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Mark Mazullo

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Seneca, Valletto and Cultural Commentary in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*

The early- to mid-seventeenth century saw a period of dramatic change in the intellectual and artistic climate of Northern Italy. Whereas the 1500s had been characterized by the flourishing of Renaissance humanism and intellectual freedom, the 1600s saw a relapse into political oppression and social instability fueled by depressed economic conditions and the Catholic Church's repressive Counter-Reformation efforts. By mid-century, these conditions had conspired to produce a new set of cultural values among the Italian elites, favoring the frivolous over the profound, scholarly apathy over worldly engagement, extravagance of language over classical rhetoric, and emotional restraint over naturalistic expression – in short, a complete reversal of the previous century's concerns. It was in this climate that Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) composed his final opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642), based on a libretto by Giovanni Francesco Busenello. As musicologist Gary Tomlinson discusses in his book *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance*, Monteverdi was remarkable in that he worked during the peak of Italy's humanistic Renaissance as well as during the subsequent period of Counter-Reformation regression; this, Tomlinson argues, allowed the composer to draw on the aesthetic ideals of both eras in his late works. While this is a valid argument, I have found that Monteverdi's late work is not simply influenced by these contrasting ideals but actively engages in cultural criticism. A close analysis of Act I, Scene VI from Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* reveals that this work can be interpreted as a subversion of mid-seventeenth-century

Italian culture in favor of a return to the principles of the late Renaissance. This subversiveness is highlighted through Monteverdi's musical characterizations of the philosopher Seneca and the page Valletto, which showcase elements of classicist seconda prattica ideals as well as ironic, even satirical uses of mid-seventeenth-century values.

First, it is helpful to have an understanding of the plot as it relates to this scene. Scene VI of Act I takes place immediately following a conversation between Nero's wife Ottavia and her nurse Nutrice, during which Ottavia reveals her knowledge of her husband's plot to divorce her and marry Poppea. At the beginning of Scene VI, Seneca appears onstage, counseling the Empress to stay virtuous. He is interrupted by Ottavia's page-boy Valletto, who initially mocks Seneca but – after Ottavia intervenes and asks the philosopher to plead her case – eventually demands that he help the Empress.

The thoughtful and moral Seneca can be viewed in this scene as representing the aesthetic values of sixteenth-century Northern Italy. This is possible in part through the compositional techniques that Monteverdi employs to set the text, which are highly evocative of sixteenth-century artistic and intellectual priorities. One such technique is "madrigalism" or "text-painting." In keeping with the classicist values of the 1500s (and those of the musical *seconda prattica*) Seneca's lines are consistently set in ways that reflect not only their literal meanings but also their affect. Examples of literal text-painting are not difficult to spot. One especially obvious use of this technique can be found in Seneca's first line: "Here is the disconsolate lady raised to the throne, only to suffer slavery" ("*Ecco, la sconsolata donna assunta a l'impero, per partir il servaggio*," mm. 1-5). Monteverdi begins this phrase with a C – the modal final – in the vocal part. At the words "raised to the throne" ("*assunta a l'impero,*" mm. 3), the melodic line ascends to an Eb and then a G. In m. 4, the vocal line returns to the final C, this time to descend to a low G on "slavery" ("*servaggio*") before returning to C. The

contour of this melody mimics the text in that it gives a clear musical picture of an "ascent" to a peak (that is, the "throne") followed by a rapid descent to low point ("slavery"). Similarly, in mm. 51-52, Monteverdi sets the phrase "but a few thieving days soon steal it away" ("*da pochi ladridì ci son rubati*") with a rapid step-wise descent in the vocal melody, evoking the image of thieves slipping away from a crime.

Monteverdi's demonstration of the affective qualities of Seneca's words through text-painting relies heavily on metrical shifts. Monteverdi varies the meter to correspond with the emotional changes in the character's statements. This is first heard in the meter change at m. 16. At the beginning of the scene, when Seneca is directly discussing Ottavia's misfortune, the text is set in a slow quadruple meter. In m. 16, however, this changes to a "cut time" triple meter as Seneca begins to counsel the Empress to "give thanks to fortune whose blows only add to [her] distinction" ("*Ringrazia*… *la fortuna che con i colpi*… *suoi t'accresce gliornamenti*…" mm. 16-21). The new triple meter moves along at a slightly faster pace than the original, perhaps reflecting the new hopefulness of Seneca's message. Such metrical shifts continue to be heard throughout Seneca's melodic passages, always attached to a change in the affect of the text.

