

GESUALDO · SHADOWS

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LIBRETTO

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GESUALDO · SHADOWS

Libretto set to music by Bo Holten 2014

ACT 1**PROLOGUE**

TO ROME: Gesualdo as a child, about 7 years, hanging around the musicians, who are tuning their instruments. Clutching his lute as if to a comforting toy.

Realizes the audience, and states in the classic childish way who he is:

Little Gesualdo:

I am Carlo.

I have my name from my very famous uncle in Rome.

He is the Pope's best friend.

Madrigalists: Carlo.
Yes! The great Carlo Borromeo!

Shadow / Borromeo: You are named after Me, little Carlo.
Your duty is to come to Rome.
Your duty is to succeed Me
as the greatest of Cardinals.
Humble, obedient, but powerful,
for the glory of your family,
and for the glory of God!

Jesuits with trunks have dissociated from the madrigal group to dress little Gesualdo in a traveller's cloak and hat. They snatch his lute from him.

Gesualdo:

My lute!

Madrigalists + Shadow/Borromeo:
First my boy; remember
the sensuous dangers of Music.
No more empty pleasure for the ears!
No more music - but for the glory of God.
Listen Carlo! No more sinful pleasure.

Shadow alone: *To the Jesuits:*
Return the lute to Carlo!

*The Jesuits escort Gesualdo, departing for Rome.
He sees his little cousin and playmate Maria, and runs to embrace her / tries to.*

INTERMEZZO

BACK FROM ROME/ BACK TO MUSIC:

Scene with no words. Gesualdo enters with his SHADOW - homecoming and welcomed by the musicians and singers of the family. Joining them with his lute and newly written scores. Absolute pleasure.

SCENE 1. MEETING HIS COUSIN MARIA AGAIN

Maria still in her first year as widow, veiled.

Maria: Carlo! You are back in Napoli!
Do you recognise me, Maria?

Gesualdo:
My cousin, no more a girl!
I'm back since my brother died.

Maria:
I know.
All upside down.

Gesualdo:
Now duty is to be prince,
not a cardinal.
I won't be the new Carlo Borromeo!

Maria:
Remember you admired him so?
Having your name from him.
You quoted his silly saying:

"The best way not to find the bed too cold,
is to go to bed colder than the bed is."
Said the cleverest-ever Borromeo,
the Pope's best friend!

Gesualdo: *Rejects her joking.*
Stop it, Maria!
It worked for me!
Imprisoned
with icy Jesuits
in icy cold rooms,
filled with tiny boys.
Surviving by the Borromeo trick:
Freezing their souls to ice.

Maria:
Sorry Carlo.

I was myself trapped.
Thirteen years old,
imprisoned in marriage.

It worked, the trick.
Now I have turned pale and cold,
not to feel the ice around me.
Losing my youth!
Oh Carlo, I lost my youth!
And now I want beauty.
Beauty, wit and fun!

Gesualdo:

For me that is music.

Maria:

I know, we know!
Who didn't know?!
But do remember
your famous Uncle
and his rule:
"No empty pleasure for the ear
but for the glory of God!"

Gesualdo:

You told me you had lost
your warm blood suffering.

But still there is life and
wit to tease me! Maria!

You know so very well
my music is both
my joy and pain,
for the glory of life
and love.

Madrigalists

Non mi toglia il ben mio
chi non arde d'amor
come faccio io.

Se non è ingiusto Amore,
io sol avrò de la mia donna il core.
Dunque lasci il ben mio
chi non arde d'amor
come faccio io.

Gesualdo

For the glory of someone like you!

Shadow:

Glory and love.
Do you love her, Carlo?

SCENE 2. DECISION ON MARRIAGE

Gesualdo:

Maria;
Our families have decided
upon a marriage.

Maria:

Marriage is not desire or love.
It is twining alliances.
First a d'Avalos to a Carafa,
now d'Avalos and Gesualdo.
My third marriage: You.
Having so much feared
who might come next,
I am relieved.

Shadow:

Do you dare say you desire her? Silenzio...
Do sense her body:
Her scent, profumo,
her breath, respiro...

Maria: Carlo we do cheat them!
Allowing ourselves freedom.
We have both been imprisoned.
Oh! Let me free, Carlo!

Shadow:

Momento...

Gesualdo:

Maria, ...you confuse me...

Shadow:

...telling you she won't love you.
...awakening desire and pain.
Such an overwhelming passion,
but you ... Silenzio!
No words, no nothing.

Gesualdo:

Maria, what to say?

Maria:

Dear Carlo, I hope our life
will be happy,
so happy....

Shadow: *from 4th madrigal book: Invan dunque, o crudele*
" ...mia crude sorte
dà la voce al silenzio ed a la morte."

SCENE 3. THE WEDDING OF CARLO AND MARIA

The couple presented to the high society and nobility of Naples. Aunt Marchioness de Vico assisting Maria.

Shadow:

Love as fear,
painful desire,
swirling world
of duty and guilt.

Nobility/ Men:

Pomp and Power
Honour and Strength!
God save the Glory of Naples!

Choro:

In sacro matrimonio,
In sacro matrimonio.

Viceroy:

Most splendid families joined,
securing the noble line!

[MINGLING] *Interlude; Wine served, small-talk*

Viceroy:

A toast for this union!

Rich Widow:

Oh my dearest young Carlo!
What a lively... what a daring lady..!
And how clever a move,
to secure heirs of quality.

