

# Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music: Cavalieri Lamentations  
Saturday, January 23, 2010 at 8:00PM

Who will tell of the might of heartbroken Jerusalem's tears?

—A. Malraux, *L'Intemporel*

Yea, she sigheth, and turneth backward.

—*Lamentations of Jeremiah, Second Lesson, First Day*

In Renaissance man's vision of the tangible world, the divine was absolute and resided in all things: God was to be found in every fragment of matter; the universe, its structure based on numbers and spheres, was a macrocosm existing in harmony with that microcosm of divine proportions, Man. At that time there was no contradiction between intellectual speculation and the sacred, no rift between the world and faith: 'The purest of that which had been created was already almost God without having ceased being of the visible.'<sup>1</sup>

The discoveries of the second half of the 16th century upset that balance however. Within a few decades, knowledge of the world (Europe's expansion to the whole globe), the stars (revolution brought about by Copernicus, heralding Galileo in his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* of 1543) and the human body (anatomy in particular, but also the discovery of micro-organisms) experienced an upheaval that was both violent and disruptive to the man of learning. Gradually the mind learned to accept the idea of a rational world, in which experience of the divine no longer had the same immediacy and celestial harmony was no longer perceptible as a part of sensory experience. Thus, for his presence to be perpetuated, the notion of God needed to be represented, i.e. to appear supernaturally, transcendently, rather than immanently. The arts in general, and the theater in particular, were a privileged vehicle for such representation, and together speech, text, and rhetoric came to be the emblematic medium of the sacred. Baroque was born.

At the end of the 16th century Rome, with Florence, was the cradle of musical experiments stemming from this new conception, shared by intellectuals, artists, and thinkers, of the art of "representation." In music, this trend saw the thriving of a specifically Roman art: that of diminution, of vocal improvisation. This admittedly ancient technique—vocalists throughout Europe had long been singing *aperto libro*—experienced a steep development at that time, with emphasis on solo improvisation. This explains why some of the finest examples of vocal diminution, often based on *falsobordone*,<sup>2</sup> are to be found in Rome, fortunately preserved in a number of rare editions. Later in the century, André Maugars, praising the superiority of Italian compositions over French ones, also described this practice as being the prerogative of Roman musicians: "Let us honestly examine our conscience, Sir, and decide frankly whether we have such compositions [in France]; even if we did, [...] we would spend a long time rehearsing them, whereas these Italian musicians never rehearse but sing all their parts extempore."<sup>3</sup>

Only a few examples of this essentially ephemeral art have come down to us, one of the most famous being Allegri's *Miserere* for the Sistine Chapel, which was still being performed there in the 18th century, though by then the work had lost the improvised nature of its embellishments. But many other psalms using extemporized *falsibordoni* were successfully performed in the same chapel, e.g. the *Miserere* by Fabrizio Dentice,<sup>4</sup> which served as a basis for improvisations which were described by G. D. Della Viola and Francesco Severi<sup>5</sup> as models of the genre.

Emilio de' Cavalieri was born in Rome in about 1550. Apparently he began his career as a composer and organizer of music. From 1577 he was a coordinator of Lenten music at the Oratorio del Crocifisso in San Marcello, and was in charge of artistic finances there until at least 1584. When Ferdinando de' Medici became Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1587, he appointed Cavalieri organizer of court

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, *Rome 1630*

<sup>2</sup> Technique known by that name from 1567 onwards, consisting of an alternation of chanted verses, sung to a Gregorian melody harmonized in counterpoint and extemporized following the rules of ornamentation of the time.

<sup>3</sup> André Maugars, *Response faite à un curieux sur le sentiment de la musique d'Italie*, published by GKC La Musique Eloquente.

<sup>4</sup> In order to keep as closely as possible to the requirements of this typically Roman musical practice, we followed the examples of diminution given by F. Severi and G.D. Della Viola in improvising the embellishments of most of the sung verses of the *Miserere*. We have also used an anonymous *falsobordone*, discovered at the Cappella Giulia in Rome by the late and dearly missed Jean Lionnet, for our performance of the verses of the Penitential Psalm *In te Domine speravi*, which we also interpret using the technique of extemporized diminution in all the voices.