These compositional techniques conspire – along with the actual text of the libretto, in which the philosopher praises the "old-fashioned" value of virtue – to make Seneca a convincing symbol of the former century's aesthetic values. It is important to note that the philosopher's character would have likely been well-received among Monteverdi's contemporaries. Like other characters in the opera, Seneca is modeled after his historical counterpart (the first-century C.E. philosopher and politician), who would have been a familiar and well-liked name to classically-literate Venetian opera-goers in the 1600s. This association virtually guarantees that

Monteverdi's audiences would have had positive reactions to the character – and, by implication, the older aesthetics that he represents.

The page Valletto's musical characterization, on the other hand, serves to suggest – and ultimately deride – the prevailing seventeenth-century preoccupation with frivolity and extravagance. Monteverdi makes this connection in part through his use of melismatic text settings. Valletto's first musical passage (mm. 76-209) includes a remarkably large number of melismas: one each in mm. 83, 85, and 100 as well as a particularly long one lasting from mm. 132-134. These devices – inherently lavish in that they "spend" more notes than is necessary to set the text – lend Valletto's music an air of flamboyance, all the more so for their prevalence. Repetition, both of text and of musical elements, is another technique employed to this end. Measures 204-206 demonstrate this technique especially well in their setting of the word "intricate" ("*intrica*"). The word itself is repeated six times while a melodic motif (F#-G-A-B-A-G) is repeated twice; meanwhile, each measure features a nearly identical basso continuo accompaniment consisting of a repeating "bass line" (D-G-D-low G) beneath a similar harmonic progression. This repetition, much like the melismatic treatment of Valletto's passages, adds an ostentation to the music through its unnecessary and therefore "frivolous" duplication of materials.

Of course, Valletto's extravagant musical passages could be interpreted as mere madrigalisms, and it is true that much of his music serves to provide an aural "picture" of the text. The distinguishing factor, however, is that these passages are by-and-large a depiction only of the words' literal meanings. Unlike Seneca's passages, which change musically to reflect changes in affect, they neither correspond to nor convey any real change in emotional content; Valletto remains static. This lack of affective sensitivity is important in that it mirrors seventeenth-century Italian culture's rejection of naturalistic expression.

Valletto, then, can be viewed as a symbol of the aesthetic values of the opera's contemporaries, while Seneca can be interpreted as representing the old values of the late Renaissance. It is important to remember, though, that these distinctions are mostly irrelevant in and of themselves; what matters most is the way in which Monteverdi prepares the listener to favor one over the other. Monteverdi's audiences would have had positive associations with Seneca from the start (as explained earlier), which would have then been augmented by the unfavorable light in which Monteverdi casts Valletto. While the page is undeniably a comedic and "fun" character, his persistent mockery of Seneca makes him a character with whom it is difficult to sympathize. This would have been doubly so in Monteverdi's era, thanks to the audience's familiarity with the philosopher. This mockery is exaggerated through humorous text-painting devices, such as the extreme elongation of the word "yawn" ("*sbadiglia*," or "*sbadi-a-e-a-o-e-glia*," as it is written here) in mm. 122-124. These strategies come together to paint Valletto – and the seventeenth-century culture he represents – as a mere jokester, far inferior to Seneca and (by association) the old aesthetic values.

Monteverdi's musical characterizations of Seneca and Valletto in Act I Scene VI of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* yield intriguing insights into the cultural change through which the composer had lived. Through the lens of this scene, it is possible to interpret Seneca as a symbol for the humanistic values of the late Renaissance and Valletto as representing the extravagant aesthetics that arose during the early- to mid-1600s. Doing so reveals the opera to be a subversion of mid-seventeenth-century Italian culture, turning its ideals against themselves in favor of a return to the classicist Renaissance. Although the scene is certainly not the most important in Monteverdi's musical drama, it is surprisingly rich and should not be overlooked.