Old Man:

A lady not easy to guard, but
a most attractive little cat!

Jesuit flirting with the rich widow. Gesualdo overhearing:

Rich Widow:

This lady is too fearless...
Her spiritual training
apparently failed.

Jesuit: *A father's hand on her shoulder, with an intimate, flirtious touch:*

Rampant moral decline!
That's why our Society of Jesus
wants discipline revived!

Focus shifts:

Maria:

Come Carlo, may I introduce
Don Fabrizio Carafa, younger brother
of my first husband?

Viceroy: *Passing close by. In a low voice to Gesualdo:*

Carlo, experience coming with age;
You're naive.
Do take care!
Still lacking manners and style:
Look at young Carafa!

Shadow.

Sprezzatura! Stile, bellezza...
Eleganza!

Gesualdo :

My love is fear, is pain,
swirling desire.
Cold hand, cold eye!

Shadow:

Swirling, strangling desire!
Look again at young Carafa!

Gesualdo now in vicinity of Maria and Fabrizio, overhearing small pieces of their conversation:

Don Fabrizio:

I was young and hot
when I first met you.
Thunderstruck by desire.
Bleeding...

Maria

My crazy Fabrizio!
Master of sweet talk...
You know how to flatter me,
to ignite a hidden flame...

Gesualdo: *Catching Maria's eyes, forcing her to stop the conversation with Don Fabrizio.*

My dear
I'm disturbed.
I doubt you can ever
find peace with me.
I love to play the lute,
I love hunting in the early morning rain.
But who are you?

A swirling sweet butterfly!?

Shadow:
From flower to flower
So very free...

Maria:
Carlo, you must not be afraid.
You know I only want swirling
in dance or in your music.

Gesualdo:
I may be young and dumb -
Just share your beauty with me!

Maria:
I share my beauty with you...

The Viceroy taking the centre:

All: *Whispering*
The Viceroy!

Viceroy:
Maria d'Avalos,
Carlo Gesualdo,
nobels of Naples.
Your duty securing our destiny
in holy matrimony.
Hereby blessed
for the Glory of God and King!

[DANCING] *Applause and toast as dance music starts.*

Viceroy :
Now enter the dance!

Gesualdo:
Taking her by the hand, as first pair:
Donna Maria!

Maria:
My Don Carlo!

Gesualdo:
But how false and bumping
to crown a wedding!
This dumpy pace!

Maria:

Don Carlo;
 Entering the dance at our wedding,
 you don't catch my eye
 or kiss my hand,
 kiss my ring.
 No touch, no loving eye!

Gesualdo:

I'm sorry, my princess.

Maria:

With all respect!
Reverence, leaves/ turns,
Gesualdo following her moves:

Old Man:

Next in quadrille
 Oh Milady!
 The Lioness of Naples..
 you clever little cat!

Maria, disgusted by his flirt, hastily turns around, meeting the the eyes of Fabrizio.

Don Fabrizio:

Next in quadrille
Oh.....!.....So!
 Oh,..let us dance
 and let me finally...
 - let me kiss
 your sweet little finger.

Maria:

Just a gentle touch!

Don Fabrizio:

Oh, Maria,
 what an honour...

Maria:

Ahh.. stop...

Maria:

You are a daring man.
Reverence, leaves/ turns:

Dance getting more dramatic, Maria for a moment without partner

Shadow: *Takes Maria's hand and enters the dance:*
 Did you get off the right path,
 Donna Maria?

Gesualdo: *Intervening*

Come dear!
You know I'm not a great dancer.
Shouldn't we leave?

Maria:

My dear Carlo, you don't like this.
...Me, I like to dance.
But you hate this music.
Hate what I love!

Gesualdo: *Upset*

We shall leave now!

Maria:

Maybe YOU should leave.
Maybe...

SCENE 4. SHADOW INTRODUCED

Gesualdo:

Who are you my shadow?
Following my steps,
ripping up my heart,
dissolving my brain
to dust, to dirt!
I'm tired and distressed,
and you poison my soul.

Shadow:

I am your companion,
your Shadow, ...l'Ombra.

Gesualdo:

I don't like you!

Shadow:

Carlo, I do challenge you,
I mortify you , mortificare!

Gesualdo:

Oh, Shadow, let me be.

SCENE 5. CONFLICT MARIA - GESUALDO

Maria:

Sorry I am hurting you
But you are like a brother.
Not really a man.
I hope you don't mind?

Gesualdo:

Shut up! You are going too far.

Maria:

I was living dead.
I want my life!
And Carlo, we did agree on cheating them.
Enjoying beauty, wit and fun!

Gesualdo:

You mean your fun with other men?!

Maria:

I hate black!!
I want open skies and roses.
I hate all this penance and guilt.
And you do too, I know it!

Gesualdo:

Maria, I am no little brother.
I am a man,
made for love and desire!
Do understand! You are mine!!

Maria:

You care more for music
than for me.
So I suppose,
that you have to accept
my enjoying life, as I like.

Gesualdo:

You are seduced by snobbery!
Enjoying life
could be without degrading me!
"Wit and fun"
for you mean "other men".

Maria:

I'm sorry Carlo.
No more to say.
I rather die than
live as dead.

