

CHAPTER IV

MELODIC STRUCTURE IN *NIGRA SUM*

Amid Monteverdi's correspondence there survive a number of letters written between 1618 and 1627 discussing various operatic projects. In these letters Monteverdi repeatedly stressed his need for adequate time in order to compose well rather than sloppily. Compositions completed in haste and performances insufficiently rehearsed troubled him greatly.¹ Indeed, it is becoming increasingly apparent to twentieth-century scholars that one of the main distinctions between the music of Monteverdi and that of his contemporaries is the carefully planned construction of his works, including even operatic recitatives. In his recitatives as well as in other monodies Monteverdi carefully adhered not only to the rhetorical expression and meaning of his texts but also to the necessities and requirements of purely musical logic.

The musical coherence of Monteverdi's *seconda pratica* compositions has often been overlooked by taking too literally his brother Giulio Cesare's famous declaration that in the new style "it has been his intention to make the words the mistress of the harmony and not the servant."² Monteverdi and his brother, for the sake of argument and because of a lack of enough time to develop the thesis at greater length, oversimplified the issue in the *Dichiaratione*. While Monteverdi certainly took the text as his point of departure as well as the ultimate rationale for many aspects of his madrigals, motets, and dramatic compositions, he never became a slavish imitator of words nor an ingenious inventor of musical metaphors after the fashion of Marenzio. In fact, Giulio Cesare's description of the *seconda pratica* may be said to apply more directly to Marenzio and Gesualdo than it does to Monteverdi.

Monteverdi's true goal, rather than the subservience of music to the text, was a balanced marriage of both textual and musical considerations, though this union took different forms in the recitative from the polyphonic and *concertato* madrigals and motets. But whatever the character of the composition, Monteverdi never ignored the demands of musical logic and coherence. Conversely, it is often this musical organization that gives the primary force to the expression of the text, for in the absence of a powerful musical

Tenor *Voce sola*

Ni - gra sum sed for - mo - sa fi - li - a for - mo - sa fi - li - a for - mo - -

Bassus
Generalis

- sa Nigra sum sed for - mo - sa for - mo - sa fi - li - a Ie - ru - - sa -

- lem I - de - o i - de - o di - le - xit me Rex et in - tro -

du - - xit in cu - bi - cu - lum su - um et di - xit mi -

- - hi sur - - - - - ge

sur - - - ge sur - ge surge a - mi - ca sur - - ge a - mi - ca me - a

a - mi - ca me - a sur - ge sur - ge et ve - ni ve - - ni iam hi - ems tran - si - jt

45

im - ber a - bi - jt et re - ces - sit flo - res ap - pa - ru - e - runt in ter - ra nostra

50

tem - - pus pu - - ta - - ti - - o - - - nis

55

ad - ve - nit sur - - ge surge a - mi - ca sur - - ge a - mi - ca me - a a -

60

- mi - ca me - a sur - ge sur - ge et ve - ni ve - - ni iam hi - ems transi - jt

65

im - ber a - bi - jt et re - cessit flo - res ap - pa - ru - e - runt in ter - ra nostra

70

75

tem - - pus pu - ta - ti - - o - - - nis ad - ve - - nit.

Nigra sum

logic, the addition of tone to word is likely to be unconvincing, inexpressive, and lacking in meaning.

Despite the success of his operas and the popularity of the Lament of Arianna, Monteverdi was not drawn frequently to monody *per se*, preferring instead the trio texture of two equal voices with basso continuo. Many of the pieces he did write for solo voice are set to sacred texts rather than secular poems. The earliest of these sacred monodies appears in the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* of 1610, published while the composer was still in the service of the Gonzaga court at Mantua. Two of the motets in this collection may be termed monodies: *Nigra sum*, in the purest sense of a single voice with continuo accompaniment, and *Audi coelum*, whose second tenor is confined solely to echoing the ends of phrases. *Audi coelum* is further complicated by the participation of a six-voice chorus in its concluding section.³

Nigra sum displays the kind of balance between musical logic and text expression that was at the heart of Monteverdi's *seconda pratica*. The text is drawn from several verses of the Song of Solomon, as is the text for another motet in the Vesper collection, the duet *Pulchra es*.⁴ A translation of *Nigra sum*, based on the King James version, reads as follows:

I am black, but comely,
O ye daughters of Jerusalem.
Therefore the king hath loved me
and brought me into his chambers,
and said unto me:
Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away!
For, lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone;
the flowers appear on the earth.
The time of pruning is at hand.⁵

Monteverdi's designation of the tenor voice for this piece may seem odd in view of the first-person, feminine orientation of the text. If the motet were to be sung in church as part of a sacred service, however, it would have had to have been performed by a male singer, whatever the register in which it was composed. The choice of a tenor may in fact have been dictated by the specific singer Monteverdi had available for initial performances of the piece. It should be noted that two other motets in the Mass and Vesper print, *Duo Seraphim* and *Audi coelum*, are also for tenors.

