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Michael Lively  
*Southern Methodist University*

Mary Lena Bleile  
*Southern Methodist University*

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## GESUALDO'S MORO LASSO AND THE FREUDIAN REPETITION COMPULSION

MICHAEL LIVELY AND MARY LENA BLEILE

The psychiatrist Paul L. Russell (2006, 604–05) has described the repetition compulsion as Sigmund Freud's most important concept and suggests the following definition:

“The confusion of memory with perception. Something experienced as occurring in and totally determined by the present situation, but which, in the last resort, we can only understand as determined by the past. In short, a memory which masquerades as a present-day event. The repetition compulsion operates functionally as a resistance to affect, to remembering with feeling.”<sup>1</sup>

According to some interpretations of the concept (Russell 2006, 607), the repetition compulsion is created or set into motion by an “original or prototypic” trauma, something “painful ... injurious ... and assaultive,” which the repetitive behavior is an ironic and unproductive effort to relive or to re-create, despite the cost in “time and energy that might have more profitably been directed elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup>

For the composer Carlo Gesualdo, the Prince of Venosa, the original traumatic event might have occurred in October of 1590, when he murdered his wife, Donna Maria D'Avalos,

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of the repetition compulsion is described by Russell as a *classical* definition, to which he also adds the following *experiential* definition: “[the] repetition of that which, so far as we know, we would rather not repeat” (Russell 2006, 605).

<sup>2</sup> In attempting to consider Freud's published case histories from the perspective of literary narrative theory, Peter Brooks (1984, 280) has observed that Freud began to question “whether one can, or need, claim that ‘in the beginning was the deed’—since the imagined can have the full originary force of the deed.” Brooks suggests that Freud developed an understanding that “causation can work backward as well as forward since the effect of event, or of phantasy, often comes only when it takes on meaning, usually when it takes on sexual significance, which may occur with considerable delay. Chronological sequence may not settle the issue of cause: events may gain traumatic significance by deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) or retroaction, action working in reverse sequence to create a meaning that did not previously exist.” Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is described in Hans W. Loewald's article “Hypnoid State, Repression, Abreaction, and Recollection” (1980 [1955], 33–42).

and her adulterous associate Don Fabrizio Carafa, the Duke of Andria.<sup>3</sup> The madrigal *Moro lasso*, from Gesualdo's sixth book of madrigals published in 1611, explicitly references "death," "pain," and disappointment. Perhaps more significantly, it describes these ideas through unusual and incongruous repetitive utterances, both at the surface level of the text and its musical setting, as well as at more complex and hidden structural levels. Similar to an individual experiencing the repetition compulsion, the madrigal seems "drawn to some fatal flame, as if governed by some malignant attraction which one does not know and cannot comprehend or control."<sup>4</sup>

### *Soggetto*

Here are two contemporary descriptions of the double murder and its aftermath, followed by the text and translation of the madrigal *Moro lasso*:

"On hearing such grievous tidings [of his wife's infidelity], Don Carlo [Gesualdo] did at first seem more dead than alive; but, lest he should place credence too lightly in the asseverations of others, he resolved to assure himself of the truth of the matter.... The Prince [Gesualdo], having returned secretly to the palace at midnight ... made his way rapidly to the bedchamber of the Princess, and with one blow broke open the door. Entering furiously he discovered the lovers in bed together; at which sight the state of

<sup>3</sup> The "original traumatic event," if such a specific thing ever existed, could also have occurred long before October of 1590, the murders being a tragic and ironic repetition of a pathological pattern that had already been established. According to Bessel A. Van der Kolk (1989, 389–411): "The frequency with which abused children repeat aggressive interactions has suggested to Green [1980] a link between the compulsion to repeat and identification with the aggressor, which replaces fear and helplessness with a sense of omnipotence. There are significant sex differences in the way trauma victims incorporate the abuse experience. Studies by Carmen et al. [1984] and others [such as Jaffe et al. (1986)] indicate that abused men and boys tend to identify with the aggressor and later victimize others whereas abused women are prone to become attached to abusive men ... [and] allow themselves and their offspring to be victimized further." It should perhaps also be noted that the pattern of domestic violence that characterized Gesualdo's second marriage, the composer's masochistic tendencies, as well as his apparent long-term hyperarousal and his inability to successfully modulate strong affective states, are all consistent with behavior patterns that Van der Kolk (1989) has shown to be associated with male individuals who were the victims of abusive behavior as children. Glenn Watkins (2010, 13–96) provides a detailed summary of the relevant aspects of Gesualdo's biography, especially from the time of his second marriage in 1594 until his death in 1613.

<sup>4</sup> The quotation is a description of the repetition compulsion by Russell (2006, 605).

mind of the unhappy prince can be imagined. But quickly shaking off the dejection into which this miserable spectacle had plunged him, he slew with innumerable dagger thrusts the sleepers before they had time to waken.”<sup>5</sup>

“[The body of the] Duke of Andria was covered with blood and wounded in many places, as follows: an arquebus wound in the left arm passing from one side of the elbow to the other and also through the breast;... many and divers wounds in the chest made by sharp steel weapons, also in the arms, in the head, and in the face; and another arquebus wound in the temple above the left eye whence there was an abundant flow of blood.... [The body of Maria D’Avalos lay] dead with her throat cut; also with a wound in the head, in the right temple, a dagger thrust in the face, more dagger wounds in the right hand and arm, and in the breast and flank two sword thrusts.”<sup>6</sup>

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo  
E chi mi può dar vita,  
Ahi, che m’ancide  
e non vuol darmi aita!

I die, alas! from my pain,  
And the one who can give me life,  
Alas, kills me  
and will not give me aid.

O dolorosa sorte,  
Chi dar vita mi può,  
ahi, mi dà morte!

O grievous fate,  
The one who can give me life,  
alas, gives me death.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This account of the murder of Gesualdo’s wife, Maria D’Avalos, and her lover, the Duke of Andria, is taken from a report of the events preserved in a document known as the Corona MS, as translated by Cecil Gray (Gray & Heseltine 1926, 15–18). We have quoted from the Corona MS, despite its historical inaccuracies, in order to convey some of the important characteristic details of the “Gesualdo myth,” as it was received during the period of time from the seventeenth century until the middle of the twentieth century. It is now generally believed, based upon the more reliable contemporary court testimony, that Gesualdo actually committed the murders in a clearly premeditated manner, with the assistance of four armed men—the Prince waiting just outside the bedchamber of the Princess until the Duke was killed or mortally wounded, and then murdering his wife by stabbing her multiple times with enough force that deep gouges were left in the floor from the sword thrusts that passed entirely through the woman’s body (Watkins 1991, 21–22). Annibale Cogliano (2006) has described the reception history of the “Gesualdo myth” from the late sixteenth century until the twentieth century. For a discussion of the cultural reception of Gesualdo’s unusual contrapuntal style, see Catherine Deutsch’s (2013) article “*Antico or Moderno?* Reception of Gesualdo’s Madrigals in the Early Seventeenth Century.”

<sup>6</sup> The description of the condition of the bodies may be found in the proceedings of the Grand Court of the Vicaria, as translated by Cecil Gray (Gray & Heseltine 1926, 21). We have quoted from Gray & Heseltine because of the quality and precision of the translation.