SCENE 6A. BURNING NIGHT IN NAPLES

*Hot night - stars, eroticism, liquor & commedia dell'arte.
 Women with fans. Wine and bowls with fruits. Passion and despair .
 Maria has disappeared among guests. Gesualdo is uneasy and nervous.*

*On the terrace outside artists & musicians are relaxing and wating. Shadow is among them as Pantalone.
 Gesualdo is passing, distressed and distracted.*

Musician: *With lute. Realizing his distress:*
 Don Carlo, are you all right?

Shadow/ Pantalone comes with a glass of wine.

Gesualdo:
 Looking for my wife.

Musician:
 Don Carlo! Don't tremble!
 See Naples, deep below us.
 Spaccanapoli.
 The bay, the moon,
 the stars.

Gesualdo:
 I can't find Maria...

Musician: *Puts his hand on Gesualdo's shoulder:*
 Don't tremble...!
 Life! Not that easy..

Gesualdo:
 I fear she betrays me.

Musician:
 Carlo, I have to return...

Gesualdo:
Turning away in desperation, crying.
 Maria! No!
Shouting slowly, word by word:
 If you betray me I'll kill you!

Intermingled with laughing guests he hears Maria like a hallucination - disappearing again.

Maria: I want open skies and roses.....

SCENE 6B. VOLCANO ARIA

Under the pressure of the situation Gesualdo is for the first time struck by madness. Shadow/ Pantalone holds him, assisted by Arlecchino. They take a wet cloth to cool his face, like nurses caring for a lunatic:

Shadow /Pantalone

Don Carlo –
 She is not here. Not here.
 Look down at Naples.
 Spaccanapoli.
 The Bay, the Moon, the Volcano.
 Desire. Despair.
 Pain and Fury.

The rising vapours
 of Vesuvius.

Smoke and ash rising
 from glowing, floating core;
 pushing tongues of fire.
 Oh, how beautiful at a distance!

Before your eyes;
 Birth of disaster.
 Burning heart
 of the Volcano before eruption.

SCENE 6C. COMMEDIA

*The other guests are coming out at the terrace to look at the commedia artists.
 Shadow/ Pantalone, with mask and full character details, acts the cheated and desperate old man.
 Arlecchino sneaks in between guests with a lantern, for fun and joke lighting up faces and intimate meetings.*

Arlecchino:

Excuse me!

Arlecchino:

Can I pass you?
 Sorry Signore!

Arlecchino: *Maria and Fabrizio, taken by surprise, lightened up by Arlecchino's lamp.*

.....Oh.... look!

To the couple:

You MUST excuse me!

Arlecchino:

Signor Pantalone!
 Listen!.. *(Whispers in his ear)*

*Commedia dell'arte scene as party entertainment:
Pantalone has been cheated by his young wife:*

Arlecchino:

"We must think."

Pantalone:

"Yes, we must think.
There is no hope, you say?"

Arlecchino:

"There's no hope.
They meet each moment you're away."

Pantalone:

"I must see!
I must see for myself."

Arlecchino:

"That is not hard to do."
Shows his lantern

Pantalone:

"Once I've seen...I'll act.
Take me...
I follow you!"

SCENE 7. BREAKDOWN.

Madrigalists:

Questa crudele

Gesualdo:

Yes, she is cruel.

Madrigalists:

Questa crudele..

Shadow /Pantalone *still masked*:

Yes, brutal!

Madrigalists:

..e pia..

Gesualdo:

No, not pious.

Madrigalists:

..le e pia..

Shadow /Pantalone:

No - a lady
of sin and brutality!
Not pious...just cruel.
Besoiling the honour
of your name.

Madrigalists:

Questa crudele pia...

Shadow:

Taking his Pantalone mask off.
Does she weep when you weep?
Does she suffer when you suffer?

Madrigalists:

..piange al mio piante
e duolse al mio dolore...

Shadow/ *Transforming to cardinal Carlo Borromeo*
Return to God for love and mercy!

Madrigalists:

E duolse al mi dolore...

Gesualdo:

You are uncle Carlo!
Carlo Borromeo...

Shadow/ Carlo Borromeo:

You need the mercy of MY God!
Can you hear them?
The nobles of Napoli.
Illustrious families requiring
Glory, Duty, Honour!
And honour requires your killing her!

But there will be
no honour for yourself.
You know it, don't you?

Naples will cry for lost love,
poets write songs of passion and death.
Yes, all Naples will mourn
the vicious beauty of forbidden love.
And you shall hide and cry.

Gesualdo:

Cursed if I kill them
and cursed if I do not.

Shadow/ Carlo Borromeo:

The world is falseness;
turn to God for his mercy!
Taste the power of the Spirit!

Gesualdo:

You holy fool,
you fool!
You are just as obsessed
by money and honour as they are!
Just as false, just as faithless!

Uncle,...uncle..you are..
...Forgive me!
I will return to your God.
I will return to my spiritual training,
I'll do penance, fasting, prayers...

Bless me, Uncle!
Don't leave me. I love her.
I don't know what to do.

Bless me. Don't leave me.
I love her!

Shadow / Carlo Borromeo *Lifting his crucifix as sign:*

Your sin! Your guilt!
Your tormented soul!

Shadow/ Carlo Borromeo ends standing behind Gesualdo, blessing him as on the famous painting.

Madrigalists:

Beltà poi che t'assenti.
Come ne porti il cor,
porta i tormenti.
Chè tormentato cor,
può ben sentire,
La doglia del morire
E un'alma senza core,
Non può sentir dolore.

