

Introduction

In 2003 I made composers aware, via the newsletter of the Australian Music Centre in Sydney, that I had published a book of librettos (*Love in the Age of Wings*). There were a number of replies, and I felt encouraged. One respondent said he was keen to set a certain libretto, and we began to discuss this project, but then he took me by surprise: what he really wanted was a libretto based on the life of the Italian composer Carlo Gesualdo, 1561 – 1613.

I had come across Gesualdo in the writings of Aldous Huxley (as I recall), I had heard a few pieces of his music, and the folkloric aspect of his life had reached me by some means because I was aware that in a fit of jealous rage he had killed his wife and her lover. Beyond that I knew virtually nothing.

Off to the library then, the Borchardt at Latrobe and the Baillieu at Melbourne. I love these libraries but I never enter them, these days, without seeing myself as a crossover man, swinging between the electronic age (the computer I'm working on) and the wonderfully rich world of heavily bound books, and pamphlets in boxes...

There wasn't a great deal about Gesualdo in English; heaps in Italian, but books in that language are beyond me. I read Denis Arnold (1984) and also Cecil Gray & Philip Heseltine, (1926). I went to *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, another favorite, and then I found Glenn Watkins' *Gesualdo: the man and his music*. I read it carefully, then discovered that he had produced a revised edition. More reading, more photo-copying and more notes.

I was searching for information, of course, but more importantly for a way to approach the task that had been offered me. I could have put it aside but I felt that since I had started writing librettos then I must follow the passions, interests, and quirks of composers who might ask me to write. The quirks of Carlo Gesualdo would be nothing!

I was interested in him straight away, and I saw at the same time that he would be a difficult subject because it would be almost impossible to enlist the sympathies of an audience on his behalf. When still quite young he committed the murders for which he's better remembered than for his music, the music is difficult for modern audiences to approach (and it hardly approaches them), and, although he did marry a second time, he was no less difficult than he'd been before. Oh dear oh dear!

There was also the matter of his whippings. His flagellation, three times a day if what has come down to us is true. Flagellation! It's the extremity of self-hatred and how can you create an opera, with all the appeal, the eloquence and dignity of that form, out of someone who hated himself so much that he had himself whipped?

He wished to imitate Christ, I told myself. Come in via that resplendent portal. I tried. I wasn't convinced by any of the notes and possibilities I scribbled.

He's a man with layers and levels in his personality, I told myself. Show him on top of his castle (well, large house, primitive

by our standards and not so wonderful in his own time), gazing over his fields and listening to his peasants singing. Show him also on a middle floor, where he's the centre of the various responsibilities, dignities and diplomacies of his position and his region. Then let there be a bottom layer, a pit, where the whippings take place, a level we won't visit, as spectators, but will hear as we try to concentrate on the doings and personalities of the middle.

It wouldn't work. It made Carlo Gesualdo too central. I refused to make him as representative of his time as this type of setting implied. I was myself a post-Renaissance man and my sympathies refused to engage with someone who wouldn't come along with me. I was rejecting him, as a man who had his place in history, but whose energies had resisted the energies that my place in history demanded be accepted.

What to do now?

Opera is drama and drama is conflict. Back to the library. What were the conflicts of his time, what were the conflicts he caused in the modern mind, when we bothered to think about him? The first question was easy. The Church was holding people in eternal subjection and there were forces, active in the north of Italy (Gesualdo was in the south), that seemed liberating to those engaged with them. As for Gesualdo and the modern mind, he'd killed his wife and he'd never been brought to what we, in a modern state, would call justice. He got away with it. People of his class did, and no doubt many men of lower classes did the same. Women were subject to their lords and masters. I'm not sure if the church of his day had forgiven him because I'm not sure if he confessed to

what he'd done, but it seemed to me that I had to make a modern audience forgive him, in some way at least, and there was only one way to do that, and that was to put everything on the level of a story, and in the story to make it clear what he'd done, so that we were at one and the same time aware of our condemnation and curious as to the nature of the beast that had killed the errant wife. That meant, I saw, bringing the male double standard into clear relief. I was fairly close to the answer I needed.

The death of Donna Maria D'Avalos would become folklore, the libretto would be divided between the Renaissance north and the Catholic south, and Carlo Gesualdo, wretched man that he was, would be shown with all his yearnings for a love and tenderness that he couldn't regularly and consistently provide for a woman of his class. Like many men in many corners of human history, he could only be decent when he was out of his allotted social space.

My libretto was done. I was proud of it. My composer withdrew without explanation, so here, dear readers, is the work I laboured over for someone else. I hope you enjoy it and I hope that in your mind's ears you can hear a worthy music!

C.A.E.

