

Possente spirito

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Possente Spirto : Opinions in the style of Monteverdi and Artusi Sabrina K. Robbins Musicology 210 Dr. Rachel Golden October 23, 2012 Music has always and will always remain a subject of debate on some level. Throughout the years music has developed, progressed, and changed alongside mankind.

There were numerous arguments as to what was considered proper and what the rules should be regarding composition during the development of music in each era. With the emergence of the Baroque era of music, the stylistic elements of homophony, alongside features such as basso continuo and a more common use of dissonance, became the norm. Prior to this development music was more structured, following contrapuntal styles and sticking to a strict tonal center.

The stretch of time between the Renaissance and Baroque periods of music offered a unique perspective of the changing opinions through the treatises critiquing the current music. A famous argument of this kind took place between Giovanni Artusi and Claudio Monteverdi regarding the latter's madrigal *Cruda Amarilli*. It is through the study of this treatise that it is possible to ascertain what the composers' opinions may have been on other pieces of music through applying their criteria to analyzing other songs.

Possente Spirto by Monteverdi is a piece to which these elements can be applied and a logical assumption of the feelings of both of these composers can be reached. Artusi, a composer and music critic, was deeply rooted in the theoretical concepts of the Renaissance era of music, and outwardly condemned the emergence of the new styles in the Baroque era. He was quite conservative, and passionately felt that Monteverdi's music was

distasteful and disrespectful in that it broke the previously established composition rules purely for the pleasure of stepping over boundaries.

Possente Spirto blatantly disregards numerous key elements in Renaissance music by incorporating a heavily ornamented, single recitative voice, accompanied only by melodic harmony that is unobtrusive. Artusi was far more concerned with a vertical harmony than linear, horizontal harmony. The vocal portion of this piece is obviously the focal point but according to the ideals that Artusi held, the virtuosic monodic singing was not what would have been desired. Counterpoint and a strict tonal center were the elements that were pleasing to the ear of music enthusiasts and musicians.

The dissonances used at unexpected times, the blatant disregard for previously set composition rules, and implementation of features such as modal mixture would make the music inaccessible and disrespectful to listeners who were expecting certain key harmonic elements from their musical experience. While Artusi would not have directly named Monteverdi in a criticism of Possente Spirto (just as he did not name him in his critique of *Cruda Amarilli*), it would have been evident to any reader that his intent was to examine the validity of his compositional works.

Despite Artusi's distaste for Monteverdi's works, his criticisms were less about the composer himself and more in regards to the developing and changing style of modern music. The "incorrect" voice leading and use of dissonance in an uncharacteristic way was not only outside of what was considered acceptable in composition but was something that was difficult to adjust to hearing. The sound of the linear harmony and dissonance was

radically different from anything that had been heard previously, and new inventions are not always attractive at first.

On the other side of the argument, Monteverdi was ahead of the time and was experiencing relatively smooth sailing through the awkward transitional period between the Renaissance and Baroque musical eras. He was principally concerned with the listener connecting emotionally and mentally with the music and text of his pieces, so he incorporated a great deal of text painting into his music. He began to focus heavily on the relationships of the text and music in his compositions.

He thought that the listeners of his music should understand the messages of the songs, and began to find ways to utilize creative methods of description and expression in his compositions. Monteverdi was essentially ushering in a new age of music by pushing boundaries with his usage of consonances and dissonances. He was unafraid of breaking rules, and did so by throwing the ideas of counterpoint, chiefly the resolutions of notes and atypical harmonic structure, out the proverbial window.

In Possente Spirto many fresh, new ideas are starting to arise. It is clearly evident through the utilization of ideas behind the text, the vocal articulation, and also the lyre-like sound of the accompaniment that Monteverdi was heavily influenced by ancient Greek music. Monteverdi would have justified his usage of dissonance by attributing it to the idea of conveying a mood to the listener. The old rules of the First Practice (counterpoint, traditional harmonic resolution, vertical harmony, etc) were of less concern to Monteverdi.

The mixture of dramatic musical elements with the text for effect was the ultimate goal in his compositions, and he would have given little thought to the opinions of Artusi on the subject matter. His ideas of the Second Practice helped bridge the gap from Renaissance into the Baroque. In *Possente Spirto*, the text is what takes center stage in the song. Without the virtuosic singing and delicate musical harmony propelling the feelings of sadness and longing forward in the aria, the song would not have had the overall mood that Monteverdi was looking for.

This piece is intended to make the listener connect with Orpheus and sympathize with his plight. The implementation of previously unused harmonic elements made the connection with the singer possible, and that in turn created the blending of music and drama that Monteverdi sought out in this work. Both of the points made by Artusi and Monteverdi were valid and well thought out. The argument simply boiled down to the fact that Artusi was more heavily rooted in tradition than Monteverdi, and favored the traditional voice leading and counterpoint practices.

He did not want to see rules broken purely for the sake of breaking them. On the other hand, Monteverdi was more of a dreamer and chose to focus on the emotional element of the music. He wanted to have the listener connect to the music in a way that would make them feel the emotions in the text through the song. Neither composer had any concrete evidence to support the “winning facts” of the debate. It should be kept in mind that it is likely that Artusi was not exactly attacking Monteverdi, but rather arguing the practices coming into light in composition. It was rumored that they even became friends later.

The only question on the table is whether it is better to stay with tradition, or take chances and break out of what is considered acceptable and normal. Monteverdi did just that, and received a great deal of criticism for his work while simultaneously creating pieces that are considered to be great works of art. Possente Spirto, while lovely and evocative, incorporated many of the same elements that caused Artusi's original critique. At what point does breaking rules becoming less about creating something new and evocative and more about simply ruffling feathers? That, I think, is a subject that will remain up for debate.