Gesualdo:

As sunk into or enfolded in the music, repeating the lines of the madrigal:

Beauty, since you depart,
as you take my heart
also take my torments.
For a tormented heart
can feel the pain of death,
but a heartless soul
can feel no pain.

Shadow/ *as transforming from Carlo Borromeo to plain Shadow*

Is this your Uncle, Carlo,
still haunting you?

Will you kill
for the honour and
the Glory of God,
will you?

Carlo ? Will you?!

Madrigalists

...Dolore

SCENE 8. CHURCH; PRAYER

Gesualdo:

God, have mercy on me.
I don't know what is right or wrong.
Your highness, my uncle Borromeo;
May you lead and guard me.
AMEN

SCENE 9 A. BEFORE MURDER.

*Late night in the ante-chamber of Maria's bedroom. Flaring dim light.
Gesualdo secretly listening to Fabrizio and Donna Maria.
His servant Bardotti besides him with a torch. Shadow with a knife and an arquebus.*

Laura: *(Maid for Donna Maria and close to Bardotti). Entering, bringing a dress for Donna Maria.
Surprised to meet her master with servants in the women quarters.*

Oh, I am sorry your Highness,
we were told your Highness
was hunting tonight.

Gesualdo: *With blank eyes to Laura:*

You will see the kind of hunt
I am going to do...

I am going to slay
Don Fabrizio Carafa
and that whore, Donna Maria!

Gesualdo gets more and more out of control:
I see you prepared
a dress for her Highness...

Why not enter her room?
Your harlot Highness
really needs a decent dress!

Why not enter her room,
to sense the foul smell of Sin!

Whispering heavily into Lauras ear:
You'll see two noble rats,
who are cheating me!

*Laura, frightened, withdraws slowly backwards,
but Gesualdo, mentally sliding out of control, grabs her arm:*

Gesualdo:
Don't dare leave this room!

*Bardetto frees Laura and keep hold of his highly disturbed master, helped by Shadow.
Laura hides herself (in true story under bed)*

Shadow:
Whispering to Gesualdo:
You're going mad!

Gesualdo:
No! The Duke is there!
Listen...

Gesualdo gets lost in listening /peeping into what's happening in Marias bedroom.

We now see the meeting of Fabrizio and Maria. Very dim light and beautiful.

Maria:
So many sorrows,
so much duty.
To be with you is life
is happiness.

Don Fabrizio:
Don't fool yourself!
This is getting out of hand.
People see.
People know.
I have five small children.
He might kill us!

Maria:

But I love you so.
 Stay with me!
 I bear children,
 I provide heirs
 I do my duty.
 Children die,
 husbands abuse, cheat, lie - and die.
 Too much sorrow, too much black.
 I will face all dangers
 to get these moments of love and desire.

Gesualdo's hired men arrive, disguised and with weapons. Shadow gives the excited Gesualdo his knife and arquebus. Gesualdo does, trembling, follow the hired men, accompanied and lightened by Shadow with torch.

SCENE 9 B. MURDER

Parallel scenes. We are basically still in the ante-chamber with Laura and Bardetto, who are hiding in darkness dotted by strays of blue light. Marias inner room can be heard, and in between also visible as a simultaneous, secondary location.

Maria: *From inner room*
 No, No!

Bardotti: *To Laura in her hiding:*
 Laura, take my hand!

Gesualdo: *from inner room*
 You shall die! Die - die!

Bardotti:
 My God, he is mad!

Laura:
 They are slaying Donna Maria and the Duke!

Maria: *from inner room*
 But Carlo??!!
 What have you done...?

Musical interlude: Shadow dresses Gesualdo in travellers clothes to turn him incognito. Like a paralyzed statue he is also shaded by Shadow. Gesualdo thus from the sideline follows the epilogue of his crime:

Bardotti:
 Laura, do not fear any more.
 Don Carlo has departed!

During interlude daylight comes, exposing the violence of the murdering and the corpses. Bardetto and Laura inspect with fear the dead bodies, also finding key, Fabrizio Carafa's clothes, while comforting and backing each other.

Scene 10. INVESTIGATION and corpses removed.

Arriving Grand Court of the Vicaria. While he makes his announcement, his staff begin examination of the scene of crime, taking notes of all details.

Parallel and following:

Two Jesuits come to dress and remove Don Fabrizio's body. Maria's body is dressed and removed by her Aunt, Marchioness de Vico, the same person that assisted her as a child and for her wedding.

Master of the Grand Court:

In the name of the Viceroy
and the Grand Court of the Vicaria
we hereby declares this house closed
and locked for investigation,
concerning the death of
the illustrious gentleman
Don Fabrizio Carafa
and of Donna Maria d'Avalos.

Marchiness de Vico *with veil*

Such a splendid couple!
Icons of the most superb grace,
beauty and manners of Naples!

Assistant investigator :

He had servants killing a Carafa.
What a lack of style!
Of nobility!

Marchioness de Vico:

Ah, Maria,
my dearest, my dear...

When finished to dress the corpse:
You did not deserve this!

Who could foresee,
that Carlo should go mad?

Scene 11. EPILOUGE

Shadow:

She was your cousin, your playmate, your love.

Gesualdo:

I didn't want to kill her.

Shadow:

She was life, she was love.

Gesualdo:

I had to kill her.

Shadow:

She was blue sky and turquoise sea,
 she was rippling water, roses - your wife.
 She wanted freedom and joy.

Gesualdo:

Lost, gone!