Part 1: The North

The scene is a piazza close to the palace of the D'Este family, in Ferrara, 1594. A troop of travelling actors is getting ready to perform. We can also see Duke Alfonso D'Este and Count Carlo Gesualdo getting ready to leave the palace. Both are splendidly clothed, but as we watch we see their princely garments taken off, then taken away, after which they assume the robes of friars. This should occur as swiftly and simply as possible, but viewers should be made aware that the garments worn by any of the characters in this opera may be deceptive. The Duke and the Count, having changed their appearance, enter the piazza.

Duke (of the actors) If we invited them in, they'd give us nothing but flattery. I prefer truth, even if it's uncomfortable.

Gesualdo You'd not let them say it to your face?

Duke They would not leave my presence alive. But this way, we can know what they're saying among themselves.

Gesualdo Dangerous knowledge, my lord?

Duke Without it, how would we survive? Our soldiers will fight while they're loyal, but if someone gives them more money ...

Player (beating a drum) Most excellent connoisseurs of the drama, we offer you a true story, instead of rumour, gossip, and lies. Honour and justice compel you to watch! You'll laugh till your bellies are groaning!

And when you've seen our show, if you think we deserve a meal before we sleep, then you can drop scudi in our bowl! This is a tale from the south, where the people have not the refinements of this great city! Ladies and gentlemen, 'In Flagrante Delicto!'

A young woman steps onto their tiny stage, accompanied by a maid, and we can also see, watching them appreciatively, a handsome man, also with a young attendant.

Maid Donna Silvana! Your husband!

Silvana The noblest of men! (A sour looking old man clambers onto the stage.) Don Checcio? What news?

Checcio Donna Silvana, I am going hunting.

Silvana A noble occupation my lord. Will you have your chair placed upon a hill so you can oversee your servants?

Checcio I shall do the shooting myself. That means I must chase. I must move like a rabbit through the grass!

Silvana No rabbit ever moved with the serenity, or the overflowing dignity of my lord, but ...

Checcio But what, my lady?

Silvana Where will you go hunting?

Checcio (aside) In the bedroom I share with this woman! (to Silvana) Far, far away, over the mountains, I am told there is fine hunting, that I have a mind to seek out.

Silvana (aside) He'll be away for the night! (to her husband) But where will you eat, my lord, and sleep? It's cold in those mountains, and even if you light a fire you will freeze. Stay home, my lord. Don't go away!

Checcio I am still young, my wife. The fires of adventure burn in me still. I will hunt!

Silvana Then I must pray for your success, my lord.

Checcio (aside) My success, if it comes, will be dire and dreadful. (to his wife) Pray, yes, pray. Nothing could be more useful than prayer. See, I am become a huntsman!

His servant takes off his cloak and helps him into a hunting jacket, and a hat with a feather or two, then offers him a gun. While this is happening, Silvana whispers to her maid.

Silvana Tell Ercole that my husband will be away tonight. (The maid slips away.) My lord is ready for the hunt?

Checcio May heaven protect the creatures that I seek!

Silvana The birds of the air and the beasts of the forest would be quaking, if they knew you were coming, my lord.

Checcio If they knew, they would be quaking indeed!

Silvana Farewell, my lord, and good success!

Checcio (aside) Those words will be regretted, before the break of day. (to his wife) Live in virtue, my wife. In the sight of God, there is no other protection. (He goes.)

Gesualdo Where are these fellows from, that they tell this tale?

Duke (a little amused) They live in this city, but their tales come from far and wide. Travellers gossip ... Ah! There is Fontanelli.

The Duke has noticed the arrival in the piazza of Count Alfonso Fontanelli, a senior member of his court. Fontanelli exchanges glances with the Duke and Count Gesualdo, but does not come close to them.

Maid (to Silvana) My lady, Don Ercole is waiting, and he has a look in his eyes that you know well.

Silvana Show him in.

Don Ercole comes from the edge of the little stage on wheels to be close to Silvana. He indicates to her, with his eyes, that they are being watched by a nobleman from the D'Este family's court.

Silvana Don Ercole, you are shy. One would think you had never been with a woman before.

Ercole I am a man of virtue, Donna Silvana.

Silvana Virtue takes many forms, Don Ercole. What form does it take in you?

Ercole The form of honour, my lady.

Silvana And how is this shown, Don Ercole?

Ercole Honour, like virtue, takes the form of doing what is right.

Silvana What may be right in one place may be wrong in another.

Ercole I live in the city of a great duke, my lady.

Gesualdo (to Duke Alfonso) He knows you're here.

Duke We are disguised. It's Fontanelli that he sees.

Silvana The great duke, as you call him, who rules my life, is away tonight. He's gone hunting.

Ercole I wonder what he means by that?

Silvana What else could he mean? Harmless birds, wild boars, will hear the report of his gun. If they're clever, they'll stay far away.

Ercole If they're not?

Silvana (merrily) They'll be shot! They'll join the deers' heads looking down from our walls.

Ercole How far away must they be to be safe?

Silvana Safe? This is a word you were not wont to use, Don Ercole. You were more adventurous at a former time.