<sup>7</sup> The Italian text is taken from the collected works edition published in 1957 (Gesualdo 1957). The translation may be found in the second edition, and several subsequent editions, of Charles Burkhart’s (1972, 45–50) *Anthology for Musical Analysis*. It is one of the few published translations that leaves unspecified the gender of the person whom the poet is describing or addressing and also avoids some of the textual mistakes that were included in older editions. We have altered the first stanza to include four lines rather than three, and the second stanza to

In this article, we explore psychological aspects of the literary and musical first-person experiencing subject of the madrigal *Moro lasso*. We specifically do not address the possible psychoanalysis of Carlo Gesualdo, the historical man, despite the “strongly neurotic, even psychotic elements [of Gesualdo’s personality] which increased in intensity throughout his life” (Watkins 1991, 169).<sup>8</sup> It is the first-person voice of the madrigal that falls most clearly into the legitimate study of the madrigal as a text from which a music-theoretical analysis can be derived. Similar to Edward T. Cone’s (1974, 20–40) idea of the fictional persona of the “composer,” the literary text of the madrigal may also suggest an “implied author,” who may or may not be synonymous with the first-person experiencing subject, and whom the reader may freely associate with the fictional persona of “Gesualdo.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Gesualdo’s unique musical style can only be adequately understood and appreciated in the context of the late Renaissance mannerist school of composition, we do not attempt in this article to provide a comparative or historical study of the Italian madrigal; nor do we attempt to trace the history of Gesualdo’s many innovative musical techniques through the works of previous composers. Instead, we intend to investigate the psychological qualities of

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include three lines rather than two, because this seems to better reflect the general syllabic organization and rhyme scheme of the late Italian madrigal. We also follow the Italian text of the critical edition published in 1957, which eliminates the near repetition of the first stanza to create an almost identical second stanza, which is not provided here. Susan McClary (2004, 164) has suggested the following alternative translation.

I die, alas, in my sorrow,  
and who can give me life?  
Alas, the one who kills me will give me no help!  
O sorrowful fate,  
The one who could give me life, alas, gives me death.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Glenn Watkins seems to generally oppose the notion that Gesualdo’s mature musical style “must be viewed as the result of the last stages of a severe neurosis” (Watkins 1991, 169). This conclusion is not required in order to accept the premise of the current article, that the first-person subjective persona of the madrigal *Moro lasso* is experiencing a pattern of thinking and feeling that is similar to Freud’s concept of the repetition compulsion.

<sup>9</sup> A number of literary theorists, including Wayne C. Booth (1961), have discussed the concept of the “implied author” in relation to both first-person and third-person narrative texts.

repetition, especially complex and subtle forms of repetitive structure, as they appear in a single musical work, the madrigal *Moro lasso*. Previous studies of Gesualdo's music, which have focused on "contrapuntal usage,... unprepared dissonances, invertible counterpoint, cross-relations, unusual melodic intervals, suspension chains, degree inflections, chromatic non-functional harmony, and a rich modulatory vocabulary" have generally failed to explain the "spell-binding effect" of Gesualdo's music (Watkins 1991, 169). By attempting to reconnect with the "essential spirit" of the music, we hope to retrieve something of significance about at least one expressive aspect of the madrigal *Moro lasso*, and perhaps also demonstrate that the composer's literary persona actively interacts with the creation of meaning in this work and occasionally suggests complex and potentially conflicting levels of discourse.

### *Ecce homo*

Glenn Watkins (2010, 52–53) takes issue, to some extent, with Susan McClary's (2004, 148) characterization that "Gesualdo may well have been a nut case, but he was an exceptionally talented artist as well—one capable of producing searing beauty and astute psychological insight in his music." Watkins (2010, 52–53) asks the question "why should anyone want to claim that the issue of Selfhood, which is typically but a pose for other madrigalists, is genuine and inescapable with Gesualdo?" and answers the question with the observation that "the details of Gesualdo's life virtually demand it." A number of commentators have attempted to link the composer's admittedly troubled psychological condition to the strangeness of his innovative contrapuntal style.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Significant studies that have focused on the connection between Gesualdo's art and his possible psychological abnormalities include Aldous Huxley's (1960 [1956]) essay "Gesualdo: Variations on a Musical Theme," Werner Herzog's (1995) film *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices*, and William B. Ober's (1973) psychoanalytical article "Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of

For the modern listener or critic, the *persona* of Gesualdo seems to interact with his music more directly than the actual historical person. As Susan McClary (2004, 1–13) has impressively demonstrated, the Renaissance madrigal was always a genre dedicated almost entirely to the idea of the subjective persona. For that reason, it is perhaps not entirely accidental that Gesualdo’s most frequently-anthologized madrigal is *Moro lasso*, in which the subjective persona of the *fictional author* can so clearly be imagined. In considering this unusual madrigal, we can easily fall into the complexities described by Gérard Genette (1980, 212–62) in his investigation of the multiple and conflicting layers of first-person diegetic levels created by Marcel Proust, through the process of narrating as a fictional “Marcel,” a character who is himself attempting to write an autobiography. As Edward T. Cone (1974, 2) has observed, even prose fiction “is narrated not by the author directly but by his persona.”

The nature of the authorial voice in musical diegesis may only slightly influence the perceived independence of the narrative persona from the narrative text. According to Genette’s (1980, 228–48) idea of “diegetic levels,” the *extra diegetic level*, or the telling of the narrative, which is similar though not identical to the *act of narrating*, is external to the diegesis itself. With respect to the subjective genre of the late Renaissance madrigal, the role of the authorial voice, though still influential, is perhaps minimized by the extra-diegetic nature of the madrigal’s first-person narrative *persona*, who already inhabits and controls the temporal space of the extra-diegetic narrative voice.

The poetic text of Gesualdo’s madrigal *Moro lasso* is believed to have been written by the composer himself (Watkins 1990, 123). Like many of the short non-attributable poetic fragments that Gesualdo selected for his sixth book of madrigals, it is remarkable for its terse semantic structure and its almost total dependence on the idea of antithesis, in this case “life” and

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Venosa: Murder, Madrigals, and Masochism.”

“death.” Also similar to many of the texts from Gesualdo’s sixth book of madrigals, the poem essentially relates to a pathological attachment between two people. This level of topical concentration seems to have developed across the span of Gesualdo’s compositional output, his earlier published collections of madrigals being comprised of musical settings of known literary texts, composed by important and recognized poets. By the time of his last published collections (the fifth and sixth books of madrigals), however, he almost exclusively selected very short and repetitive poetic fragments, which usually are not attributable to any known poets and which frequently relate to the idea of death or dying (Turci-Escobar 1984, 18).

The text of *Moro lasso* seems to repeat, in multiple and incongruous ways, the idea of death as the result of unfairly and tragically being denied life by the person who is the poet’s fixation of interest and expectation. The possible biographical significance of these ideas for the composer speaks for itself and was well known to any informed listener at the time of the madrigal’s publication. Similar to other madrigals from Gesualdo’s late style period, the irregularities of the poetic structure, and perhaps the semantic structure as well, seem to be somewhat obscured by the frequent repetition of relatively short segments of the text within the musical setting.

The word “life” becomes an object of obsession in the madrigal and the center point around which the repetitive rotations are based. The psychoanalytic term *cathexis*, or Freud’s original German word *Besetzung*, describes the process through which an object or idea is invested with intense personal meaning, a type of signification that has been described as an “occupation” or a “charge” (Freud 1963 [1909], 38). The poet of *Moro lasso* begins to see the world as entirely comprised of “life” and “death.”



The development of the distinctive Gesualdine poetic antithesis, originally similar to the kind of antithetical conceit that was characteristic of the late Italian madrigal, into an object of pathological repetition and fixation seems to represent the clear assertion of an existential and subjective crisis that overwhelms the genre's expected metaphor of "unrequited love." Through this transgressive insistence upon the reality of the proposed antithesis, "life or death," the subjective reality of the narrator tends to merge with that of the authorial persona.<sup>11</sup> Since the madrigal could essentially represent an interior monologue, the first-person voice never specifically addressing an individual listener, the meaning of the madrigal is ultimately determined by the subjective interpretation of its own *act of narrating*.