Shadow + Madrigalists

Nel Mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

Gesualdo:

Myself lost...

Shadow + Madrigalists

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
Ché la diritta via er smarrita

Gesualdo:

Caught in the darkest forest
 Where the right path
 is lost and gone and dead.

Shadow: *Taking some commedia steps, reciting:*

Carlo, now just wait and hide!

In your second act you'll play

a new dazzling part on the stage of life!

Gesualdo: *mirroring opening prologue:*

I am Carlo Gesualdo. I just killed my wife.

I killed our little cousin and playmate, Maria d'Avalos.

Madrigalists: (*ché le da morte*)

Play of life.

Play of death.

END of ACT 1

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ACT 2

OUVERTURE. ARRIVING IN FERRARA 1594

Gesualdo in traveller's outfit arriving in Ferrara, followed by Shadow, who is also entering the character of the composer, printer and musical assistant Stella - with glasses and an accountants appearance.

Fontanelli - ambassador, composer, guide and spy, is letting Gesualdo and Shadow/Stella into a separate chamber. They are about to enter a new illustrious life.

Shadow: *again with commedia gestures:*
 Your second act of life:
 A new wife, a new life.
 Enter stage!
 From inferno to paradise!
 Ferrara!

Gesualdo:

Where is the trunk with my own music?
 With all my manuscripts?

Shadow: *Puts his glasses on > Stella*
 In a secure place,
 your Highness!
Showing and dangling the key.

Fontanelli comes back to escort them into the hall of festivities and Duke Alfonso of Ferrara.

SCENE 1. WELCOME TO FERRARA

Pompous prelud. Fontanelli takes Gesualdo around to nod and be superficially introduced, but he is more caught by the music, eyes and attention turning to the orchestra.

Alfonso

Be welcome
 my Don Carlo Gesualdo,
 famed prince of Venosa,
 welcome to Ferrara!

Your escort is.... spectacular.
 My pleasure to feed and house them...!

Again serious:

I'm expecting this union
to bear out historically
for Ferrara.

I know you are somewhat mad,
your crazy deeds
retold so gracefully
by our dear Tasso.
This little poet with his melancholy whims!

He just got the idea that I will kill him!
If I had wanted to kill him, or you,
(*points at Gesualdo with lifted eyebrows*)
I would have pursued years ago.

Yes, a touch of Melancholia
gives the defining flavour
to a court of true artistry.
Like mine.

Yes! You add flavour!
Prince and Melancholic.
Fit to value
musical emincence
and my brilliant staff.

Which is, I dare say, unrivaled!

Gesualdo caught in fascination by the soprano coloraturas

Shadow: *in Gesualdo's ear:*

The Ladies of Ferrara,
...a wonder...wonder...
And soon you'll meet
the great Vecchi,
maestro Gabrieli
...de Wert, Monteverdi.
And here: Luzzaschi!

Gesualdo

Luzzaschi, the only one
I do fear and admire...
Luzzaschi...

Fontanelli: *Listening*

Oh..., so...

[INTRODUCED TO LEONORA]

*Leonora enters. Gesualdo is lost in music and doesn't notice.
Alfonso, quite irritated, calls him to order.*

Alfonso:

Don Carlo!
Attention! Awake!

Alfonso:

My sweet cousin,
your bride,
her Highness
Léonora d'Este.

Gesualdo

I'm honoured, Mylady.
Takes her hand.

Léonora:

I'll be honest.
I know who you are.
I'm not afraid, your Highness.
I trust in God. Just God.

Alfonso:

A union of purpose and reason!
To Gesualdo:
I expect - decency.

Now enjoy!
Marriage,
a grand excuse to display
the glory of Ferrara!

[MUSICAL FASCINATION]

*Gesualdo again sliding into his own universe, lost in pleasure and fascination.
To Shadow/Stella:*

Gesualdo :

Oh, this music!

Shadow

...and soon you'll show them yours!

Gesualdo:

I do surpass them in complexity!

Shadow:

Conquer them..!

Gesualdo:

With sudden admiration:
...hear Luzzaschi,
the archicembalo...

Fontanelli: *To the absent-minded Gesualdo:*
Is this to your satisfaction?

Gesualdo
What? Yes ...

(Coloratura)
Hear! Behold!

Shadow:
...She tunes her voice
with a certain mystery...

Gesualdo:
...pushes my heart!

Fontanelli:
Now the famous Nuns
of San Vito!

Gesualdo
This is too harmonious...

Shadow:
Too stiff...

Gesualdo:
No passion!

During the Ave Maria passage he looks at Leonora; hands clasped and deeply moved.

Gesualdo:
You do like this music?

Leonora:
Yes, I feel the Lord's presence.

Gesualdo:
You wanted to be a nun?

Leonora:
Yes.
But I take on my duty
to love you.

Pastoral music. Leonora retires, giving a sign to Gesualdo not to follow her.

SCENE 2. THE MISSION

Evening of the first day in Ferrara. Gesualdo is still lingering with his glass in company with Shadow, who is stretched out beside him.

Duke Alfonso enters to join Gesualdo. He is uncontrolled and somewhat drunk.

Alfonso:

Talks without listening:

Whoops, ...oh my dear!

Don Carlo!

I note you are not

in your nuptial bed.

He fills his own very big glass.

Shadow: *With eyes closed, feigning sleeping*

He's drunk.

Take care...might be dangerous.

Alfonso:

Your two Uncle Cardinals;

so strikingly different!