On the other hand, if *Nigra sum* were to be performed outside of church, in "chapels or chambers of princes" according to one possibility suggested on Monteverdi's title page, it is conceivable that a female singer might have taken the part. We have no definite information as to whether the female vocalists so highly treasured as performers of secular music in the North Italian courts of this time might also have participated in private religious devotions. If they did, Monteverdi's designation of a tenor would have proved no barrier to performance by a woman, since it was common prac-

tice in the early seventeenth century to employ the tenor and *cantus* voices interchangeably. Countless published motets of the period carry the rubric "*canto ovvero tenore*," and such a substitution may be assumed feasible even if the composer did not bother to indicate it.

To Monteverdi the essential concept of his text was embodied in the word *surge*. The command "arise" establishes the fundamental character and direction of the melodic construction throughout *Nigra sum*. At the very outset of the piece this rise is expressed in its simplest and most elemental form by means of an octave leap from the lower *d* to the higher *d'* (see bars 1-3 of the transcription). Monteverdi relieves this sudden, energetic beginning with a pair of descending motives in bars 3-4 and 4-7, first by a descent to *g* and then by a more leisurely descent to *a* which uses the *g* as a lower neighbor.

The energy originating from the first leap is at this point increased by yet a larger leap in bars 9-10 designed to enhance the upward thrust not only by its greater interval, but by arriving at a tone dissonant to the initial pitch. This *e'* in bar 10 also serves to announce the second stage of a rising tonal sequence encompassing bars 1-23. The sequence commences in G major and, beginning with the *e'*, rises to A minor in bars 11-14.

Now that the upward surge has been extended to the parameter of tonality as well as pitch and register, the third phrase completes the process by beginning at a higher pitch level with *Ideo* in bar 15 and rising to the highest note yet, the *f'* in bar 18, before continuing with the familiar short descending motive. This new pitch level coincides with the third stage of the tonal sequence, which is now in C major. These initial three phrases have thus established the generally upward direction of *Nigra sum*, first in an abrupt fashion with the opening leap and then more deliberately by the rising sequence of phrases passing from G major to A minor and finally C major.

The opening section of the motet does not conclude at this point, but is extended by a short *codetta* to accommodate the conjunctive phrase that introduces the next portion of the text: *et dixit mihi*. This brief *codetta* in bars 24-26 also serves as a melodic link between the two sections, diatonically filling the leap from *g* to *c'* with which the preceding phrase had begun (bars 15-17). This embellishment also anticipates the next section, which begins in bar 27 with an even more extended scalar ascent.

The second section begins at bar 27 with the word *surge* itself, which Monteverdi repeats several times accompanied by a variety of upward thrusts in the melody. At first the scale rises easily through a twelfth from the low *c* to the high *g'*, but then it turns back upon itself to settle on the *d'* in bar 31. This phrase may be considered a stepwise subdivision of the opening leap of the composition, expanded to a larger compass. The span between the *c* and *d'* at the beginning and end of the phrase effects a modulation back from C major, in which the first section closed, to the dominant

of G, which was the harmony underlying the *d'* in bar 3. The upward drive of this phrase has also been enhanced by the continuo, following immediately behind the voice in imitation (bars 28-29).

Just as the octave rise at the outset of *Nigra sum* was accomplished deceptively simply with respect to its weighty significance in the composition as a whole, the ascent from *c* to *d'* in bars 27-31 has also occurred without great effort, even overshooting the mark by a fourth before resolving back to the principal tone. Monteverdi therefore retreats in bar 32 to the original *d* to attack the ascent more vigorously and systematically. First he repeats the rising scale, this time beginning on *d*, climbs only as far as *a*, and then settles on *g* (bars 32-34). The *g* next serves as the point of departure for a series of short sequential leaps reaching as high as *e'* in bar 36 before quickly coming back down again. This last phrase has brought the melody once more to the region of the upper *d'*, and in bar 38 Monteverdi begins his next phrase on the *d'* itself, hovering around this note throughout the recitative of the next eight bars. This circling around *d'* ascends as high as *f'* in bar 40, which was also the highest pitch at the climax of the sequence in the first section (bar 18). The prominence of *d'* is underscored by its repetition in bars 43-44 and the closure on *d'* in bar 46.