The idea that Gesualdo may be attempting to "break the fourth wall" of the Italian madrigal's genre-typical conceit of the first-person narrator, simply through the sheer power of the biographical metaphor associated with the fictional "Gesualdo persona," raises a number of important questions. If an authorial persona, or perhaps more accurately a *fictional persona of the author*, is the first-person subject of the madrigal, or assumes through transgressive power the function of the first-person subject, then who is being addressed and what form of utterance does the madrigal actually represent? Perhaps an answer may be found in Susan McClary's (2004, 148) chapter on Gesualdo in her book *Modal Subjectivities: Self-Fashioning in the Italian Madrigal*. The title of McClary's chapter on Gesualdo is "The Luxury of Solipsism" and it contains the observation that "[in] point of fact ... Gesualdo answered to no one but wrote increasingly for himself, thus justifying to some extent those who would view him as anticipating a Romantic vision of 'self-expression.'"

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<sup>11</sup> In his essay "Wordsworth and the Tears of Adam," Neil Hertz (2009 [1967], 21–38) suggests that both William Wordsworth and John Milton were able to compose highly metaphorical poetic language that seems to transcend the apparent voice of the fictional narrative persona and thus tends to express the emotional affect of the presumed authorial persona.

***Wiederholungszwang***

Sigmund Freud engages most directly with the concept known as the *repetition compulsion* in his lengthy essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961 [1920]). Freud observes that several well-known and easily observable aspects of human behavior seem to contradict his general theory that an individual should instinctively seek pleasure and avoid pain. One of these examples was clearly demonstrated by the experience of war veterans who had suffered or been exposed to sustained periods of physical and psychological trauma. Many of these survivors of traumatic conditions tended to compulsively fixate on the original situations of their trauma, both in dreams and in their conscious imagination. It seemed to Freud that if a traumatized war veteran were to follow the *pleasure principle* he would choose to imagine or dream about “pictures from his healthy past,” rather than “repeatedly bringing ... back ... the situation of his [trauma]” (Freud 1961 [1920], 11–12).

After describing a number of situations in which individuals seemed to compulsively repeat unpleasant experiences, either in thought or through action, Freud eventually suggests a rather complex theory based upon the idea that an organism instinctively seeks to restore an “original state of being” (Freud 1961 [1920], 52–78). In the case of a psychologically traumatized person, the “original state” was upset by the event that caused the trauma. The individual will then seek to restore the “original state” by repeatedly thinking about the traumatizing event, probably as an attempt to gain a sense of mastery over the situation. If these repeated efforts to overcome the harmful effects of the trauma are unsuccessful, the compulsion to continue to think and behave in a way that does not benefit the individual may evolve into an extinction process, which Freud describes as a “death instinct.”<sup>12</sup> It may not be entirely

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<sup>12</sup> The term *Todestrieb* was first used by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961 [1920]). It is usually translated into English as “death instinct” rather than as “death drive;” however,

coincidental that the process of musical repetition in *Moro lasso* is fixated around the compulsive obsession with death that is experienced by the madrigal's first-person subjective persona.

It is possible to directly compare the textual repetitions in *Moro lasso* to Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion. Gesualdo's technique of repeating small elements many times in preparation for a larger structural repetition may perhaps represent or allegorize a version of the Freudian repetition compulsion, similar to the "uncanny" repetitive patterns Carolyn Abbate (1991)<sup>13</sup> has identified in Paul Dukas's tone poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, the incessant repetition of a few distinctive motivic patterns in *Moro lasso*, such as the descending half step motive, closely resembles the obsessive repetition of a similar descending half step motive in Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23 (the *Appassionata*), which Lawrence Kramer (1984, 36) has described as "troublesome [and] omnipresent." Kramer (1984, 27) has compared this kind of "unnecessarily repetitive" structure to "a mental stammer, a sign that the normal operations of consciousness have been thwarted."

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neither translation may accurately capture the meaning of the German term. Regarding the English translation of the term *Todestrieb*, Jacques Lacan (1981, 49) observed that "the translation of *instinct* for *Trieb*, and *instinctual* for *triebhaft* has so many drawbacks for the translator that, although it is maintained throughout quite uniformly—thus basing the whole edition on a complete misunderstanding, since *Trieb* and *instinct* have nothing in common—the discord becomes so impossible at one point that the implications of a sentence cannot be carried through by translating *Triebhaft* by *instinctual*. A footnote becomes necessary." Lacan is referencing James Strachey's translation of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1961 [1920]), which is known as the "Standard Edition."

<sup>13</sup> Concerning the incessant motivic repetition in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Abbate observed that "[in] repeating each element a few too many times, and in preparing a larger repetition—the entire piece seems to re-begin as it was beyond this point [the "fragmented repetitions of the main theme in the contrabassoon and bass clarinet" at the "fearful midpoint" of the work]—the moment may compose out what Freud understood as uncanny repetition, recurrence (like that of the father-figure in Hoffmann's *Sandman*, on which Freud based his theory) that is threatening because it allegorizes the repetition-compulsion" (Abbate 1991, 56).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of associating the psychopathology of a composer, or the composer's persona, with the repetitive aspects of a musical work, especially the possible connection between the nineteenth-century mental disorder known as *monomania* and the musical structure called the *idée fixe*, has been explored in Francesca Brittan's (2006) article "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania, and Romantic Autobiography."

One of the important connections between the obsessive and ubiquitous motivic repetitions in *Moro lasso* and Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion, is the quality of idiosyncratic incongruity that dominates the formal structure of Gesualdo's madrigal. Not only is the poetic text inherently repetitious, but its individual lines are repeated asymmetrically in the musical setting. The unexpected textual repetitions in the madrigal may be compared to Freud's (1963 [1909], 76) case history of the "rat man," in which the patient compulsively repeats a prayer to the woman who is the object of his obsession, except that instead of the supposedly intended line "may God protect her," he often says, "may God *not* protect her."<sup>15</sup> This aspect of the "rat man's" case history exhibits two important elements of Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion that may also be applied to an analysis of the madrigal *Moro lasso*: the Freudian principle of the *love-hate complex*, in which the idea of love is inappropriately conflated with the idea of hate, and the Freudian principle of *distortion*, in which an obsessive thought is understood to have already gone through an extensive process of transformation before it

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<sup>15</sup> The asymmetrical pattern of textual repetition and the similarity to Freud's case history of the "rat man" are perhaps perceived more emphatically in the version of the text provided in some older editions, such as Carl Parrish's (1958, 181–88) *A Treasury of Early Music*. In Parrish's version, based on the first publication of 1611 (rather than the score edition of 1613), there are three short stanzas, the first two of which are identical except for the last word of each stanza. Parrish provides the Italian text as the following:

Moro lasso al mio duolo,  
e chi mi può dar vita,  
ahi, che m'ancide  
e non vuol darmi vita.

Moro lasso al mio duolo,  
e chi mi può dar vita,  
ahi, che m'ancide  
e non vuol darmi aita.

O dolorosa forte,  
chi dar vita mi può,  
ahi, mi dà morte.

becomes available to the conscious mind, perhaps similar to the constantly developing motivic structures in Gesualdo's madrigal.

The addition of musical repetition to the already repetitive poetic text of the madrigal not only functions as an expressive or topical signifier of the idea of *repetition* itself, but also as a dramatic or mimetic structure, conveying a sense of excessive emotional connection to the key words of repetition.<sup>16</sup> The poetic text of *Moro lasso* is saturated with repetition in a way that seems to progressively and irrationally destroy the possibility of redemption. The false and consistently weakened dialectic between “life” and “death” in the madrigal is obsessively negated by the sheer repetition of the words “death,” and “dying,” including both the first and last words of the madrigal.