The great Borromeo,

to be respected.

But your other Uncle:

Alfonso Gesualdo!

An absolute fool!

Working hard to return

my duchy to the pope!

Shadow: *In a low voice to Gesualdo*

Just let him talk,

he is as crazed as you are...

Alfonso:

I find destroying Ferrara worse

than erasing a single person.

Or two.

What do you think?

Not to be personal!

Such small scale killing

can even produce fame,

songs and poems!

Do you think Tasso

will ever write poems

featuring cardinal Gesualdo

killing the duchy of Ferrara.

Do you?

Refills his glass.

Gesualdo:

Your Highness...I am....

Alfonso:

To make things clear:
You are accepted
into the illustrious d'Este family
only to fulfil a mission:
To influence your uncle cardinal.
In my favour.

Gives Gesualdo a friendly slap, more like hitting him.

But first sweet Leonora.
Seduce her...!

Interlude – Time passing.

SCENE 3. CRITICISM.

*An everyday morning at the court of Ferrara.
Musicians are about to start rehearsing.*

Alfonso:

Fontanelli!

Your duty to keep an eye on Don Carlo.
How can you stand
all his talking?

Fontanelli:

I can't. Manic flow.
Though, there is a subject
he never refers to.

Alfonso:

And that is?

Fontanelli:

The subject on which
all Naples sings and cries.

Alfonso:

Circumstances were
...spectacular!
But indeed not the first harlot wife killed.

Luzzaschi: *From his chair in the orchestra:*

The worst - his musical liberties!
Too much! Too dense!

Alfonso: *To Fontanelli:*
 You agree, Fontanelli?

Fontanelli:
 I do.
 Passion must only be
 a passing strangeness,
 dissolved in harmony.
 Not a big muddle!
 Not an intoxicated delirium!

Yes, affects are touches
 to be inserted
 with a subdued elegance.
 Don Carlo towers passion up,
 like fever!

Alfonso:
 And on top his erratic
 social behaviour.
As he withdraws, he spots Gesualdo coming.

To Luzzaschi and the orchestra, with irony:
 Enjoy yourself!

Luzzaschi: *From orchestra to Gesualdo:*
 Your Highness,
 we are honoured
 that you will attend our work.

Gesualdo:
 I'm glad to give advice.

Luzzaschi and Fontanelli look at each other. Music restarts.

Gesualdo:
 Meaestro, a moment!

The disturbance disrupts music. Luzzaschi ignores Gesualdo, takes a deep breath and restarts:

Gesualdo: *With growing excitement.*
 Balance!
 ...Speed up! Tempo...
 ...Stop!

Luzzaschi: *Cuts music - getting up from his chair:*
 I suggest you take my place!

Gesualdo: Oh no! You are brilliant!

Orchestra restarts.

Gesualdo: *With hand to ear*
 But admit the violin was flat...

Luzzaschi: *Hammers fist on table or hammers a chord on the keys.*
Enough!

Fontanelli: *Takes action, hand on Gesualdo's shoulder to calm him down:*
Please, make sure not to distract Maestro Luzzaschi!

Gesualdo:
...just some advice.!

Luzzaschi:
Thank you your Highness,
but we do better without.

Gesualdo: *Whispering, with a sudden strain of true insanity in his eyes:*
Luzzaschi, I'll conquer you...!

SCENE 4. CONFLICT WITH LEONORA & MADRIGAL / DEPRESSION

Shadow:
Calm down and listen!
No more words.
Do study
Luzzaschi
and his archicembalo.

Gesualdo
The octave split in thirty-two,
four keyboards on one instrument.
A miracle!

Léonora:
Excuse me, my Don Carlo.

Gesualdo:
Léonora!
I'm surprised!

Léonora: *with the air of piousness and obedience:*
I want to join you
to listen to the music.

Gesualdo: *Disturbed*
I'm sorry.
For once you show up by my side.
But you make me
more confused than pleased.

*Suddenly Gesualdo is overwhelmed by alienation, seeing this cold, pious spouse.
Her entrance awakes all agony and loss - himself having killed the wife he really loved.
Gesualdo leaves in despair to be alone.*

Madrigalists:

Caligaverunt

Oculi mei a fletu meo:

Quia elongatus est a me,

Qui consolabatur me,

Gesualdo:

I had Maria,
but I killed her.

Shadow:

...now far away
in the realm of death...

Gesualdo:

My eyes dimmed,
my heart darkened
from crying.

Shadow:

Dolore...
Tormento!

Gesualdo:

Black bile vapours
rising to infuse
my brain
and to poison
my spirits.

Shadow:

Rising vapours
of the volcano
before eruption.

Gesualdo:

Music, console
my tormented soul!

SCENE 5. COMPOSING

*Madrigalists are now madrigalists of Ferrara, professional and self-conscious.
Gesualdo is working at compiling his madrigal collections - in rivalry and competition.
He is assisted by Stella / Shadow, wearing glasses and with pencils and similar equipment.
Scores and partbooks heaped up and moved about. Shadow/ Stella distributing parts etc..*

Gesualdo: *With determination dropping a bunch of music on a table:*

A bulwark of music!
Ferrara is a viper's nest.
This is my fortress,
Slaps hand on music
to defend myself against Luzzaschi!
A fortress from where to attack...!

He gives sign to the madrigalists to perform some of the newly written music:

Madrigalists:

Già piansi nel dolore;

Shadow/ Stella: *close behind him*
Affects towering up...