The entire passage from bars 27-46 can now be seen as a purposeful, methodical extension from the low *d* to the upper *d'*, a series of events foreshadowed in simple form in bars 1-3. Once the high *d'* has been attained in this systematic manner, Monteverdi emphasizes it decisively by the repetition of long sustained tones in bars 47-54. This recitation on *d'* fulfills and confirms the melodic goal of the composition. But to conclude at this point would have been unsatisfactory, for Monteverdi, in his continual upward drive, has constructed a powerful force and tension which are by no means resolved by the cadence in bars 55-56.

Monteverdi's solution to this dilemma is ingenious. He returns to bars 34-35 in the second section, repeating the sequential upward surge almost verbatim and reaching the high *d'* yet a second time. But in repetition this passage sounds slightly anticlimactic. Once the *d'* is attained again the bass begins an unprecedented downward scale, which is carried in a pair of sequential segments through almost two octaves (bars 69-74). This bass descent has the effect of quickly deflating and dissipating the accumulated energy and tension of the carefully calculated upward motion of the voice and now permits a satisfying closure almost identical in form to the unsatisfying cadence of bars 55-56.⁶

Nigra sum thus exemplifies an ideal union between poetry and music. Not only does Monteverdi carefully follow the rhythmic accents of the words and interpret their rhetorical inflections with corresponding inflections of pitch, but he has also conceived a melodic structure for the motet as a whole, pursued with relentless musical logic and yet derived from and in

perfect harmony with the essential idea of the text. It should be little wonder that Monteverdi wished to "go slow" with his compositions in order that they be done well, for the marriage of poetic and musical meaning demonstrated here is the result of a deeply thoughtful process in which the composer has brought his greatest intellectual concentration to bear on the problems of his art.

NOTES

1. See in particular letters nos. 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, and 22 in Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, "The Man as Seen through his Letters," *The Monteverdi Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 48-62. Similar remarks are also found in other letters from this period not translated by Arnold and Fortune. See G. Francesco Malipiero, *Claudio Monteverdi* (Milano: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1929), letters nos. 38 and 49, pp. 187 and 205, and the more recent edition of the letters by Domenico De' Paoli, *Claudio Monteverdi: Lettere, Dediche e Prefazioni* (Rome: Edizioni de Santis, 1973), letters nos. 39 and 51, pp. 127-128 and 159-160.

2. The theory of the *seconda pratica* is propounded by Giulio Cesare Monteverdi in the famous *Dichiaratione* printed in the *Scherzi Musicali* of 1607. The *Dichiaratione* is cast in the form of extensive glosses upon the phrases of a "Lettera" that Claudio had printed in the Fifth Book of Madrigals of 1605 announcing his intention to publish a theoretical treatise explaining the rationale behind his "second practice." A modern edition of the *Dichiaratione* is found in Domenico De' Paoli, *Claudio Monteverdi: Lettere, Dediche e Prefazioni*, pp. 394-404. An English translation is in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1950), pp. 405-412. The passage quoted here is on p. 406 in Strunk, but Giulio Cesare restates the same idea several times with different wording.

3. See chapter III, pp. 106-108 for a more extended discussion of *Audi coelum*.

4. In *Nigra sum*, Monteverdi adapts the Vulgate text by slightly rearranging it and mixing it with the third and fourth antiphons for Vespers on Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These antiphons had themselves originally been adapted from the Song of Solomon. The sources for both the antiphons and Monteverdi's text are chapter I, verses 2-4 and chapter II, verses 10-12.

5. Printed, among other places, in the liner notes of the Telefunken recording of the Vespers, SAWT 9501/02.

6. The ABB' structure of *Nigra sum* coincides with one of the most ubiquitous forms for small-scale secular and sacred works throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This fact does not contradict the conclusions drawn here, but rather underscores Monteverdi's genius in adapting a common form to an uncommon end.