Ercole I think Don Checcio knows about our love. I think he's set a trap.

Gesualdo (disturbed) Who wrote this piece?

Duke Don't take it to heart, Don Carlo. You are in the robes of a man of God.

Gesualdo And God knows I belong to him, whatever I may have done.

Silvana Don Ercole, you were given the name of a great hero. Live true to what you are. Am I so easily put away, that a thought can make you cold? Love is cold, and the bed where it was celebrated, that too is cold, if you can so easily deny what has been ours. I am a woman, Don Ercole, and a woman is not intended, so they say, for bravery and arms, but there is another

bravery, which is stronger, and that is to defend what is alive in one's heart. I will never deny what I hold in my heart for you!

Ercole I too have a heart full of love, my lady, but another emotion has entered, and it is fear. I fear to die. We are in a state of sin, my lady, and if we are discovered, then damnation is surely ours. It lasts forever, and it is a fearful thing.

Silvana Nature, Don Ercole, has made an error in making you. It has created a cavalier with the heart of a woman, and in me a woman with the heart of a cavalier. If there is fear in you, then you must become a huntsman too, and chase from your heart any thought of love. And then, if your heart is loveless, you must leave my sight and never return.

Ercole (after a little thought) My lady, since you want to die, I shall die with you. We have known the heights of love and now we must learn the results. Our lives are joined, since our hearts are one. Whatever fate holds for you, is mine to share. Donna Silvana, I am yours to command.

Silvana Let us retire to my room, Don Ercole. I wish to endow you with the gift of love, and I ask no less in return.

Silvana and Ercole withdraw, and we hear their sighs, and cries of pleasure from behind a curtain. As their lovemaking develops, we see three servants of Don Checcio gathering swords, halberds, daggers, et cetera. These three go through the motions of trying to peep

into Silvana's bedroom, and they push their swords around or under the curtain that hides the lovers and bring out garments, including under-garments, as a teasing way of telling their audience that the lovers have undressed. They make great play of this. They make a lot of noise, but, to their amusement, the lovers are too occupied with lovemaking, to notice. Or perhaps they are asleep by now.

Gesualdo (angrily) If I had my sword I'd stop them!

Duke Withdraw, Gesualdo. Fontanelli will handle this.

Fontanelli has observed Gesualdo's anger, and is signalling to the D'Este palace behind him. Armed men wearing the family's livery come out to the actors' little stage, and cart.

Gesualdo Wait! I want to see what happens! (Don Checcio reappears at the side of the stage.) He is her husband! No man can take from him his rights!

Duke Restrain yourself. You are my guest, as obliged to me as I am to you. (quietly; a man used to being obeyed) Fontanelli knows his ground.

Fontanelli (to the players) Enough. No more of this wretched tale. Are you not aware that our Duke is celebrating a marriage within his walls? Your play is unseemly. It may not be performed in the realm of the Duke. Take yourselves away!

He gestures to the soldiers and they move close to the actors' wagon, threatening. The actors, with a certain amount of cheek, push their cart from the piazza. As they do so, the garments which The Duke and Carlo Gesualdo exchanged for their monkish robes

are brought back to them, and the two men return to their identity as nobles. The actors leave the piazza, the soldiers in D'Este livery take up position in relation to the Duke and his guest, the gateway of the palace opens and two heraldic devices, that of the D'Estes and that of Carlo Gesualdo, are displayed on either side of the portal of the palace.

Duke Your anger is natural, Don Carlo, but nature may need to be restrained. Those who are used to power know that the unexpected is the greatest weapon we can wield. Never be predictable, Don Carlo. If you are displeased, look for the moment when your displeasure cannot be checked, and wait till then before you act. Am I clear?

Gesualdo (nodding) And wise, my lord. I have still to learn your restraint.

Duke Let us go in. There are finer arts than the buffoonery we have seen.

The Duke and his guest enter the palace, followed by the soldiers. A trumpeter blows a fanfare, the Duke bows to those coming to serve him, and he gestures to two seats. Gesualdo bows, the Duke sits, then Gesualdo sits beside him. Two or three musicians begin to play for them. The Duke listens, then gestures to the musicians that they should move further back because he wishes to talk to his guest.

Gesualdo Your court is full of music, my lord.

Duke The world should be full of music, Don Carlo, but we haven't achieved that yet, except in fortunate places ...

Gesualdo ... such as the Palazzo D'Este, here in Ferrara.

Duke You must have music too?

Gesualdo Poorly, by comparison. I had a chapel built, after the death of my wife.

Duke You have a choir?

Gesualdo A few singers, my lord, and they sing my madrigals too.

Duke We shall hear some.

Gesualdo I was proud of them till I reached your palace, my lord, and heard the artistry of your people.

Duke You will be proud of them again. Your music lost nothing on its journey.

Gesualdo I fear it did. You are civilised, up here.

