Sulpetia Cesis

Three Motets
for four, five and eight voices

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Candace Smith, editor

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Sulpitia Lodovica Cesis (Modena, May 15 1577 - ?) was a nun at the Agostinian convent of S. Geminiano in Modena. A lutenist as well as composer, her only known works are an important collection of motets for 2-12 voices, Motetti spirituali (Modena, Cassiani, 1619), preserved in the Biblioteca Estense in Modena. Very little is known of her life beyond the fact that she was born into nobility, the daughter of the Modenese count Annibale Cesis and his wife Barbara.

Cesis’ collection is dedicated to another nun of the same name, Anna Maria Cesis, at the convent of Santa Lucia in Selci in Rome. Both the composer’s convent in Modena and in particular the dedicatee’s in Rome were renowned for their music, and the motets in this collection were undoubtedly intended to be performed by the resident nuns.

Cesis’ collection of Motetti spirituali is an important body of music both for the generally high quality of the works it contains and for the information it provides regarding performance practice in Italian convents in the early 17th century. Its eight partbooks contain 23 motets for diverse forces: 2 motets for 2 voices, 2 for 4, 1 for 5, 3 for 6, 14 for 8, and 1 for 12 voices. Two of the motets include specifications for instruments. Despite the date of publication (1619), Cesis’ motets have more in common with the late 16th-century polychoral compositions of Andrea Gabrieli than they do with the concertato style of her contemporaries, and this is evidenced by, among other things, the absence of a partbook for the basso continuo. One should not, however, assume that these works were performed without organ. We know of at least one organist at Cesis’ convent, and it was not unusual in the late 16th century to use organs in the performance of polyphonic and polychoral motets.

Most importantly, we must remember that these motets were written to be performed by cloistered nuns, without access to male voices to sing the lower parts. An organ would therefore be useful, or even essential, to performing the bass and possibly even the tenor voices. In the same capacity, other bass instruments could also be employed (and it is indeed interesting to note that Cesis’ convent was also home to at least one nun trombonist). These instrumental parts could also be doubled at the octave by female voices, and all of these performance solutions are well-documented.

Another option for performing this music with entirely female voices is suggested by Cesis’ use of clefs: in fact, eight of her motets are in “high clefs”, with the bass rarely descending below e. While the use of high clefs usually indicates a transposition downward of a fourth or fifth (and Cesis herself indicates such a transposition in some of her pieces) it is logical to assume that a performance by women might have maintained the higher tessitura.

Finally, women performers should feel free to devise their own solutions to this sticky problem of performing tenor and bass parts without male voices (as did the nuns undoubtedly themselves) and, in the absence of instruments, choose whatever pitch best suits their voices.

Stabat Mater

Cesis’ setting of the Stabat Mater is a simple and moving hymn for 4 voices. This motet is originally notated in high clefs with a bass part in baritone clef indicated “alla quarto bassa”. If performed at pitch, the three upper parts all fit within the range of women’s voices, while the bass is too low. This is also true if the piece is transposed down a fourth, for the tenor would not descend below an e. The bass part would thus need to be played instrumentally in a women’s ensemble regardless of the key, but could be doubled at the octave by a voice.
Text:

Stabat Mater dolorosa
iuxta cruxem lacrimosa
dum pendebat Filii.
Cuius animam gementem
contristantem, et dolentem
pertransivit gladius.
0 quam tristis et afflicta
fuit illa benedicta
Mater unigeniti.
Quis est homo qui non fleret
Christi Matrem si videret
in tanto supplicio?
Sancta Mater istud agas
Crucifixi fige plagas
cordi meo valide.
Tui nati vulnerati
iam dignati pro me pati
paenas mecum divide.
Fac me plagis vulnerari
cruce hac inebriari
ob amorem filii.
Quando corpus morietur
fac ut anime donetur
Paradisi gloria.

The sorrowful mother stood
weeping beside the cross
while her son was hanging there.
Her grieving soul
sad and dolorous
was pierced through as by a sword.
O how sad and afflicted
was that blessed
mother of an only son.
Who is the man who would not weep
if he saw the mother of Christ
in such distress?
Holy Mother, hear me,
and inflict the wounds of the cross
deeply in my heart.
Your son, covered with wounds,
desired to suffer for me;
may I share his pains.
May his wounds hurt me,
may I become intoxicated from the cross,
for the love of your son.
When my body dies
may my soul be granted
heavenly glory.

Errata:

mm. 11, canto: original is a’ d” b’
mm. 18-21 and 58-61, canto: the original phrase is

Since this leaves one syllable more than the number of notes, I have divided the whole note (*) into two half-notes to accommodate the words, as in the other voices.

Il mio più vago Sole

Il mio più vago Sole is one of four works in Cesis’ collection in Italian rather than Latin, and resembles a late 16th-century madrigal for five voices. The anonymous text, which begins with the common conceit of comparing one’s beloved to the sun, is actually a sacred metaphor, with Christ portrayed as the burning sun and the cross symbolized by the trunk which shades the souls. As is to be expected, the text has an underlying moral message: just as only the most barren and forlorn of lands would fail to bear fruit in the splendor of such a brilliant sun, thus only the hardest of hearts would not blossom in the light of Christ.

The five voices are notated in “normal” clefs, but the soprano never ascends above a d”, so that a transposition up a 5th would allow for an all-female performance (with the bass thus descending to a low e).
Text:
Il mio più vago sole
morto par che più avampi
e più dell’alme i campi
scaldar alrombra d’un bel tronco ei suole,
e ben è duro sasso
d’ogn’humor privo e cassso
ò pur terra spinoa e persa in tutto
quella ch’à si bei raggì
niega it frutto.

My loveliest Sun is dead,
and yet it seems to burn more,
and warm more the field of souls
in the shade of a lovely trunk,
and it is indeed a hard stone
deprived and extinguished of every humor
or a thorny and completely lost land
which denies its fruits
to such beautiful rays.

Io son ferito sì
I am wounded, alas,
ma chi mi dide
but I do not wish to accuse
accusar non vò già
the one who has done this to me
se ben ho prova:
although I have proof:
cinque piaghe nel corpo
five sores in my body
ne fan fede
which pour blood
testi我自己に
E della piaga nova
And from the new sore
io non spasmè non moro.
I do not suffer or die,
E pur si vede.
And yet it can be seen.
il mio nemico ben si trova
My enemy is well-armed,
ma di chiodi d’amor,
but with nails of love,
ò bel partito,
o what good fate,
che sanato m’ha quel
for he who wounded me
che m’ha ferito.

Errata:
  m. 22, Alto I: original is g’, which is clearly incorrect. The best solution appears to be changing it to an e’, despite the parallel octaves created with the Basso II.
  m. 48, Canto II: original is

  m. 50, Canto I: original is f#’, but I think the # must be an error.
Alto I: original is f’g’, but I have changed the f’ to an a’ to avoid parallel octaves with the soprano. Considering the large number of errors of this sort in the print, I assume that this is merely another printer’s error, rather than a contrapuntal lapse on the part of the composer.
  m. 54, Canto II: original is f”g”
  m. 88, Canto II: original is c”a’
m. 142, Alto I: this is the most puzzling error, because this voice finishes a breve earlier than the other voices, and on a b’. I have to assume that the last note was simply left off inadvertently.

Candace Smith, 1996