### ***Grundgestalt***

The formal design of *Moro lasso* presents an unusually powerful display of successive or continual iteration as a method for the generation of form. Not only is the repeat of the first stanza (mm. 16–29) an almost exact thematic repetition of its original first rotation (mm. 1–15), but the concluding two lines of the second stanza (mm. 29–42) are also asymmetrically repeated.<sup>17</sup> Considered together with the developmental treatment of several important motives and referential sonorities, the madrigal represents a nearly continuous process of variation structure, similar to the concept described by Arnold Schoenberg as *developing variation*, but in

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<sup>16</sup> Michael L. Klein (2018) has compared the incessant textual and thematic repetition in “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe to “a prolonged moment of Lacanian *tuché*,” in which the subject “finds the Real where he does not seek it, and the subject seeks the Real where it cannot be found.” See also Jacques Lacan (1981, 53–56), “Tuché and Automaton,” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>17</sup> “Musical repetition can also be understood as a consequence of behaviors related to composing. According to this perspective, in-score repetitions are traces of a compositional act, artifacts of a composer’s conscious or unconscious choice to use repetitive structures” (Margulis 2014, 55).

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this case expressed primarily at relatively deep levels of the structure. The complete madrigal is provided as Example 1<sup>18</sup> and a formal diagram is shown in Example 2.

EXAMPLE 1. Carlo Gesualdo, “Moro lasso,” score.

The image displays a musical score for the madrigal "Moro lasso" by Carlo Gesualdo. It is arranged for five vocal parts: Canto (Soprano), Quinto (Alto), Alto (Tenor), Tenor (Bass), and Bass. The score is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal entries with lyrics: "Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - lo E chi mi può dar". The second system continues with lyrics: "ta, e chi mi può dar vi - ta, vi ta, E chi mi può dar vi ta, e chi mi può dar vi ta, E chi mi può dar vi ta, E chi mi può dar vi - - - ta,". The music features complex rhythmic patterns and chromaticism characteristic of Gesualdo's style.

<sup>18</sup> Example 1 is taken from the critical works collection published in 1957, which is derived from the score edition of 1613.

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EXAMPLE 1, cont.

10

C  
Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar-mi-a - i - ta, e non vuol

Q  
Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar-mi-a - i - ta, e non vuol

A  
Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta, e non vuol

T  
ta, Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta, e non

B  
Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta, e non vuol

15

C  
dar-mi-a - i - ta! Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - lo E chi mi

Q  
dar-mi-a - i - ta! Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - lo E chi mi

A  
dar - mi-a - i - ta! Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - lo E chi mi può dar

T  
vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta! Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - lo E chi mi può

B  
dar - mi-a - i - ta! E chi mi può dar

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EXAMPLE 1, cont.

20  
 C può dar vi - - ta, e chi mi può dar vi -  
 Q può dar vi - - ta, e chi mi può dar vi  
 A vi - - ta, e chi mi può dar vi - -  
 T dar vi - - ta, e chi mi può dar vi -  
 B vi - ta, e chi mi può dar vi - -

24  
 C - - ta, Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta,  
 Q - - ta, Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta,  
 A ta, Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta,  
 T - - ta, Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar-mi-a-i - ta,  
 B - - ta, Ahi, che m'an ci - de e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta,

28  
 C e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta! O  
 Q e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta! O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te,  
 A e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta! O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te, o  
 T e non vuol dar-mi-a-i - ta! O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te, o do - lo -  
 B e non vuol dar - mi-a - i - ta! O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te,



LIVELY/BLEILE: MORO LASSO AND THE FREUDIAN REPETITION COMPULSION

EXAMPLE 1, cont.

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C  
do - lo - ro - sa sor - te, Chi dar vi - ta mi può, ahi, mi dà mor - te,

Q  
o do - lo - ro - sa sor - te, Chi dar vi - ta mi può, ahi, mi dà

A  
do - lo - ro - sa sor - te, Chi dar vi - ta mi può, ahi,

T  
ro - sa sor - te, Chi dar vi - ta mi può, ahi, mi dà

B  
Chi dar vi - ta mi può,

37

C  
ahi, mi dà mor - te, ahi,

Q  
mor - te, ahi, mi dà mor - te, ahi, mi dà mor - te, ahi,

A  
mi dà mor - te, ahi, mi dà mor - te, ahi, mi dà mor - te,

T  
mor - te, ahi, mi dà mor - te, ahi, mi dà mor -

B  
ahi, mi dà mor - te, ahi,

41

C  
ahi, mi dà mor - - - te!

Q  
mi dà mor - - - te!

A  
ahi, mi dà mor - - - te!

T  
te, ahi, mi dà mor - - - te!

B  
mi dà mor - - - te!

## EXAMPLE 2. Formal Structure of “Moro lasso.”

Form-Section	Measures	Texture	Harmony
Stanza 1- Line 1	1-3	Homophonic	C# Major — A Minor
Stanza 1- Line 2	3-10	Imitative (Fast)	C Major
Stanza 1- Line 3	10-13	Imitative (Slow)	C Minor — C# Major
Stanza 1- Line 4	14-15	Homophonic	B Major — D Major
Stanza 1- Line 1	16-18	Homophonic	F# Major — D Major
Stanza 1- Line 2	18-24	Imitative (Fast)	D Minor — F Major
Stanza 1- Line 3	24-26	Imitative (Slow)	D $\flat$ Major — B Major
Stanza 1- Line 4	26-29	Homophonic	A Major — C Major
Stanza 2- Line 1	29-33	Imitative (Slow)	C Major — B Major
Stanza 2- Line 2	34-35	Homophonic	E Major — E Minor
Stanza 2- Line 3	35-42	Imitative (Slow)	E Minor — A Major

According to Kofi Agawu (1991, 74), “one of the invariant characteristics of beginning is a composing of the global progression in miniature.” In the madrigal *Moro lasso* the distinctive motivic, harmonic, and intervallic content of mm. 1–2 may function as an indication of the most significant structural aspects of the work as a whole.<sup>19</sup> The gradual development of the motivic-intervallic content of mm. 1–2 into a “controlling motive” for the entire madrigal, perhaps similar to Schoenberg’s idea of the *Grundgestalt*, may be discovered through an investigation of the repetition of this controlling motive at various levels of the madrigal’s voice leading structure.<sup>20</sup> In many musical works the structural voice leading of an opening motivic gesture

<sup>19</sup> In a description of his concept of *Grundgestalt*, Arnold Schoenberg (2010 [1975] [1931], 290) observed that “whatever happens in a piece of music is nothing but the endless reshaping of a basic shape ... there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself ... all the shapes appearing in a piece of music are *foreseen* in the ‘theme.’”

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Ian Knowles (2014) has suggested that a method of pitch-class set analysis may be applied to the madrigals of Gesualdo by focusing on a group of selected intervallic patterns. This approach is perhaps in some ways similar to the investigation of the “controlling motive” in the current study, since the “controlling motive” in its initial version consists of three consecutive descending half-steps, a pattern which would be completely outside of any contemporary theory

will resemble the large-scale voice leading reduction of an entire movement.<sup>21</sup> The controlling motive of the madrigal (E♯ moving down to D♯ by half steps) first appears in mm. 1–2 and is repeated at many deeper levels, usually in some way referencing or directly recalling the first words of the text, “moro, lasso.”<sup>22</sup>

Michael Cherlin (1993) has described the process through which the listener, or perhaps even the composer, may recognize aspects of the tonal system, or recognize motivic fragments from specific tonal works, when hearing the “atonal” music of Arnold Schoenberg, as an “uncanny” recognition of something that is not “real.” In perhaps a similar manner, we suggest that as the listener recognizes the many repetitions of the “controlling motive” in *Moro lasso*, especially the repetitions at structural levels deeper than the surface layer, an effect analogous to the repetition compulsion is established, in which the reality of the “current” time sequence is problematized through the question of subjective focus and subjective point-of-view. Richard Cohn (2004) has described as “uncanny” the unusual juxtaposition of certain harmonies, through

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of modal or hexachordal pitch organization, but which could, of course, be described adequately through pitch-class set notation.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Burkhart (1978) provides an explanation of multi-level motivic repetition in his article “Schenker’s ‘Motivic Parallelisms.’” See also Allen Cadwallader’s (1982) dissertation, “Multileveled Motivic Repetition in Selected Intermezzi for Piano of Johannes Brahms.” A very similar pattern of translation between small and large scale tonal progressions is the subject of Irene Montefiore Levenson’s (1981) dissertation, “Motivic-Harmonic Transference in the Late Works of Schubert: Chromaticism in Large and Small Spans.”

