitative-like 'She said, grieving and sad', and a concluding section in triple time: 'Wretched girl, what shall I do? / I will not suffer such grief' ('Misera, che farò / tanto duol non soffrirò').<sup>2</sup>

Piazza is the first to articulate different voices in the text, however briefly, in keeping with trends in the 1630s: to do so, he needed to change the words. Brunelli's setting is for tenor, as is the anonymous one, whereas Kapsberger's is for two sopranos, and Piazza's for solo soprano. The apparent choice of gender may or may not be significant (soprano parts may, of course, be for castratos) given that Rinuccini's canzonetta is in a single poetic voice, a narrator whose gender appears fairly irrelevant. After the opening narration to set the scene (three stanzas), the poetic 'I' reports the words of the nymph but remains resolutely detached from them:

'Amor,' diceva e 'l piè	'Love,' she said and stopped
mirando il ciel fermò,	her foot, gazing at the sky,
'dove, dove la fe	'where, where is the faith
che 'l traditor giurò?'	that the traitor swore?'
<i>Miserella, ahì più, no, no,</i>	<i>Wretched girl, ah, no, no more</i>
<i>tanto giel soffrir non può.</i>	<i>can she suffer such coldness.</i>

Piazza, however, separates the narrator from the nymph by altering the refrain: 'She said . . . "Wretched girl, what shall I do?"' Monteverdi followed the hint by giving the opening narrative to two tenors and a bass (stanzas 1–3, each minus the refrain), and the central lament (stanzas 4–9) to a solo soprano with the lower voices using the refrain to 'comment' on the scene and even to offer the nymph their sympathy, and then the final stanza again just for the trio to present the lesson: 'Thus in lovers' hearts, / Love mixes fire and ice.' His delaying of the refrain to the central lament makes a certain sense, allowing the trio to respond realistically to a particular situation rather

than setting the wretched ‘donzella’ up for a fall right from the start. This lament is over the descending tetrachord ground bass; the first and final sections are further marked for separation by being in C major rather than the central section’s A minor.

Giving a separate voice to the nymph locates this piece within the *stile rappresentativo* – in which the singer takes on a separate, identified persona – and Monteverdi uses the label ‘Rappresentativo’ for the central section, although not, significantly, for the framing stanzas for the two tenors and bass who remain characterless (albeit now more strongly gendered male, one assumes). He also directs this central section to be sung ‘in time to the emotion of the soul and not to that of the beat’ (*a tempo dell’affetto dell’animo e non a quello della mano*), whereas the narrative frame is to be performed in a more regular manner. The notion of a flexible tempo is somewhat at odds with the triple metre of the lament and also, of course, with the relentless repetition of the ground bass (thirty-four statements). But some generic confusion ensues. Canzonetta texts were normally set as arias in the early seventeenth-century sense of repetitively strophic settings of strophic poetry (hence Brunelli’s and Kapsberger’s). Such arias might be set in a declamatory recitative-like style, or more often in a more tuneful one (in a regular triple or duple metre). Yet Monteverdi’s *Lamento della ninfa* is in effect through-composed (although there is repetition in the ground bass), and its central triple time, while seemingly regular in metrical terms, is meant to be sung freely.

There is no doubt that the central section is a *lamento* or a *pianto* (so Monteverdi variously calls it). It is not in the grand manner of laments for noblewomen, which conventionally remained in impassioned recitative (Arianna, Penelope, Ottavia), but then, a nymph is a lowlier character for whom singing – rather than musical ‘speaking’ – was a more feasible mode of self-representation, at least in early Baroque opera. But like Arianna, at least (and also Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, if we treat his opera as adhering to the Aristotelian unity of time), our nymph laments at the right time of day (just before dawn), and also in the right place (outdoors).<sup>3</sup> The music itself is less clearly marked, despite the apparent emblematic significance of the descending tetrachord ground bass. Such bass lines (whether or not as a ground) are also found in this period in what are, strictly speaking, non-lamenting contexts: Monteverdi uses them (with the diatonic tetrachord in D minor) to represent love’s ‘sweet delights and sighed-for kisses’ (*‘i dolci vezzi, e sospirati baci’*) in the madrigal ‘Altri canti d’Amor, tenero arciero’ at the beginning of his Eighth Book; the major descending tetrachord appears in the bass lines of love duets in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*; and the minor descending tetrachord underpins the final love duet in Cavalli’s *La Calisto* (1651).

Similarly, Purcell's G minor version of the trope is anticipated by Hecuba's despairing invocation of the Underworld spirits in Act I, scene 6 of Cavalli's *La Didone* (1641). It may be but a short step from love, or invocation, to lament, but the comparisons suggest that, like most conventional signs, this one can be somewhat slippery, with its meaning needing to be fixed by way of contextual determinants.

So what contextual determinants exist for the *Lamento della ninfa*? The prior settings of the text do not help very much, given their consistency of narrating voice (even in the Piazza, for all the change of rhetorical register). In Monteverdi's Eighth Book, this is one of the *madrigali amorosi*, situated between the five-voice setting of Guarini's 'Chi vol aver felice e lieto il core' (Whoever wishes to have a happy, joyful heart should not follow cruel Love, that flatterer who kills the more he jokes and laughs) and the trio (ATB) 'Perché te 'n fuggi, o Fillide' (Why, o Fillide, do you flee? Alas, ah, Filli, listen to me, turn your beautiful eyes toward me . . . I am Aminta). Does our nymph exemplify the moral of Guarini's cynical warning against the flames of love, or is she the Fillide whose heart colder than ice cannot be moved by a newly (perhaps always) faithful Aminta? Looking not so further afield, is she the 'Ninfa che scalza il piede e sciolta il crine' extolled by two tenors and a bass – the nymph who, barefoot and with hair loosened, has set grief aside to go singing and dancing in the meadow but is pursued by Lillo who would accompany her with his lyre if only she would pause – or is she the pretty girl whom another, evidently humorous if not bawdy, male trio (ATB), in 'Non partir ritrosetta', urges not to flee so that she might herself hear a lament that is, to judge by its music, clearly parodic.<sup>4</sup> Will our nymph eventually find her Aminta, Lillo, or three dirty old men expending their sighs in erotic wishful thinking, or will she become an ingrate condemned to eternal punishment for her refusal any more to yield to love? Is hers the only serious piece in the somewhat tongue-in-cheek *madrigali amorosi* or is she herself a parody of the abandoned woman, a humorous counterpart to Arianna or Penelope who attracts male sympathy only with a knowing nudge here and a wink there?

Monteverdi forces these questions precisely because he has given the nymph a voice rather than hiding her behind a narrative screen. Performers must select from multiple options: she can be deranged, angry, bitter, piteous, jealous, cynical, regretful, wistful, proud, or even self-deprecating – there is more than one 'affetto dell'animo' here, any or all of which are probably better than her just being bound by convention to sing and then, so Rinuccini's text has it, fall silent. Listeners, too, cannot avoid decisions: are we moved, amused, or simply detached observers presented with an object lesson in love? Perhaps we should just be glad that we have the choice.