Duke What is it like then, in the south?

Gesualdo We are violent men, our women are sad, and the church rules all.

Duke You are far from Rome.

Gesualdo Distance makes us servile. Real power is elsewhere. Our people imitate, and obey.

Duke You must lead them from servility. Donna Leonora will transfigure your estate.

Gesualdo If she ever gets there. I see no thought in her mind, my lord, that she wishes to leave this place.

Duke You move me, Don Carlo. But the day will come, if you make her happy, when she will ask to go.

Gesualdo I shall attempt what you suggest, my lord, but I am not good at making people happy. My greatest failure is myself.

Duke (beckoning the musicians back) We shall dine, and drink, and then we shall ask the heavens to let us listen to the sounds they hear, night and day.

Gesualdo stands, bows, backs away, and follows the Duke when he too rises, and leaves the hall where they have been sitting. There is a pause, and then the poet Torquato Tasso enters.

Tasso Noblemen they call themselves, but everything they enjoy is made for them by others. Peasants toil for them, bakers bake their bread. Men with finer fingers make the jewellery they give their wives. Murderers carry out their wishes, and might they not kill me if my inspiration failed? It will not fail. The only nobility of these people is brought to their courts by poets such as I. (He stands by the chair the Duke has been sitting on, and sings. It is suggested that the ambivalence he feels about his position should be clear in his singing of the verse, especially the last two lines.)

Worthy of royal lists and brightest day,
 Worthy a golden trump and laurel crown
 The actions were, and wonders of that fray
 Which sable night in darkness drowned:
 Yet, night, consent that I their acts display
 And make their deeds to future ages known,
 And in records of long enduring story,
 Enrol their praise, their fame, their worth and glory.

The Duke and Gesualdo appear at the back.

Duke Our poet is full of melancholy whims. He has a strange notion that we wish to put him to death, though we have always made much of him; and he ought to know that if his death had been our design then nothing would have been easier than to have it carried out.

Gesualdo And he lives, and is allowed to sing his song.

Duke A world without song is poor indeed.

Gesualdo Singers die, my lord, every one. It is the song that lives, and he that wrote it lives on, disguised, because people forget that there was a beginning for every song. Creation is the noblest work of God, and he shares it with those blessed few that bring what he wishes into this world.

Duke You will find us appreciative, Don Carlo. In our halls tonight we shall hear the music of which you are so proud.

Gesualdo Let us do it now, my lord.

The Duke makes a sign, and members of the D'Este family, and their musicians, enter. Donna Margherita, the Duke's wife, and many years younger than he is, takes her place beside the Duke. Gesualdo stands and bows to her, then looks around, and shows signs of relief when Donna Leonora D'Este enters. She bows to him, touches his hand, bows also to the Duke and Donna Margherita, and sits, showing great interest in the musical proceedings. Gesualdo makes signs to the musicians, then sits again.

Singers I am silent, yet in my silence
My tears and sighs
Speak of my martyrdom.
So if I must die
My death will continue to cry out for me.

Duke This is cleverly crafted music, Don Carlo. You write in a way we have not heard before. But what do you think, Donna Leonora?

Leonora A woman is fortunate indeed to be wedded to such accomplishment.

Duke Fairly spoken, my lady, but Don Carlo, why is it that you speak of dying at a time when blood is flowing hotly through your veins?

Gesualdo Death and life are one, my lord. Each attends the other. Every birth pushes death away, but only to circle our lives, waiting for its time to claim us back. Even our greatest passions are a denial of what must come one day.

Leonora That is why we create a court such as this, and why, in the castle which is your home, I will help you build the court you greatly desire.

Gesualdo We must have a court, my lady, but what sort will it be?

Duke A gloomy question, Don Carlo, to which I give you Ferrara's reply.

Gesualdo (after a pause) I await your words, my lord.

Duke Not mine, Don Carlo, but those with more talent than I. What can a prince do, to create a glorious state,

but make it a home for those who sing because their minds know how to do so? Torquato Tasso, prince of poets, sing for us again.

Tasso (after bowing to the court) My lords and ladies, I give you the saddest moment of my poem. The lovers have been fighting, unaware ...
 But now, alas, the fatal hour arrives
 That her sweet life must leave that tender hold;
 His sword into her bosom deep he drives,
 And bathes in lukewarm blood his iron cold;
 Between her breasts the cruel weapon rives
 Her curious square embossed with swelling gold:
 Her knees grow weak, the pains of death she feels,
 And like a falling cedar bends and reels.

Leonora Noble Tasso, this is too affecting. You forget that my lord and I are to join in holy marriage. Your song should dispel the doubts and apprehension which is natural at such a time.

Tasso I bow to your apprehension, my lady. When you call me next, I shall sing a different song.

Duke It is time for the pleasures of the table to occupy us. (He signals that they should go inside, then, as they move away, he speaks quietly to Gesualdo.) Stay a moment, Don Carlo. I wish to know your thoughts.