Perchè dice il ben mio:

“Ardo el per anchor io”.

Gesualdo:
Yes..!!

Fuggan dunque le noie, e'l tristo pianto

Shadow/ Stella: *Taking his glasses off,*
turning to “plain Shadow”:
Music as intoxicated delirium...

Omai si cangi in dolce

Gesualdo:
Yes!..Ardour, fever..
To singers:
Listen!
Taste this harmony,
the sweet dissonance.
Feel the deep passion,
the pain.

Shadow:
Tormento...
Dolore...

Gesualdo:
Just take care.
Tenor! In tune!

Shadow:
With heavy, whispering excitement:
Ferrara!
Glorious singers
fusing the parts
to heavenly pain.

Gesualdo:
Tears transformed into beauty.

Oh, Ferrara!
My rescue, my rapture,
my nest of musical desire...

SCENE 6. FONTANELLI REPORTING TO DUKE ALFONSO

Fontanelli:

Your Highness -

Alfonso:

Come here!
I need final reports
on Don Carlo, to expel him.

His weirdness the talk of the court.
Entertaining but unacceptable.
Ruining reputation.

Fontanelli:

In fact worse, your Highness.
Escalating troubles.
Advancing loss of sense,
loss of reason and manners.

Alfonso:

Got it: By now simply mad.
And more?!

Fontanelli:

Whims!
Excitement!
Far beyond suitable.

Triggering conflict and rivalry.
For Maestro Luzzaschi:
Plain terror!

And worst;
abusing sweet Leonora.

Alfonso:

That asshole!

But still...
a strangely talented man...

My Fontanelli.
Well done.

Fontanelli:

My honour.

Alfonso:

So, will you please let him in?

SCENE 7. EXPELLED FROM FERRARA

Alfonso:

My dear Carlo!
You have a strange talent.

Excellent at spending my money.
Insulting my brilliant staff.
Cheating and beating
our sweet Léonora.

Gesualdo tries in vain to respond.

Yes, I do appreciate
some craziness and
slight melancholia.

Though not including
hubris, bad manners and plain madness.

Furthermore I have to conclude,
that your key mission was...fiasco.

You made use of and exploited
my court and my glorious music,
but did nothing to save Ferrara.

Your agenda: Only yourself!

Your visit has come to an end.
You are intolerable!
Go home, get sane!

Leave this court.
Go calm yourself down
where you belong!

I do still
treasure your music.
Highly personal.
Indeed mad!
But you must leave now.

You are intolerable.
Yes, you must leave now.

Gesualdo, crushed and shocked, withdrawing.

Alfonso:

One more thing:
Leonora stays with us.
You seem to prefer ladies with bruises.
We do not.
Farewell.

Alfonso leaves a thunderstruck Carlo Gesualdo.

SCENE 8. EPILOGUE FERRARA

Shadow:
Paradise lost.
Your nest of musical desire
is lost and gone.

Begins to dress Gesualdo - in hat and cape - for one more departure.

Gesualdo: *Shocked and degraded:*

He'll soon die!
And Ferrara dies with him.
He is falling, failing...like me.

Ferrara, lost and gone.
Now my turn.
Now rising: MY glorious
court of Gesualdo!

Shadow:
Spoken: What?!

Gesualdo: *Distressed and not very convincing:*

I'll turn my ancient Norman castle
into a magnificent palace...
with the most brilliant music...
Life and joy...

Shadow: *Very serious, with commedia mask and gesture:*

Dreams touching heaven
for the third act of life.

*Gesualdo meets the eyes of Shadow.
Leaving Ferrara - again on the move in a travellers outfit.*

Interlude: Setting the stage for ACT III at Gesualdo, his tiny home town in southern Italy.

END ACT 2

Eva Sommestad Holten 2013©

GESUALDO · SHADOWS

Libretto set to music by Bo Holten 2014

ACT 3

SCENE 1. GESUALDO: DESPAIR, DECLINE, DECAY

Sunshine outside – but Carlo Gesualdo is hiding with shutters closed. He is dressed for hunting, unkempt and depressed. An amulet around his neck. His singers, hanging around a table, have been commandeered to sing for him at all times, and they look as though they have been singing all night.

*There are visible signs of sorcery: Human nails and hair in boxes, small statues with iron nails inserted etc. Several portraits of Saint Carlo Borromeo are scattered around.
All singers are afraid, wary of every movement.*

Madrigalists:

O vos omnes,
qui transitis per viam,
attendite et videte:
Si est dolor, sicut dolor meus.

Shadow:

*Alone at the stage front arranging musical prints.
With friendly irony:
Our glorious court of Gesualdo...*

Gesualdo:

So what?!
I am damned!

Pointing to his arms, legs and head, as though he was covered by a swarm of insects:
See those demons.
They are eating my flesh!
Like swarming rats,
poisoning my soul...

To Shadow:
Take the blessed whip!
Pain defeating pain.

Shadow whips him twice, while Gesualdo kisses the amulet hung around his neck.
Ah...Oh..!
...Blessed pain...

Gesualdo now lifts his dead hare, closing his eyes and circling the amulet around the limp, dead creature:

“Sangue a sangue, membro a membro;
Fuori, piccolo giavellotto,
se sei ancora dentro”
*(Blood to blood, limb by limb.
Out, little spear, if you're still in.)*

Shadow:
Leaving God for Magic?

