

GESUALDO – SHADOWS – an introduction

Gesualdo's dramatic life and bitter fate is inextricably bound up with the colourful, torn and profoundly despairing music he produced. Igor Stravinsky was the first musician of importance in the 20th century to recognize his striking originality.

Bo Holten has composed his work for Baroque instruments, and Gesualdo's expressive music is seamlessly fused with his own. The opera depicts Gesualdo's life as a psychological drama in an age that combined the most refined artistic flowering with political and religious ruthlessness. In his insistence on personal integrity and with his fragile but feverish psyche he reflects our own time.

We do follow Carlo Gesualdo from a passionate youth in Naples via an artistic eruption in Ferrara to an old age of tribulations, beauty, mysticism, violence and melancholy in the town of Gesualdo, encircled not only by the walls of his princely castle, but also by his own guilt and regrets.

Synopsis / Eva Sommestad Holten

ACT 1 – NAPLES

Carlo Gesualdo, named after his uncle Bishop and Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, is in childhood sent to a Jesuit school in Rome to embark on a church career in the footsteps of his famous relative. When his older brother dies he is called home, being the eldest surviving son now to become Prince of Venosa. He is also reunited with the vivid musical scene of Naples and his true passion – music. As succession needs to be secured, Carlo in haste has to marry his cousin Maria d'Avalos, who already twice widowed has proved her fertility. Let down by several arranged marriages, she looks upon an alliance with her younger cousin and former playmate as a possibility for a marriage of friendship and freedom. But Carlo is seriously in love. The wedding is a manifestation of the nobility of Naples, headed by the Spanish Viceroy. While Carlo's awkwardness and lack of attention displeases Maria, she delights in the elegant flirting of her former brother-in-law Fabrizio Carafa. Carlo Gesualdo is now for the first time facing his inner Shadow, who follows and harasses him. Maria accuses Carlo of putting herself second to his music, and insists on finally being allowed to enjoy life. At a late night ball Carlo looks desperately for Maria, and as his suspicion that she betrays him is confirmed he breaks down, torn between his passion for Maria and an inner chaos of guilt and duty. One late evening outside Maria's bedroom Carlo surprises her chambermaid Laura and the servant Bardotti. Carlo is supposed to be out hunting. Followed by his Shadow he now secretly listens to his wife and her lover, for thereafter to kill them assisted by a hired assassin. The next morning the examining magistrate of the Vicaria arrives. Gesualdo with his Shadow stands in a void and a vacuum of life - What had happened?

Interval

ACT 2 – FERRARA

Four years later Carlo arrives at Ferrara to marry Leonora d'Este, the niece of Duke Alfonso II. While highly aware of the previous events, she piously undertakes the duty to love him. Carlo is more interested in the musical magnificence of Ferrara and he is, as intended, impressed by Duke Alfonso's shows and displays. The Duke does not conceal that the purpose of the marriage is having Carlo, through one more cardinal uncle, Alfonso Gesualdo, to influence the Roman Curia and the Pope, who due to the Duke having no male heir, at his death can return Ferrara to the Papal States. Carlo is monitored and spied upon by Duke Alfonso's right-hand man, Fontanelli, who reports on his ever more frenzied and wayward behaviour towards his musician colleagues and his new wife. Duke Alfonso is attracted by Carlo's melancholy and talent, but ends up expelling him without his wife from the court and from Ferrara – which means Carlo losing his musical paradise.

ACT 3 – GESUALDO

Carlo Gesualdo has returned to the town of Gesualdo and his castle, over years more and more depressed, ill and weakened. He seeks help in witchcraft and from his now deceased and recently canonized uncle Borromeo. The visibly insane Carlo is tormented by demons and fears, which he relieves with pain and music. His wife Leonora unexpectedly appears in Gesualdo in the company of Fontanelli. She brings a relic of St. Carlo Borromeo – a papal shoe. Her purpose is to replace the amulets and other witchcraft that according to her beliefs have caused all the misfortune. When Carlo learns that Leonora on top of this has taken legal action accusing him of witchcraft, he shows his guests the door. His mind is relieved as he tries to collect and publish his music. But as he listens to his own chords, he is once more seized by despair. He looks back on a life characterized by struggle and failure. Not even the beauty of music, only the cold of death, can now relieve the pain of life. Carlo Gesualdo dies. Only the shadow is still there.