Gesualdo My lord?

Duke Your marriage is near and if God so blesses you, you will have a son.

Gesualdo Indeed, I have one already, my lord, in the south.

Duke Then you have a blessing God has not granted me.

Gesualdo Your lands are at risk.

Duke You know then. My wife is young, but has not proven fertile. The Pope will claim my lands, and this city which has welcomed you, if I die without a son.

Gesualdo Can he not be offered something he covets more?

Duke I have been to Rome to put my case. I took a small army to make them know my power, but I could not get the decision I wanted.

Gesualdo Can I help, my lord, do you think?

Duke Your uncle is the bishop who stands most prominently in my way.

Gesualdo I shall call on him in Rome, or Naples, as I make my way home.

Duke He will want something. He shall have it. This is my city, Don Carlo, and it is fair in my eyes ... (They hear music from within) ... and my ears.

Gesualdo Your family has made this city. It shall be forever yours.

Duke I am grateful, Don Carlo, but that word 'forever' sounds darkly in my ears.

Gesualdo Nothing is forever, my lord, but we say it to make ourselves strong ...

Duke ... when we are weak, Don Carlo, however powerful we seem.

He goes in, taking Gesualdo with him, and then three women we haven't seen before enter the hall, gorgeously dressed: Laura, Anna

and Livia. They have with them other young women carrying a lute, a small harp, and a viol, and they place themselves where they can project their voices into the dining hall where the guests have gone to dine. Laura sings.

Laura I shall sing to you, gentle nobles, of Medea and her magic arts.

Medea lived more than one era, attractive and pretty, queen of those peoples; she renewed herself with every new pleasure, and chased from herself every ugly bit of age; and this she did by virtue of a bath that she had made by enchantment in the forest; so that no one else would approach it, she had placed a thousand demons around it.

Duke (within) Find me the bath, gentle singer, and you shall never see me out of it, unless invited by love ...

Margherita You have created it, my lord, for do we not bathe in it every day? Tell him, Don Carlo, he listens only to you.

Duke Don Carlo is a musician, of a distinguished kind. Give us one of his madrigals.

Laura We are only three, my lord. We need more voices.

Duke Don Carlo, you and I must make the other lines. Come.

Gesualdo So please you, my lord.

Gesualdo and the Duke join the ladies. Donna Margherita and Donna Leonora come with them, while the others remain in the dining hall.

Five voices Thirsis to die desired
Marking her eyes that to his heart was nearest,
And she that with his flame no less was fired
Said to him, Oh heart's love dearest,
Alas forbear to die now
By thee I live, with thee I wish to die too.

Duke (appreciatively) There is only one way to die ... with our hearts, our minds, our memories, full of thoughts of love.

Gesualdo Some who have died so have died in sin, my lord, and cannot escape the damnation they incurred before they died.

Duke You are still thinking of those players we saw today.

Margherita Players, my lord? I saw no players today.

Duke Don Carlo and I went into the piazza, dressed as friars.

Margherita And what did you see my lord?

Duke A vulgar piece, yet it had some thoughts that struck a chord.

Leonora What were they, my lord?

Duke (sharply, yet also dismissively) Your husband will tell you.

Leonora Then we must wait till tomorrow, because that is when we are to be married.

Duke Another song, ladies, if you please.

Leonora Sing to us of Dido, at the time when she thought fortune smiled.

Laura These are the words of Juno, queen of the gods:
Singers Aeneas and his unfortunate Dido plan to go
 A-hunting in the woods tomorrow, but I shall pour
 down a darkling rain storm
 And hail as well, and send thunder hallooing all over
 the sky.
 Dispersing for shelter, the rest of the hunt will be
 cloaked in murk;
 But Dido and Lord Aeneas, finding their way to the
 same cave,
 Shall meet. I'll be there: and if I may rely on your
 goodwill,
 There I shall join them in lasting marriage, and seal
 her his,
 With Hymen present in person.

Leonora It is a solemn thought. You are both troubled, my
 lords?

Gesualdo Speak first, noble duke; it is your right.

Duke These poets direct our thoughts where it suits them.
 Aeneas had a son, but it was not Dido's, nor did she
 bear him any child.

Margherita The gods may yet give us blessing, my lord. I am still
 young.

Gesualdo You still have Virgil in your mind, my lady; you say
 'the gods', when there is only one, and more jealous
 than any husband ever was.

Leonora Does that jealous God inspire you, my lord? Must I
 shape my ways to keep away his wrath?

Gesualdo You have spoken wisdom, I think.

Duke We have spoken enough. We shall sleep and tomor-
 row, when we have risen, the court shall gather to
 receive you, Don Carlo and Donna Leonora, when
 you have been joined by a kinder god than the one
 we have been discussing. Good night Don Carlo,
 ladies, courtiers, servants all, goodnight.