<sup>22</sup> The first two sonorities of the madrigal, a C♯ Major triad followed directly by an A Minor triad in first inversion, represent a doubly-chromatic mediant relationship, which most listeners who are familiar with the harmonic language of western classical music (WCM) tend to associate with the work of composers from the late romantic style period, especially the music of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. A comparison between the doubly-chromatic mediant relationship and Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” (*das Unheimliche*) has been suggested by Richard Cohn (2004), who makes use of the neo-Riemannian term *hexatonic pole* to describe the doubly-chromatic mediant relationship. It was in Freud’s (1963 [1919]) essay on the “uncanny” in which he first described in detail his concept of the repetition compulsion.

which the listener may be able to recognize some but not all of the implied tonal functionality, as a reference to the boundary between the “real” and the “imagined.”<sup>23</sup>

As Watkins (1991, 142) has observed, Gesualdo possessed a “remarkable capacity ... for motivic unification and development.” In Example 3 we find the initial appearance of motive A, the “controlling motive,” in the upper voice during mm. 1–2. The motive is repeated in the bass voice through parallel motion at the interval of a major third.<sup>24</sup> Motive B (see Example 4) is also presented for the first time in mm. 1–2, occurring in the Tenor voice and repeated through parallel motion at the interval of a perfect fourth in the Alto. Consideration of the score reveals that, through this process, four voices are created from two motives at the beginning of the madrigal. Motive B may possess a similarity to the protestant chorale melody *Aus tiefer Not*, a setting of the penitential Psalm 130.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Since Richard Cohn (2004) has observed the association between Gesualdo’s music and the “uncanny,” and Sigmund Freud (1963 [1919]) has described the association between the “uncanny” and the repetition compulsion, we are now, in the current article, suggesting the relationship between Gesualdo’s musical structure and the repetition compulsion itself. It should be noted, however, that the power and awe of the first two harmonic simultaneities in *Moro lasso* is not, in and of itself, the subject of the current study, but rather the process of motivic repetition (admittedly derived from the opening chromatic motivic material), both at the surface and at deeper structural layers, which we suggest allegorizes, perhaps somewhat *metonymically*, the Freudian repetition compulsion.

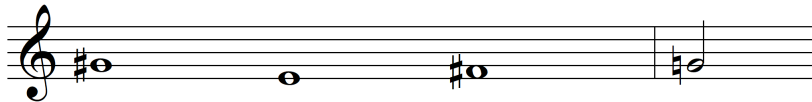
<sup>24</sup> Zarlino (1958 [1558], 442) recommended that composers avoid consecutive parallel major thirds: “the composer ought not to use two or more imperfect consonances one after another, ascending or descending together ... such as two major or minor thirds, or two major or minor sixths ... for not only do these offend ... but their procedure causes a certain bitterness to be heard.”

<sup>25</sup> It is, of course, probable that Gesualdo would not have been familiar with a protestant chorale melody, but the importance of penitential sacred music to the composer, considered together with his established level of musical knowledge, and the penitential character of the presumed subjective meaning of the madrigal, suggest that the possible motivic correlation should at least be observed.

EXAMPLE 3. Motive A (mm. 1–2).



EXAMPLE 4. Motive B (mm. 1–2).



The beginning of each line of the poetic text is set to a distinctive motivic figure, which may in each instance be understood as a version of motive A or motive B. The initial appearance of the “controlling motive,” or motive A, is shown in Example 3 and repetitions of the motive appear in Example 5. Inverted forms of the motive are shown in Examples 5-5, 5-6, and 5-7. Example 5-8 describes the very dissonant form of the motive that creates the complex pattern of imitative counterpoint that concludes the madrigal.

Although it might be suggested that motive A could describe any descending chromatic motion, and therefore is not inherently a distinctive or meaningful motive in itself, we believe that, at least in this madrigal, as well as others composed by Gesualdo, the salience of the chromatic half-step motion is deliberately and unmistakably established as the crucial motivic element of the musical composition, which in this work we describe as the “controlling motive.” The salience of the chromatic half-step motion in this madrigal is in part derived from its strongly characteristic use in extremely dissonant harmonies, or extremely unusual harmonic successions. More importantly, the half-step motive is established by its initial presentation as a motivic *Grundgestalt*, as well as a musical setting for the literary and psychological *cathexis* of the madrigal, the word “to die” or “death.” Considering all of this, we believe it is clear that not

only the primary form of the descending half-step motive, but also its inversional equivalents are connected by their shared meaning as functioning representatives of the initial “controlling motive,” and that the constant repetition of this “controlling motive” *mimetically* suggests the process of repetition to which the subjective persona of the madrigal has become irrevocably attached.

EXAMPLE 5. Repetitions of Motive A.

The image displays eight musical examples (Ex 5-1 to Ex 5-8) on a single treble clef staff, illustrating various repetitions of Motive A. Each example is separated by a double bar line. Ex 5-1 (mm. 16-17) shows a sequence of notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. Ex 5-2 (mm. 30-31) shows: B3, A3, G3, F#3. Ex 5-3 (mm. 12-13) shows: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. Ex 5-4 (m. 13) shows: B3, A3, G3, F#3. Ex 5-5 (m. 3) shows: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. Ex 5-6 (mm. 10-12) shows: B3, A3, G3, F#3, E4, D4, C4. Ex 5-7 (m. 31) shows: B3, A3, G3, F#3. Ex 5-8 (mm. 35-36) shows: B3, A3, G3, F#3, E4, D4, C4.

After the initial appearance of the “controlling motive” in mm. 1–2 (in both the Quinto and Bass) it returns in its complete and primary form during the repeat of the first stanza in mm. 16–17, this time in the Canto and Tenor parts (Example 5-1). The primary form of the motive is also heard during the point of imitation on the words “O dolorosa sorte,” especially in the Alto voice in mm. 30–31 (Example 5-2), but also the Canto voice in mm. 32–33. A partial statement of the “controlling motive,” this time consisting of only a single distinctive descending half step,

may be found at the setting of “e non vuol dar” in mm. 12–13 (Example 5-3), as well as the 4-3 suspensions on the word “aita” in m. 13 (Example 5-4), m. 14, m. 27, and m. 29.

The inverted (ascending) form of the “controlling motive” appears within the initial statement of the *Grundgestalt* itself (the Alto and Tenor parts in m. 2), but perhaps is heard more distinctively during the setting of the word “duolo” in m. 3 in the Alto part (Example 5-5). The ascending half-step motive is the basis for the very distinctive points of imitation on the words “Ahi, che m’ancide” in mm. 10–12 (Example 5-6) and mm. 25–26. The motive repeats, of course, during the structural repetition of the word “duolo” in mm. 18 (in both the Canto and Quinto parts).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the half-step motive as a unifying *Grundgestalt*, especially in terms of a possible expressive trajectory that might reference, or correlate with, the idea of compulsive repetition, may be observed in the increasing frequency of the half-step motive towards the end of the madrigal. Beginning with the point of imitation on the words “O dolorosa sorte” in mm. 29–33, the half step motive is continually presented to the listener in both the original descending form as well as the inverted ascending form, often with the two forms of the motive dissonantly set against each other, such as the setting of the word “sorte” in m. 31 (Example 5-7) and m. 33.<sup>26</sup> From the words “ahi, mi da morte” in m. 35 onwards (see Example 5-8) the half-step motive is almost continually repeated, frequently combining into a harsh contrast of harmonies, contributing to one of Gesualdo’s most dissonant and chromatically adventurous passages. The compulsion to repeat intensifies over the course of the madrigal, as

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<sup>26</sup> The half-step motive may also be found in the setting of the word “sorte” (m. 31) as a dissonant half-step simultaneity between the Quinto and Alto parts, a dissonance that cannot be explained as a passing tone. The same issue occurs again, this time as a dissonant major seventh, on the setting of the word “sorte” in m. 33.

the first-person persona seems to replace an original fixation with an individual person (the object of his affection) with a new obsession upon the idea of death itself.