<sup>5</sup> Salmi passaggiati...sopra i falsi bordoni di tutti tuoni ecclesiastici...con alcuni versi di Miserere mei Deus in falsobordone a Quattro, & otto voci, a due chori separate, e tutti insieme quando vi piacerà, con voci, e stromenti.

festivities in Florence. His predecessor in this position had been Giovanni de' Bardi, Count of Vernio, who had enjoyed the favor of Francesco I. Following in his wake Cavalieri enjoyed a very comfortable salary and vast living quarters at the Palazzo Pitti, which no doubt explains the ill feeling that existed between the two men. During the 13 years he spent in Florence, Cavalieri made several trips to Rome, where he met the great musicians of his day: Frescobaldi, Quagliati, and Gesualdo, who requested a meeting with Cavalieri during a visit to Rome—the two musicians spent a whole day comparing their ideas on music.

Cavalieri was also active as a diplomat to the Grand Duke (musicians were often called upon to play a political role in the 17th century). Furthermore his eclectic interest in the arts was that of a true nobile gentiluomo: he collected artifacts, paintings, and objets d'art, and was passionately interested in instrument making (he commissioned the building of three enharmonic organs and devised an amazing water organ for Tomaso Francini's Villa Pratolino). Finally, at the end of his life, he was also the superintendent of a crystal works.

For the wedding of Ferdinando to Christine of Lorraine in 1589, Cavalieri oversaw the lavish staging of the *Intermedii della Pellegrina*. He composed two solo madrigals for the occasion, and choreographed the final ballo, in which he also participated as a dancer. The following year he composed two musical pastorals, *La Disperazione di Fileno* and *Il Satiro* (music now lost), which are believed to be the earliest examples of the musical melodrama. He also composed choruses or intermedii for a performance of Tasso's *Aminta*. In February 1600 he presented his *Rappresentazione dell'Anima, e del Corpo*, which was published in September. Faced with growing hostility to Romans at the Grand Duke's court, Cavalieri returned to Rome that same year. He died there on 11 March of 1602.

In 1584, at the Camerata Bardi (an informal academy, which met at the home of Count Giovanni de' Bardi), Vincenzo Galilei, who had carried out extensive research into Greek music, presented his *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, a monodic score accompanied by a consort of viols (music now lost). Fifteen years later, in Pisa, his friend and colleague Cavalieri gave his own version of the *Lamentations*, containing the first recitatives in the history of sacred music and combining the stile nuovo ('new style': monodic recitative, homophonic chorus attempting to get back to *musique mesurée à l'antique*, i.e. in which the composer faithfully followed the metre of the verse). This is the only extant liturgical work by Cavalieri; the manuscript is in the library of the Chiesa Valicelliana in Rome. It was probably first performed in Pisa during Holy Week 1599. The style of Cavalieri's *Lamentations* was completely new. The austere majesty of the Hebrew letters composed in the purest Roman polyphonic tradition, the alternation of monodic recitatives, the dramatically very expressive duos and trios (certain passages, such as "O vos omnes" from the responsory *Caligaverunt*, bring to mind Carissimi or Charpentier), the use of chromatic formulas and 'false relations' (*Ipsa autem gemens*, First Lesson, First Day), the use of a soloist answered by the choir—all these elements result in a very original work of extraordinary dramatic force and pathos.

However, it is for his *Rappresentazione dell'Anima e del Corpo* that Cavalieri is best remembered. We know that he played a decisive part in the introduction of accompanied monody, or recitative style, which was developed principally at the Florentine court towards the end of the 16th century. Taking as his basis the humanist system of thought attaching prime importance to the individual, he replaced vocal polyphony by singing that was closer to human speech. In the preface to his *Rappresentazione* he described his music as follows: "It prompts all sorts of emotions, including compassion and joy, laughter and tears, and so on." When his rival Caccini laid claim to the paternity of *musica recitativa*, Cavalieri indignantly retorted: "He [Caccini] acts as if he invented this type of music. I was the inventor of this style, as everyone knows, and I even had it published." And the singer and composer Jacopo Peri echoed his assertion: "Mr. Cavalieri was to the best of my knowledge the first to use such amazing inventiveness in presenting our music on stage."

This desire for recognition as the inventor of the new style is not in the least surprising, considering the importance of this discovery in the history of Western music. And if, as the musicologist Solerti<sup>6</sup> suggests, Caccini was indeed the father of this new technique of vocal expression—a technique he employed in his madrigals and songs—it is also important to point out that Cavalieri was the first to use this *nouova maniera di cantare* in a stage work. His *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, a densely dramatic work combining Renaissance aesthetics with the nascent monodic style, may therefore be regarded as the first instance of a Baroque Tenebrae Office.

—Note by Vincent Dumestre (Translation: Mary Pardoe)

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<sup>6</sup> Solerti, *Gli arbori del melodramma*.