Part 2: The South

We are in Carlo Gesualdo's home – it's hardly a palace – at the edge of the village of Gesualdo, inland and east of Naples. Donna Leonora, attended by a handsome maid, is listening to the voices of peasants, not far away, as her husband comes in.

Peasants Glory be to God! Glory be to Christ, our salvation!
Our redemption from the pains of hell.

Leonora Where have you been, my lord?

Gesualdo In the fields, walking. Inciting my people to prayer.

Leonora I thought I saw the priest ...

Gesualdo You did.

Leonora Is that why they're singing?

Gesualdo The Holy Father was carrying the body and blood of Christ; they could do no less.

Leonora Carrying the sacrament in the fields? Why was he doing that?

Gesualdo (with cheerful mockery) To incite them to express their faith.

Leonora They attend mass ... what more need they do?

Gesualdo They must please their lord, and they will do it by obedience.

Leonora Their lord in heaven, or their lord on earth?

Gesualdo The latter. Our Heavenly Father has thunderbolts he can fling if they trouble him. I need other means.

Leonora Are you displeased with them?

Gesualdo No, but I want them to please me.

Leonora Will this please God?

Gesualdo We can only please God with perfect lives, and the holiest saint can't be perfect. We must imitate Christ, and accept punishment for falling short, as inevitably we will.

Leonora To imitate Christ? Is that not a way of trying to be as good?

Gesualdo What else?

Leonora Then is it not a form of challenge?

Gesualdo (as if he is interested in her for almost the first time) If it is, we must have the challenge beaten out of us ... (Three men appear at one side; Gesualdo signals that he will join them.) ... in order to make us humble again.

He leaves. She waits and after a moment or two we hear the sounds of a beating being administered.

Leonora My husband has himself beaten! (to her maid) Marina, how long has this been going on?

Marina Long before you arrived, my lady.

Leonora Have you seen what they do to him?

Marina Never, my lady, though I have seen him afterwards, bleeding.

Leonora Bleeding?

Marina He sent me for his ointments, once.

Leonora Did he tell you to rub them on?

Marina I knew he wanted it, my lady, so I did.
 Leonora Only once, then?
 Marina (slowly) More than once, my lady.
 Leonora Twice?
 Marina Many times. He told me not to say.
 Leonora What are you to him, that you may see him thus, and I may not?
 Marina You are his wife. Your virtue must not be spoiled.
 Leonora And what are you, then?
 Marina Only a serving maid, my lady. What I do does not matter.
 Leonora But it does. We are never out of the sight of God, any of us.
 Marina I have no rank. What I do for him does not matter.
 Leonora What you do for him?
 Marina (frightened) No my lady! I speak only of his ointment.
 Leonora (imperiously) Speak to me about what you see in his eyes!
 Marina (bowing her head) What do women expect to see in a man's eyes?
 Leonora This whipping must stop ... or I must return to my own people.

Marina bows, and leaves; Leonora thinks for a time, then she leaves too. A light shows us Carlo Gesualdo, bleeding a little from his whipping. He is rubbing ointment onto himself, and putting some clothes back on.

Gesualdo Our Lord Jesus had no wife. There is no record of him giving way to lust. He took on the form of man, but it was deceptive. Man cannot be pure as he was. Man can only aspire ... and fall back, eternally. Lust and every human desire rise all the time, like weeds that must be dug out of the olive groves. They must be plucked out and thrown away to die, yet, even as they die, they get ready to return. Sin is as eternal as God himself, and I am sin incarnate. Marina, my ointment has fallen. Pick it up and rub it on me!

Marina comes in from one side, and Donna Leonora from the other.

Marina (deferring) My lady!
 Leonora I will do it, Marina, if I am allowed. Please leave us. (Marina leaves.) Well, my lord, you have had them beat you?
 Gesualdo There shall be music from me now. Blood from my wounds, music from my soul.
 Leonora Can there be no music without blood?
 Gesualdo No.
 Leonora And yet where I come from ...
 Gesualdo (cruelly) Your uncle's court is no more. It was not based on God. You have had to move.
 Leonora I ask your permission to go back there.
 Gesualdo No.
 Leonora I am unwell.
 Gesualdo Which of us is well? We are mortal, and fated to die.

Leonora All the more need to live joyfully while we can.
Gesualdo All the more need to understand our position, and accept.
Leonora How can you make music out of that?
Gesualdo You will see.
Leonora Will I hear?
Gesualdo If you have ears.

He stands, more or less fully clothed, and leaves her. She takes out a letter, and calls softly.

Leonora Marina? (Her maid appears at the side.) A man is leaving for Naples today. Give him this letter. (Marina accepts it, and disappears.) My position is impossible. My husband is a wilful man. And yet we have a child. A mother has a duty to the father of her child. When we let a man enter us, we accept his soul as well. I wish that life was different, but I see no other way. Purgatory on earth, in order that there may be paradise to follow. That is God's allocation to women. He might have done better. Men may whip themselves, but women have God to lash them, night and day!