The initial appearance of motive B is shown in Example 4. We suggest that the initial, somewhat mannered and distinctly controlled, presentation of motives A and B in the first two measures of the madrigal (the initial statement of the *Grundgestalt*), provide the motivic material for much, if not all, of the thematic material of the entire work. The contour of motive B, a falling interval of a third (or larger) followed by stepwise motion in the opposing direction, may be identified in Examples 6-2, 6-3, and 6-7. An abbreviated form of the motive may be observed in Example 6-4, while an extended or embellished version of the motive may be identified in Examples 6-1, 6-5, 6-6 and 6-8. The ending of the madrigal (from m. 31 onward) could be heard as a relentless and compulsive repetition of both motives A and B (the original *Grundgestalt*), if the motives shown in Examples 5-8 and 6-8 are understood to both represent versions of motive B, the two motives becoming somewhat distorted in their final iterations.

Expressions of multi-level motivic repetition related to the “controlling motive” are shown in Examples 7, 8, 9, and 10. The analyses provided in these example are, of course, only very loosely derived from a Schenkerian approach to the understanding of harmonic progression, yet they do share with traditional Schenkerian analytical theory the important principle that motivic and structural elements may be expressed at multiple levels within a musical work.<sup>27</sup> In a typical instrumental composition, for example, the classical Schenkerian 3-2-1 melodic pattern may be observed in the initial four-measure phrase, but could also be found to provide the melodic background for an entire movement of three hundred measures or more, as well as being expressed multiple times at various middleground levels. In *Moro lasso* we suggest that the

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<sup>27</sup> The idea of *multi-level motivic repetition* is perhaps most clearly and effectively explained in Charles Burkhart’s (1978) article “Schenker’s ‘Motivic Parallelisms.’”



initial descending chromatic “controlling motive,” as well as other motivic elements, are similarly expressed at multiple levels of the madrigal’s contrapuntal and formal structure, including at the deepest level of the background,<sup>28</sup> and that this multi-level motivic correspondence represents one of the most important expressions of *repetition* as an idea within the work.<sup>29</sup>

EXAMPLE 6. Repetitions of Motive B.

Ex 6-1 (mm. 4-5)      Ex 6-2 (mm. 34-35)

Ex 6-3 (m. 3)      Ex 6-4 (mm. 29-30)

Ex 6-5 (mm. 11-12)      Ex 6-6 (mm. 25-27)

<sup>13</sup> Ex 6-7 (mm. 31-32)      Ex 6-8 (mm. 38-40)

<sup>28</sup> Felix Salzer (1983) has provided a Schenkerian interpretation of a late sixteenth-century madrigal in “Heinrich Schenker and Historical Research: Monteverdi’s madrigal *Oimè, se tanto amante*.”

<sup>29</sup> Although Examples 7, 8, 9, and 10 make use of analytic notation that is similar to traditional Schenkerian analysis, we are not necessarily providing a traditional Schenkerian reading of the madrigal. The analyses suggested in these examples should not be directly compared to the graphical method described in Heinrich Schenker’s last theoretical works, such as *Der freie Satz*. Despite this very clear disclaimer, the reader may observe that Example 10 describes a background-level analysis of the complete madrigal that is somewhat consistent with the general principles of traditional Schenkerian analysis. For a general discussion of the applicability of Schenkerian theory to music from the sixteenth century see Saul Novak’s (1983) article “The Analysis of Pre-Baroque Music.”

In Example 7 the madrigal's initial E $\sharp$  over C $\sharp$  is shown to move to the E $\natural$  over C $\natural$  in m. 3, and then to the D $\sharp$  over B $\natural$  in m. 12.<sup>30</sup> This motion describes the course of the "controlling motive" as it is heard during the entire first rotation of the madrigal's first stanza, creating an important level of hidden motivic repetition, a version of the "controlling motive" (G $\sharp$ -G-F $\sharp$ ) even being shown to create the 4-3 suspension at the conclusion of the first rotation of the first stanza in m. 15. Example 8 describes the initial appearance of the "controlling motive" at the beginning of the second rotation of the first stanza in mm. 16-18, this time transposed to the level of F $\sharp$  major, also showing the voice-leading connection between this appearance of the "controlling motive" and the original C $\sharp$  referential sonority, as well as the eventual prolongation of D major harmony in m. 18. In Example 9, the full presentation of the "controlling motive" is shown to consist of the foreground elements previously identified in mm. 1-2 and the madrigal's last harmonic sonority in m. 42, an A major chord with C $\sharp$  in the upper voice. Example 10 describes the background voice leading of the entire madrigal, which centers around the E major harmony achieved in m. 34 as the functioning dominant of the entire structure.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> It may be helpful to once again mention that the voice-leading connections described in Example 7 are not intended to conform to all of the principles of traditional Schenkerian analysis. As Timothy Chenette (2018, 481) has described some of the voice-leading continuities identified in his recent article concerning the analysis of Gesualdo's tenebrae responsories, "these observations are not intended to imply Schenkerian reductions ... where Schenker's graphs show elaborate relationships of structure and ornament, these examples merely pick out emphasized pitches or pitches clearly made important by a pattern of movement."

<sup>31</sup> The type of motivic expansion described in Examples 7, 8, 9, and 10 may be directly compared to the *multi-level motivic repetition* demonstrated in Allen Cadwallader's (1982) dissertation, "Multileveled Motivic Repetition in Selected Intermezzi for Piano of Johannes Brahms." Cadwallader identifies a "basic motive" in several of Brahms's piano intermezzi and discusses the transference of this motivic material from the foreground to the middleground and background levels, very similar to the *multi-level motivic repetition* that we suggest operates on several important motives in *Moro lasso* at various structural levels. Foreground appearances of the "controlling motive," both as prime or inverted forms, may often be nested within deeper structural versions of the same motive.

EXAMPLE 7. Voice Leading (mm. 1–15).

Musical score for Example 7, showing voice leading from mm. 1 to 15. The score is written for two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a grand staff bracket. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef consists of notes: F#4 (m. 1), G#4 (m. 3), A4 (m. 12), and B4 (m. 15). The bass clef accompaniment consists of notes: F#3 (m. 1), G#3 (m. 3), A3 (m. 12), and B3 (m. 15). Long horizontal lines connect the notes across the staves, indicating voice leading.

EXAMPLE 8. Voice Leading (mm. 1–18).

Musical score for Example 8, showing voice leading from mm. 1 to 18. The score is written for two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a grand staff bracket. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef consists of notes: F#4 (m. 1), G#4 (m. 16), A4 (m. 17), and B4 (m. 18). The bass clef accompaniment consists of notes: F#3 (m. 1), G#3 (m. 16), A3 (m. 17), and B3 (m. 18). Long horizontal lines connect the notes across the staves, indicating voice leading.

EXAMPLE 9. Voice Leading (Motive A, mm. 1–42).

