Ah, Dolente Partita:
Monteverdi’s Bridge Between Two Ages
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**Ah Dolente Partita: Monteverdi’s Bridge Between Two Ages**

The seventeenth century was a period of excitement and change in the western musical world, beginning the transformation from the Renaissance period to the Baroque. Claudio Monteverdi, born in 1567, was able to experience both types of music, “straddling” the gap between the two periods, and his music played a huge role in pioneering the transition of the *prima prattica* to the *seconda prattica*. This is extremely evident in the evolution of Monteverdi’s eight books of madrigals. “Ah, dolente partita,” from his fourth book of madrigals, is representative of a bridge to a new style, while still maintaining elements of the old style. The madrigal’s text, taken from Guarini’s *Il pastor fido*, details the protagonist of the play’s separation from his lover, highlighting (quite drastically) the painful experience of longing, loss, and sorrow. Monteverdi is able to get every emotion, passion, and meaning across in his setting, utilizing extensive text painting and harmonic dissonance.

The opening line of the madrigal immediately catches the listener’s attention, with both the canto and quinto singing a sustained high E (E5) in unison, beginning the piece with a startling “ah.” The text painting continues, as the two aforementioned voices parting from their unison in increasing intervals – a minor second, minor third, and, ultimately, major third – while singing the words “dolente partita,” or “sorrowful parting.” The two voices parting invokes the image of two people parting – the subject of the poem – and the suspension-like texture adds to this; it is as if one person (voice) is staying still, watching the other leave, before departing in the opposite direction, looking back occasionally at the other, longingly.

The alto joins the two voices at measure seven, and quickly mimics the canto’s descending stepwise line at the lyrics “ah, end of my life.” This is important text painting, as a
descending line is evocative of a lament, and the lyrics in this section, full of grief and despair, are quite clearly lamentable. The canto and quinto repeat this descending line, this time together in thirds. Throughout the piece, whenever the words “fin de la mia vita” (“end of my life”) are sung, they are done so in a stepwise descending line. At measure twelve, Monteverdi writes an octave leap in both the canto and quinto, appropriately placed with the lyric “ah,” as the text continues its mournful feeling with a sigh. At measure sixteen, Monteverdi repeats his opening line in the canto and quinto, but this time with the addition of the alto, tenor, and bass. The additional voices heighten the dissonance of this motif, at times creating a three-note cluster (at measure twenty-one, a D4, E5, and F5 are being sung concurrently). This harmonic clash serves to heighten the tension between the voices, reflecting the tension between Mirtillo and his departed lover. The first clear cadence of the piece falls on measure thirty-one, with all five voices outlining an A minor triad (the “C” of the triad falling a measure later in the canto).

The next section begins with the familiar opening motif, this time down an octave and in the alto and tenor voices. Above them, the quinto comes in, singing “E pur i’provo” (“and yet I suffer”) on a single pitch – A4. The canto repeats this at measure thirty-eight, this time on an A5. Though every voice has these lyrics at some point, throughout the piece they are always sung on a single pitch – either an A, C, or E – outlining an A minor triad (A minor being essentially the “tonal center” for the piece, though it is not quite tonal). This repetition serves the idea that the “suffering” is never ending, that it is immobile and fixed. It also has the feel of recitative or monody, emphasizing the “spoken word” value of the phrase. Even though the actual line in the poem reads “And yet I suffer/the pain of death,” Monteverdi finds it appropriate to isolate “and yet I suffer,” and repeats it several times at varying intensities.
Like he did so with the lyrics “fin de la mia vita,” Monteverdi utilizes a descending line every time the words “la pena de la morte” (“the pain of death”) – a quality of a lament. From measure thirty-eight to forty-seven, the piece gets increasingly heterophonic, textured, and harmonically intense, in addition to being one of the most polytextual sections of the madrigal. This intensity, almost to the point of cacophony, heightens the tension and the “parting” aspect of the text. Monteverdi follows this intricate section with a sudden homophonic duet between the alto and the tenor, which is then joined by the canto a measure later (on the lyrics “e pur i’ provo la pena de la morte”) establishing a “resting point” for the music, which is reiterated in measure fifty-six with one beat of total silence. This serves to allow the words to “sink in” to the listener; the last pitches of that section (a B and an E) would have reverberated magnificently in a church or cathedral. In addition to this effect, the rest also serves to usher in a new, livelier section.

This new section begins with the lyrics “e sento nel partire” (“and feel in this parting”) which indicate an emotional change in the song; the first half depicts what has happened to Mirtillo (a “sorrowful parting” from his lover) with punctuated exclamations of grief, while the second half goes into more detail about his suffering and emotional turmoil, and makes a conclusion (of sorts) about his future and pain (“causing my heart to die immortally”). The opening words are sung in strict homophony, and the two measures actually cadence on a D major triad, giving a feeling that hasn’t been experienced in the song yet. It is ironic that, though the lyrics read “and feel in this parting,” these measures are homophonic. In fact, the phrase reappears at measure sixty-one, this time in the alto, tenor, and bass, this time landing on a G major triad.

Following this section are the lyrics “un vivace morire, che da vita al dolore” (“a vivacious dying, which gives life to sorrow”) which are introduced by the canto (and then later
echoed by nearly every voice part) are rhythmically the most intense in the entire madrigal, which is appropriate to the term “vivacious.” Monteverdi further utilizes text painting in this line by having it begin fast, using eighth notes, and then gradually slow down (rhythmically) with “dolore” ending on a half note, as if the music itself is going from “vicacious” to “sorrow.” Every time this section comes up, it is presented in a similar fashion. Starting in measure seventy-eight (in the quinto) the last line of text is introduced, reading “per far che moia immortalmente il core” (“causing my heart to die immortally”) and within four measures becomes the only text being sung by all five parts. This line is repeated until the end of the piece (another nineteen measures) and it is sung in a slow canon with the other voices for much of the remaining time, often in a descending line. This emphasizes the magnitude of Mirtillo’s loss – he will never love again. Yet again, the listener gets an image of voices (or people) parting, as the voices are moving away from each other, in a staggered fashion. The piece finally ends on an A major triad, though the lighter harmonic implication is somewhat lost in relation to the preceding sorrowful measures.

Overall, Monteverdi’s madrigal, “Ah, dolente partita,” is about parting – parting in the textual sense, of two lovers parting ways, but also in the idea that Monteverdi was truly “bridging the gap” between two periods with this book of madrigals. Though it contains many conventions used before him, the piece also uses techniques that would prove prominent in the “seconda prattica.” Through his text painting and treatment of dissonance, Monteverdi is able to evoke sorrow, loss, and other emotional sensations from his listener, and thus the piece is unforgettable and deserving of its solid place in madrigal history to this day.
EXAMPLE I. Monteverdi, “Ah, dolente partita”

Canto
Ah, dolente partita

Quinto
Ah, dolente partita

Alto

Tenor

Basso

C
V
A
T
B

Ah, fin de la mia vita, Ah, fin de la mia vita
Ah, fin de la mia vita
Ah, fin de la mia vita!

Da te

(continued)
EXAMPLE 1 (continued)

C

Un vi-vae-mo-rie Che dà vi-ta al do-lo-
re, Un vi-vae-mo-rie Che dà vi-ta al do-
lo-
re, Per far che mo-
B

re, Un vi-vae-
V

ce mo-
A

ria Che dà vi-
T

ta al do-
lo-
re, Per far che mo-
B

ria Che dà vi-
C

ta al do-
lo-
re, Per far che mo-
V

ria im-
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mortal-
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men-
B

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re, Un vi-
mor-
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te il co-
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