She disappears, and then we are aware of sounds coming from elsewhere in the house. The best way to think of what follows is to think of the house becoming Carlo Gesualdo's mind, full of sounds that he's thinking about with a view to writing the better ones down.

Voices O Vos Omnes ... I would speak to all. I am counted among them that go down to the pit. I am become a man without help; free among the dead. He was wounded for our inequities, and by His stripes are we healed.

We hear the whip sound in the accompaniment to these words. Leonora returns, aghast at the way her husband is taking these thoughts.

Leonora I shall return to Modena! No, I must suffer here on earth. Why does the church teach us these things? Why does it offer only despair? I swear I am not as bad as this!

Voices (continuing Carlo's thinking) Cleanse me from my sin; for I know my iniquity and my sin is always before me. (some more whipping sounds) Attend and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.

Leonora I give these words to you, oh my God! Do you not see they speak for me? You who see everything, what do you think of this?

Voices Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: the spirit indeed is ready but the flesh is weak.

Leonora Marina! Come to me. Bring the child!

Marina returns, with little Alfonsino, child of Gesualdo and Donna Leonora.

Leonora Shall my son grow with these thoughts inside his mind?

Marina Our lord lives in despair, Donna Leonora. His music is his release.

Leonora What music is this? I always knew it was strange.

Voices For behold I was conceived in iniquities; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Leonora No! No! No!

Marina Shall I take the child away, my lady?

Leonora To the end of the earth!

Leonora, Marina and the child leave; the meditative voices continue a little longer.

Voices Thou shalt open my lips, Oh Lord; my mouth shall declare Thy praise. A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit: a contrite and humble heart, Oh God, Thou will not refuse.

There is a pause. Some indication should be given to the audience that time has passed. Gesualdo enters, and sees Marina.

Gesualdo She has gone, Marina. I gave her six months, she will take a year.

Marina My lord?

Gesualdo I will sleep tonight in the room where I slept at a former time.

Marina I shall prepare it my lord.

Gesualdo You are like my first wife, Marina. Very like.

Marina I never saw her my lord.

Gesualdo She was full of beauty, and it stirred desire in men.

Marina Her beauty was fatal, then.

Gesualdo I am glad I killed her, and yet I want her back.

Marina If she were, my lord?

Gesualdo I might teach her to love me. (Marina makes no reply.) You think that would be impossible.

Marina I must do your bidding. I shall make up the bed in the room.

Gesualdo You know I never enter it.

Marina I see you keep away, my lord.

Gesualdo If I go near it, I think I hear her voice, singing ...

Marina What does she sing, my lord?

Gesualdo A sad song. Yet full of pride. She never repented of what she was.

Marina As I hear, my lord, you gave her no chance of that.

Gesualdo I struck her in her sin. I killed her lover. They were foolish, and I overcame them both.

Marina Will you feel triumph, my lord, if you sleep in the bed that was ...

Gesualdo Mine!

Marina Theirs?

Gesualdo Marina!

Marina My lord?

Gesualdo You will hold me.

Marina As you wish, my lord.

Gesualdo You are not afraid?

Marina Women of my rank have no reason to hope, my lord. We accept, and we endure.

Gesualdo That's little enough.

Marina It's all there is.

Gesualdo Women make nonsense of the church. It's your crime.

Marina It's what we are, my lord. The church must find its own way.

Gesualdo (amused) Find a way! I like that Marina. Make the room! Fresh sheets, soft pillows. Let us see if we hear voices tonight.

Marina There is one I think we will hear my lord.

Gesualdo (suspiciously) You mean my wife? Cursing me from Modena?

Marina Your first wife, singing from her grave.

The lights change and the scene becomes the bedroom where Gesualdo killed Donna Maria D'Avalos and Fabrizio Carafa. Gesualdo climbs into the bed.

Gesualdo No voices yet, Marina.

Marina I think they are close my lord.

Gesualdo I cannot sleep without someone to warm my back.

Marina Shall I join you my lord, and rub your back?

Gesualdo Please, Marina.

Marina gets into the bed with him and rubs his back.

Gesualdo I am a prince, Marina. My uncle is a prince of the church. Yet I am helpless without a woman's hands.

Marina None of us is complete in ourselves, my lord. We all need another.

Gesualdo My wife needed someone that was not me. I was jealous.

Marina Perhaps she was lucky, my lord.

Gesualdo Lucky, Marina? How could that be?

Marina Nobody can be happy over a whole long life. But if we can be uplifted for a time, and know our fortune, then we may be spared the pain of seeing ourselves change.

Gesualdo Our minds have to change, is that what you say?

Marina I hear a voice, my lord. Listen.

Donna Maria Aaaaaaaaahhh.