Musical score for Example 9, showing voice leading for Motive A from mm. 1 to 42. The score is written for two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a grand staff bracket. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef consists of notes: F#4 (m. 1), G#4 (m. 2), A4 (m. 42), and B4 (m. 42). The bass clef accompaniment consists of notes: F#3 (m. 1), G#3 (m. 2), A3 (m. 42), and B3 (m. 42). Long horizontal lines connect the notes across the staves, indicating voice leading.

## EXAMPLE 10. Voice Leading (Background).

The musical score for Example 10, Voice Leading (Background), consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains three measures of music. The first measure has a single note G4. The second measure has two notes, A4 and B4. The third measure has three notes, C5, D5, and E5. Above the treble clef staff, there are three hats with numbers: 3, 2, and 1. Below the treble clef staff, there are three measures with numbers: 3, 34, and 42. The bass clef staff contains three measures of music. The first measure has a single note G2. The second measure has two notes, A2 and B2. The third measure has three notes, C3, D3, and E3. Below the bass clef staff, there are three measures with Roman numerals: i, V, and I.

As Glenn Watkins (1991, 109) has observed, “the fervor of the late madrigal is increasingly measured not only by the temperature of favoured sentiments but also by their compulsive repetition.” In this kind of repetitive texture, we may “hear the intrinsic meaning of each theme as colored by what it has been.”<sup>32</sup> Edward T. Cone (1982, 240) has even described “formal repetition” as a “representation ... of events rehearsed in memory.” Consistent with the idea of the repetition compulsion, the first-person experiencing subject of *Moro lasso* seems to be unable to progress beyond a tortured pattern of ironic repetition, including the repetition of hidden and distorted layers of its own narrative text, or perhaps its own *act of narrating*.

### *Todestrieb*

Robert S. Hatten (1991, 76) has suggested that a musical work may be characterized by an *expressive trajectory*, such as the “tragic-to-triumphant” trajectory of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, or the “relentlessly tragic” finale of the *Appassionata*. These expressive trajectories are understood to be similar to the idea of paradigmatic plot archetypes, but comprised of a

<sup>32</sup> The quotation is from Anthony Newcomb’s (1984, 240) article “‘Between Absolute and Program Music’: Schumann’s Second Symphony.”

succession of esthetically warranted expressive states. The stylistic competency of the listener allows the various *topoi* and musical codes to reliably communicate each expressive state, thus producing an expressive trajectory from the temporal arrangement of these more basic elements.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Gesualdo's madrigal *Moro lasso*, the expressive trajectory traces the poet's ideological progression from agony ("Moro, lasso, al mio duolo"), to the expectation of help ("aita"), to the final acceptance of death ("morte"). This expressive trajectory also emphasizes the process of repetition itself, as both formal and internal repetition continually characterize the poet's manner of discourse. Both the literary text of the poem and the musical text may be understood to converge upon the same *expressive trajectory*, which seems to point towards its ultimate conclusion on the word "morte." Similar to Freud's death drive or *Todestrieb* the madrigal is not motivated by the pleasure principle, but rather is seeking its own conclusion in death. As Carolyn Abbate (1991, 56) has observed, "when music ends, it ends absolutely, in the cessation of passing time and movement, in death."

The expressive trajectory of *Moro lasso* essentially subsumes the concept of Freud's *Todestrieb*. As the madrigal moves towards its conclusion on the word "morte,"<sup>34</sup> its vital energy

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<sup>33</sup> Much of the recent work on musical narrativity, such as Byron Almén's (2008) *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, seems to focus on the concept of linking expressive musical *topics* into a trajectory of meaning, which could then be compared to a narrative structure, primarily through reference to existing narrative archetypes. This method of narrative analysis derives in large part from the semiotic theories of narrative proposed by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1971), Roman Jakobson (1970), and Eero Tarasti (1979). A potential problem with this method of analysis, as identified by Carolyn Abbate (1991, 52–56) in *Unsung Voices*, is that it may insufficiently account for the disjunction between story and discourse that is necessary to create the compound diegetic structure that is traditionally associated with the literary narrative. We would, perhaps somewhat cautiously, suggest that this type of topical-narrative analysis could also be applied to *Moro lasso*, if Freud's concept of the *Todestrieb* were understood to function as a narrative archetype.

<sup>34</sup> It is, of course, possible that Gesualdo references the poetic conceit known as *la petite mort* with the final word, if not all of the instances of the words "death" or "dying" within the text of

and its formal structure seem to expire in a complex and dissonant culmination that is, perhaps ironically, not entirely convincing in terms of harmonic or tonal closure. Freud's concept of the *Todestrieb* explains the repetition compulsion as an instinct that compels an individual to behave in a hopeless and self-defeating manner, because of some actual or theoretical trauma, that renders happiness and realistic goal-seeking impossible. As described by Paul Russell (2006, 611–12):

“The compulsion to repeat was, in fact, for him [Freud] *the major piece* of evidence that there is a powerful, self-destructive force at work within us, which is, at all times, re-traumatizing, pulling apart, tearing asunder, killing.... To the extent that we experience the present in terms only of the past, to the degree that we murder present time and opportunity by persistently, malignantly demonstrating that there is no possible difference between the past and the present, to that degree we cease to live.... To the extent that we intend our traumatizing repetitions, to that extent we intend not to live or to grow, we intend to die.... The repetition compulsion is paradoxically both an invitation to a relationship *and* an invitation to repeat the interruption of some important earlier relationship. It is both adaptive and suicidal because, in this context, relatedness is what the person most needs and cannot yet feel.”

Clearly the madrigal *Moro lasso* is an attempt to express, or possibly to re-create, a powerful emotional response that was, at least theoretically, felt by a real person, or at least a fictional persona. Although many of the late Italian madrigal composers, especially those of the *nuova maniera* style, attempted to directly and mimetically express very intense emotional states within their music, Gesualdo seems to surpass his contemporaries in terms of both the intensity of the expressed subjectivity of feeling and the obsessive qualities of the musical forms. As Igor

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*Moro lasso*. Susan McClary (2004, 59–61) has suggested that the overt use of the metaphor in Arcadelt's *Il bianco e dolce cigno* “produces something far more significant ... than just a dirty joke” and that the madrigal “presents an extraordinarily complex model of Selfhood,” in relation to “anxiety over the loss of control entailed in passionate transport ... and the mysterious mechanism of desire, which fuels a sense of agency even as it seems to come unbidden from a source nonidentical with the Self.” The sexual metaphor related to “death” may be more plainly observed in Gesualdo's “*Mercè*,” *grido piangendo* (from the fifth book of madrigals), another madrigal that makes prominent use of both the C# major triad and the descending half step motive. As Susan McClary (2004, 161) has observed regarding “*Mercè*,” *grido piangendo*, death “is not really the goal of this game, but rather manipulation of the Beloved.”

Stravinsky (or possibly Robert Craft) has observed, Gesualdo “weights the traditional madrigal of poised sentiments and conceits, of amorous delicacies and indelicacies, with a heavy load” (Watkins 1991, vii–viii).

### *Sjužet*

Although we must take seriously the admonition offered by Glenn Watkins (1991, 149) that “the temptation to consider the traumatic events of Gesualdo’s first marriage as largely responsible for the later developments of his art is specious,” there are a number of facts about the biography of Carlo Gesualdo that seem to correlate with his unusually expressive musical style. Firstly, we know from several accounts that he was capable of an almost manic level of obsessive interest in musical composition and in discussing his own innovative technique.<sup>35</sup> We also know that he was susceptible to lengthy periods of almost total withdrawal from social contact and that closely associated with these periods of isolation were intense expressions of guilt and contrition.<sup>36</sup> We also know that his second marriage was characterized by some type of

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<sup>35</sup> We know this mainly from the detailed descriptions of Gesualdo’s character and personal habits sent to Alfonso II, the Duke of Ferrara, by Count Alfonso Fontanelli in 1594, when Gesualdo was traveling from southern Italy to Ferrara for his marriage to Leonora d’Este, the cousin of Duke Alfonso II. For a portion of the journey he was accompanied by Fontanelli, who sent at least eight lengthy reports to the Duke concerning Gesualdo’s demeanor and general attributes. We may speculate that the Duke had concerns regarding Gesualdo’s temperament and mental stability. Selected translations from Fontanelli’s letters to the Duke relating to Gesualdo have been published by Anthony Newcomb (1968) and Glenn Watkins (1991, 37–48).