(forts >>>)

Three acts – three locations / Eva Sommestad Holten

Act 1 in Naples: The young Gesualdo lives in Naples, by then the largest city in Europe and controlled from Spain through a powerful Viceroy. The remarkable location can still be enjoyed from the cliff above Naples, with the Gulf and the Vesuvius as a backdrop and below the long narrow streets that cut through the old city to form a “split”, the Spaccanapoli, flanked by the now so decayed noble palaces. The palazzo on the Piazza San Domenico where Gesualdo murdered his wife, is still there.

Act 2 in Ferrara: In the 1590s, Ferrara, ruled since the 1300s by the d’Este family, was experiencing one of the most spectacular flowerings in European cultural history. This was just before the whole duchy had to be returned to the Papal States, due to Duke Alfonso not having a male heir. In Ferrara Carlo Gesualdo experienced a musical culture second to none, and this challenged him during a few intense years, to compose all his important madrigals.

Act 3 in Gesualdo: Carlo spent his last years increasingly ill at his own castle in Gesualdo, where he set out to renew both castle and town in a modern Renaissance style. However, like Duke Alfonso in Ferrara, he was to die without an heir – his children died before he did. The town remains as a dormant Renaissance treasure, now steadily more conscious of its great son.

CARLO GESUALDO and his music / Bo Holten

Carlo Gesualdo (1566-1613) was not only one the most important – and most extreme – composers of the Late Renaissance; he was also a neurotic, experimental, ‘modern’ personality, who among other things dramatically took the life of his unfaithful wife and her lover. As a prince he could compose exactly what suited him, and did so. This gave his music a different, wilder face than that of his contemporaries.

In the course of the past fifty years Gesualdo has become an icon of musical life. From great fame in his own time until gradual oblivion a century after his death, the rediscovery of his music has given it incomparable power and great influence on the music of today. Stravinsky in particular, perhaps the most important composer of the twentieth century, who rediscovered Gesualdo, never lost sight of him in his works, and wrote and spoke about him for many years.

Gesualdo’s dramatic life and bitter fate were inextricably bound up with the colourful, torn and profoundly despairing music he produced; indeed, one is tempted to call it overwrought. But how can a Renaissance prince have become an avant-garde composer? As the second son in the princely succession and a nephew of the famous Bishop Carlo Borromeo, Gesualdo was an obvious candidate for a career in the church when his elder brother was to succeed to the principality. But his brother died young, and left Gesualdo with the official duties; unfortunately, since the boy was in fact exclusively interested in music.

When Gesualdo was twenty, a marriage was arranged for him with Maria d’Avalos from Naples. Maria was a much-coveted match, and an alliance between the Gesualdo and d’Avalos families was considered a powerful advantage. However, Maria embarked on an affair lasting several years with the young Duke Fabrizio Carafa. When this was revealed, it was Gesualdo’s aristocratic duty to avenge it with murder. A hired assassin murdered Carafa, while Gesualdo himself killed his wife with his own hands. Often this murder, not his music, has been viewed as the basis for Gesualdo’s fame; but in fact there was nothing extraordinary about this action, which would have been a necessary evil for any nobleman of the time – quite apart from the passion with which Gesualdo carried out the murder.

Gesualdo’s second marriage did not end in the same bestial manner; but this relationship – now with Leonora d’Este from Ferrara – was by no means happy either. On the other hand Gesualdo’s time in Ferrara and his encounter with the latest musical currents led to a huge intensification of Gesualdo’s work. It was in these years – 1594-97 – that Gesualdo, inspired by the fertile environment in Ferrara – composed his radical fourth, fifth and sixth books of madrigals. It is these works which have primarily led to his status as a composer of the first rank.

As early as 1596 he formed a private vocal ensemble based at his castle in the town of Gesualdo, 100 km east of Naples; a milieu of singers and composers where all the newest experiments with chromaticism could be tried out, and where composers could vie with one another to be the most sophisticated.

Gesualdo’s final years were darkened by his unstable state of mind and a series of unfortunate ailments. Both his children died before he did, and his relationship with his wife was extremely unpleasant for both. Only music bore him up. I think it unlikely he died a happy man – suffering was his constant companion, even in death.