

Notes on Monteverdi: *Mentre Vaga Angioletta*

History:

After publishing his Fifth Book of Madrigals nearly ten years elapsed before he published his Sixth. By this point he had become a sensation in Italy, having become *maestro da capella* at Venice's St. Mark's basilica and having composed the operas *Orfeo* and the now lost *L'Arianna*. In 1638, Monteverdi published his Eighth book of Madrigals. The Eighth book was divided into two parts: *Canti Guerrieri* (Songs of War) and *Canti Amadorosi* (Songs of Love). Themes of love permeate the entire collection – as many of the “war” songs speak of the pains of unrequited love or lovers' quarrels.

By the time of its publication, the madrigal had changed significantly as a genre: what had once been settings of Italian love poetry intended to be sung by amateurs, had become accompanied song for trained singers.

Things to Note:

Mentre vaga is a cavalcade of word painting: each image of the text is reflected in the music in ways that may seem to be stereotypical to the modern listener. To the Renaissance listener it would be seen as a successful example of the concept of representation.

In the Eighth book, Monteverdi sets up an almost linguistic syntax in which one sort of musical gesture could signify love and another could symbolize war. For instance, war was symbolized by quickly repeating notes in duple meter, while love was often represented by triple time and a descending stepwise bass line. This descending bass line – known as the *passus duriusculus* – was often an emblem of lament as well.

The text is by Guarini and tells of a love for a woman. The accompaniment is performed by a continuo group – a group consisting of at least a chordal instrument, such as a keyboard or lute and a bass instrument, like a cello. This ensemble would improvise an accompaniment based on the bass line provided by the composer.

Listening Chart:

Mentre vaga	0:00	Monophonic opening Accompaniment enters (0:45) then a second tenor voice (1:14)
piaghe vol voce	1:30	Endless series of madrigalisms
e con ritorti giri	2:32	“complex runs”
qui tarda e la veloce	2:45	“that slow down and accelerate”
mormorando	3:25	“murmuring”
e alternado fugh e riposte	3:42	fast passages alternate with slower homophonic passages
e placidi respiri	4:12	quiet breaths signified by rests between the notes
hor la sospende	4:28	Various motions of the heart are illustrated
quando con modi tremoli	5:50	Vocal gymnastics illustrating “tremulous and drifting accents”
Così cantando	6:15	Song-like section in triple feel.

Text and Translation:

<p>Mentre vaga angioletta Ogni anima gentil cantando alletta Corre il mio core, e pende Tutto dal suon del suo soave canto; E non so come intanto Musico spirito prende Fauci canore, e seco forma e finge Per no usata via Garrula, e maestrevole armonia. Tempra, d'arguto suon pieghevole voce. E la volve, e la spinge Con rotti accenti, e con ritorti giri Qui tarda, e là veloce; E tall'hor mormorando In basso, e mobil suono, ed alternando Fughe, e riposi, e placidi respiri, Hor la sospende, e libra, Hor la preme, hor la rompe, hor la raffrena; Hor la saetta, e vibra, Hor in giro la mena, Quando con modi tremuli, e vaganti, Quando fermi, e sonanti. Così cantando e ricantando, il core, O miracol d'amore, E' fatto un usignolo, E spiega già per non star mesto il volo.</p>	<p>While a charming, angelic girl attracts every wellborn soul with her singing my heart dashes over and hangs completely upon the sound of her soft song, and meanwhile somehow assumes a musical spirit, songful lips, and, together with her, forms and molds, in an extraordinary way, garrulous and masterly harmony. It modulates a flexible voice of ringing tone, and turns and propels it with irregular attacks and complex runs, now slowly, now speedily, and at times murmuring with a low, changeable sound and alternating rapid and calm passages and quiet breaths, now suspended, now free now heavy, now cut short, now held back; now darting, now in undulating runs, now led here and there, sometimes tremulous and wandering, at others firm and resonant. Thus as the song is sung and sung again, the heart, O miracle of love, is transformed into a nightingale and spurning sorrow, spreads its wings and flies.</p>
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