<sup>36</sup> Glenn Watkins (1991, 252) has observed that the nearest Gesualdo may have come to composing in a true first-person subjective voice might have occurred in his late-period penitential sacred music. “The choice of texts in the volumes of *Sacrae Cantiones* is revealing. Just as his madrigals continually emphasize the images of despair, suffering, and death ... the motets stress their Latin counterparts. Anyone inclined to connect Gesualdo’s texts, which as Einstein [1949, 692] says, ‘consist of nothing but cries of anguish, self-accusation, and repentance,’ with his life will find ample evidence here.”

manifestly dysfunctional behavior that caused the two brothers of his wife, Leonara d'Este, to constantly express their concern for the physical safety of their sister.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the personal traumas suffered and inflicted by Don Carlo Gesualdo, as an actual historical man,<sup>38</sup> what may be of genuine concern for the current essay is the *persona* of Gesualdo, who informs and interacts with the musical text of the madrigal *Moro lasso* almost in the manner of a dramatic character.<sup>39</sup> Similar to Edward T. Cone's (1974, 20–40) notion of the composer as *musical persona*, a fictive "Gesualdo" may be constructed as a dialectical partner to the experiencing subject of *Moro lasso*. This would be similar to the fictional "Berlioz" who may interact with the "young musician" who is the programmatic hero of the *Symphonie fantastique*, or the fictional "Beethoven" who is in dialogue with whatever subjective entity is "experiencing happy feelings on arriving in the country" in the Sixth Symphony.<sup>40</sup>

It is easy to imagine the persona of "Gesualdo" as the first-person subjective voice of *Moro lasso*, hopelessly and ironically seeking "help" but instead receiving death; however, we

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<sup>37</sup> Glenn Watkins (2010, 13–96) provides a thorough review of the issue of domestic violence in Gesualdo's second marriage. It is reported that Pope Paul V consented to grant Leonora d'Este a divorce in 1609 on the grounds of "excesses and prodigalities," but the divorce was never officially enacted (Watkins 1991, 80–81).

<sup>38</sup> "Given the evidence of a life riddled with guilt, betrayal, murder, ill health, and perhaps a search for sexual identity, Gesualdo clearly suffered under various degrees of mental distress for most of his mature life" (Watkins 2010, 62).

<sup>39</sup> L. Poundie Burstein (2006, 187–98) has suggested that the general perception of the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813–1888) as being "mad" has significantly influenced the popular reception and interpretation of his unusual "modernist" style of musical composition.

<sup>40</sup> In his essay "Dr. Johnson's Forgetfulness, Descartes' Piece of Wax," Neil Hertz (2009 [1992], 76–79) suggests that for readers who are aware of the "actual" disfigurement suffered by the body of the English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, after his drowning near the coast of Lerici in Italy, the meaning of Shelley's highly metaphorical poem *The Triumph of Life* is significantly altered by the ironic fate of the poet's "actual" body. The distortion and defacement of Shelley's physical body also relates, of course, to Paul de Man's (1984) essay "Shelley Disfigured."



must ask who is really speaking in this madrigal.<sup>41</sup> According to Freud, “the repetition compulsion is a repeat of something which may not have actually happened” (Russell 2006, 614). The voice of the madrigal could be interpreted as either the first or second wife of the composer speaking in the first person, seeking “help,” but only receiving the pathological behavior of their obsessive husband. The first person of the madrigal could also represent Gesualdo’s ill-fated mistress of his later years,<sup>42</sup> or either of his two sons (who both preceded the composer in death).<sup>43</sup> More abstractly, the experiencing subject of the madrigal might be *life* itself, or more specifically the ability to lead a productive and fulfilling life that is being denied that opportunity by “Gesualdo” and his compulsive disorder.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> As Roland Barthes (1974 [1970], 151) has observed in *S/Z*, “what we hear, therefore, is the *displaced* voice which the reader lends, by proxy, to the discourse ... we see that writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself: *in the text, only the reader speaks.*”

<sup>42</sup> Glenn Watkins (2010, 26–30) provides a thorough review of the historical information regarding Gesualdo’s mistress during his second marriage, Aurelia d’Errico, who was tried and convicted of witchcraft after confessing to her crimes under torture. Gesualdo’s attorney requested that she receive the death penalty (although the court did not impose that punishment), perhaps suggesting the final two lines of the madrigal, “the one who can give me life, alas, gives me death.”

<sup>43</sup> Gesualdo’s son from his second marriage, “Alfonsino,” died as an infant in October of 1600 (Watkins 2010, 25). The adult son from Gesualdo’s first marriage, Don Emmanuele, “who hated his father and had longed for his death,” was killed in a riding accident, only two weeks prior to the death of his father in 1613. The quotation is taken from a report by Don Ferrante della Marra, as quoted by Glenn Watkins (2010, 35).

<sup>44</sup> The question of “voice” as well as the question of “point of view” is clearly one of the intentional mysteries of Gesualdo’s epigrammatic text. As Seymour Chatman (1978, 153) has observed, “[voice] refers to the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated ... [point of view] does *not* mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made ... [the] *perspective and the expression need not be lodged in the same person.*” Although the “implied author” of the madrigal may be the *fictional persona* of Gesualdo, the actual first-person voice of the madrigal’s literary text is unspecified, as is the gender of the speaker, and the gender of the person upon whom he or she is fixated.

In *Sento che nel partire* from Gesualdo's second book of madrigals, the poetic text<sup>45</sup> expresses the pleasant momentary distress that is experienced when parting with a loved one. This same poem is set by Cipriano de Rore with a gentle effect derived from various madrigalisms for words such as "parting" or "joy." In Gesualdo's setting of the text, however, the meaning is reversed and the "momentary anguish upon departure which turns to joy upon the thought of return becomes ... an unrelieved cry of distress" (Watkins 1991, 129). It is never certain whether the trauma creates the repetition, or the compulsion creates the pattern of behavior that causes the trauma. As Sigmund Freud (1997 [1900], 160) described the association between Shakespeare and his obsessively traumatized character Hamlet, "Every genuine poetical creation must have proceeded from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation."

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<sup>45</sup> The literary text was composed by Alfonso d'Avalos, Marchese del Vasto, who was the grandfather of Gesualdo's first wife Donna Maria d'Avalos (Watkins 1991, 129).

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

Michael Lively is a Lecturer in Music Theory at Southern Methodist University. He holds a Ph.D. in music theory from the University of North Texas and a master's degree in conducting from Texas State University. He has presented at a number of regional and international conferences in subject areas such as music theory pedagogy, musical narratology, and Beethoven sketch study. His publications include articles in the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* (2005), *Inquiry* (2015), *College Music Symposium* (2016), and *Music Educators Journal* (2017). Lively was previously a Visiting Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas.

Mary Lena Bleile is a Ph.D. student at Southern Methodist University's Statistical Science Department. Hailing from Calgary, Alberta she holds undergraduate degrees in Cello Performance as well as Statistical Science and has performed as a soloist with orchestras in Canada and the United States. Mary Lena's dissertation research takes place at UT Southwestern Medical Center, where she is involved with the Medical Artificial Intelligence and Automation Lab. She was the 2019 recipient of the SMU Statistical Science department award for academic excellence and has presented original research at Music Theory and Musicology conferences throughout the United States.