Marina Are you a goddess and asleep, or are you a woman, and dead?

Donna Maria Dead I am, and a woman.

Marina Tell me how you died.

Donna Maria Murdered I lay, and my name is Maria; of death was I too little wary.

Marina How so?

Donna Maria Through love was I extinguished, which often leads to the end of those that follow it.

Marina By whom were you inflamed?

Donna Maria By the most comely and valorous knight ...

Marina Tell me his name.

Donna Maria Ah, I suffer the pains of death again in remembering ...

Marina Say his name and may the high eternal justice diminish your sharp punishment.

Donna Maria The name was Fabrizio ...

Gesualdo Ah!

Donna Maria ... who like a smithy so did shape my heart that it never more departed from his will.

Marina His family?

Donna Maria The illustrious Carafa, noble and ancient by a thousand years. Never could painters with a brush be able to paint a youth more handsome. He was a model of beauty.

Gesualdo Ah!

Marina And how were the hours of this life made short for you?

Donna Maria When we thought we were in secret enjoying the sweet and happy fruits of love, in the most quiet sleep were we interrupted, and I and he lay slain. This, alas ...

Marina ... alas ...

Gesualdo ... alas ...

Donna Maria ... befell me because of having too much loved. And I am content with it.

Marina Content?

Gesualdo Content?

Donna Maria Content. For if great sin torments my soul I wish the world to know that for my Fabrizio's sake I hold infamy and hell to be glory and eternal paradise!

Gesualdo No! By heaven, she dies again for that!

Marina She lives forever, my lord, as long as men and women tell their tales.

Gesualdo Punishment! She should have taken longer in the killing, and suffered more. I was too quick!

Marina Your back, my lord. Turn so I can rub.

Gesualdo (turning) There, Marina. Give me ease for pain.

Marina Pain and the means to ease it seek each other out. We are needed, my lord.

Gesualdo Women cause things outside men's understanding. Women see things men do not see. All we can do is take upon ourselves the sufferings of the world.

Marina Do you want me to stay to the morning, my lord, or shall I leave you now?

Gesualdo Stay! I need you the whole night long. (He thinks.) Could ye not watch one hour with me, ye that were ready to die with me?

Marina The words of Our Lord! (She crosses herself.)

Gesualdo See, oh all you people, if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.

Marina Sorrow is overcome by tenderness, if it allows itself to open.

Gesualdo How wise you are. A contrite and humble heart, Oh God, Thou wilt not despise.

Marina Turn again, my lord, and give me love.

Gesualdo In sin. In sin!

Marina It is not sin, my lord, but nature.

Gesualdo Nature is riddled with sin! That's why we must surpass it.

Marina Nature can never be surpassed. At best, we may improve on it a little.

Gesualdo So pessimistic, Marina? The Lord Jesus gave his life so we can go further than you say.

Marina Who but the Lord Jesus has gone further? Nobody that I know, my lord, not even you.

Gesualdo Marina! So impudent! You may not speak like that, even in this bed ...

Marina Then I will be silent, my lord, but you will read my thoughts.

Gesualdo You are honest, Marina. I find it easier to deal with you than with my wife.

Marina I have no position to uphold. You may speak to me as to your own soul.

Gesualdo You know why I write music, Marina? I wish to speak ... to all.

Marina To each and every one?

Gesualdo God sent his son to earth in order to let us hear His wishes.

Marina The Lord Jesus met a terrible end.

Gesualdo Jesus by His crucifixion showed us how terrible we are. Human nature is so debased that we could kill our God.

Marina Then there is no way out of that.

Gesualdo There is! God triumphed despite us when He allowed Jesus to rise again, to heaven, in glory. (Marina says nothing.) Marina!

Marina I must admire what you say, my lord, but I have nothing to say.

Gesualdo You are a woman. You live inside the limits of your mind.

Marina Shall I rub your back, my lord?

Gesualdo Please, Marina. You are kind. You are tender.

Marina I see kindness and tenderness in you, my lord.

Gesualdo Which no one else has ever seen. This is precious ...

Marina ... but ...

Gesualdo ... it is not what I want to say.

Marina What is that, my lord?

Gesualdo I must speak, as Christ did, to all who can hear.

Marina What do you say, my lord, to God's people?

Gesualdo This is what I say, Marina. I thank you for making me understand.

Marina Will you sing to me, my lord, to us, in this room, this night?

Gesualdo I will sing Marina. Lie there and listen, and let the world be changed by the knowing.

Voices O vos omnes, qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte: si est dolor similis sicut dolor meus. (O all ye that pass by, attend and see: if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.)

Marina Your back is warm, my lord. I press myself against you.

Gesualdo You are kind, Marina, but the world ...

Marina ... the world ...

Gesualdo ... is as it always was.

Marina Rest, my lord, rest in my arms and sleep.

Gesualdo (faintly, as he drifts off to sleep) O vos omnes ...