Gesualdo: *Throwing the amulet away*
Oh no...! No!!...
God's mercy. Sorcery. Music.
Anything.

Shadow: *transforming into Carlo Borromeo:*
So? Magic is Sin!

Gesualdo: *Mentally sliding:*
Uncle, I tremble,
mirroring your wretched holiness.
You decided this, didn't you?
Dead children and madness.
Decay. Decline.

But now you are sanctified,
and you shall rescue me!
As a Saint you cannot refuse.
Your duty! Ha!

Getting excited and desperate:
Save me from hell!
And let me survive these afflictions,
to defend and collect my music.
But they all steal - copy and change!

My triumphs of Ferrara!
Let me live to defend my work!

Attacking Shadow/ Borromeo:
Your duty as a Saint is to help me...
As penance for all your crimes
against me and music!

Shadow/ Borromeo:
No! You are the Sinner.
Turn to God for his mercy!

*Feeling the hand and shadow of the Saint, Gesualdo halts his attack.
Seized by terror he turns to defend himself in desperation:*

Gesualdo:
But I did compose
for the glory of your God;
Sacrae Cantiones!
I followed your rules!
I built you a chapel.
A chapel with your portrait...

SCENE 2A. FONTANELLI BACK WITH LÉONORA

In his own quiet way Fontanelli, still in the service of the d'Este family, has unseen entered the room.

Fontanelli: *Greeting the all too apparently mentally disturbed master of the house:*
Your Highness...

Shadow: *Transforms into Stella as he puts on his glasses. Answers on behalf of his master:*
My dear Fontanelli,
an honour to see you here in Gesualdo!

Gesualdo: *To Fontanelli*
You spy! You traitor!
Are you here to poison me?

Fontanelli:
As you know his Highness, Duke Alfonso, is dead.

Gesualdo: *Suddenly moved and disturbed, almost in tears. Grabs Fontanelli:*
A failure. Like me!
Ancient line and duchy lost.
Like me punished
for his love of life,
of artistry and music.

Fontanelli: *Frees himself*
Your Highness,
I have brought your wife,
her Highness Léonora d'Este,
back to you.

Gesualdo: At last.

Fontanelli: Your Highness -
I'm sure you'll show her the respect of...

Gesualdo: *Interrupts him*
Did I not?!

Fontanelli: *As he turns to fetch Léonora:*
No.

Léonora enters. Fontanelli catches Stella's eye, seeking his understanding, and keeps close to Léonora:

SCENE 2B. LÉONORA PRESENTS THE BORROMEO SHOE

Gesualdo:
Léonora!

Léonora:
Your Highness,
my duty is to unfold
my love and loyalty,
despite the dangers.

Gesualdo:
Shut up!

Léonora: *Clinging to Fontanelli*
All illness,
your madness,
the death of our child,
I'm sure is caused by witchcraft.

Gesualdo:
Oh, you join forces
with Saint Borromeo!
Attacking!

Léonora: *With absolute focus and determination*
My duty is to love you,
defying blasphemy
magic and danger.

Léonora:
Touching one of the Carlo Borromeo portraits.
I notice your devotion for Carlo Borromeo.

Gesualdo:
Don't meddle.
As a true wife
you should support me.
Not pry, not preach!
Why did you come now?

Léonora:
I have a gift for you.

Fontanelli opens the little relic chest to reveal a worn-down pontifical shoe.

Léonora:
This is a relic
from your holy Uncle.
You do not need magic
to protect you
from this horde
of demons and evil spirits.
Your cousin Federico
has kindly sent
this pontifical shoe.

Gesualdo takes the shoe, with a twinkle of mad revelation in his eyes:

Gesualdo:
A beautiful relic, this shoe...

He starts talking to the shoe, as if to Carlo Borromeo himself:
My Uncle!! Is this you? The SAINT?!
Is this me? The OFFENDER?!
Look - your *little* Carlo
has turned old and ugly, as yourself...

Turning to Léonora:

Imagine, I prefer witchcraft to your God.
I will place this shoe,
charged with magic,
as an amulet among the others...

*Dangling the Borromeo shoe in her face,
speaking with a spine-chillingly gentle voice:*

Léonora, you are *his* servant!
As a spy, a snake, you entered my body, my mind!
Sent by the Saint,
to control - to poison me
with your perfection...

Léonora can take no more.

Fontanelli:

Your Highness, Carlo Gesualdo,
I have to inform you
that Her Highness and her brother
will take legal action
against witches and sorcery
present in this house.

*Gesualdo is overwhelmed by rage when hearing about their intentions.
Shadow now grips him, holding him from behind and preventing him from turning to violence.*

SCENE 2C. QUARTET

Gesualdo:

First to Fontanelli:
What? I rule this house!
You crab!
I know your lies, your clever tales.
Now posing as escort to my wife!

Pointing at and addressing Léonora:
You too a spy, a snake!
You entered my body, my mind,
sent by the Saint,
to control and poison me
with your perfection...

Shadow:

You want life, wit and beauty,
anything to conquer pain;
Music, magic, relics,
fighting evil demons
who eat your flesh,
infect your brain
and poison your soul.
A failed prince,
a failed life.

All alone in your despair.
You do not want her help,
you do not want her pity.

Léonora:

With the help of God
I take on my duty,
facing the danger.

I take on my duty
to fight the evil;
with the help of God
to love and save him.

Fontanelli:

Her Highness and her brother
will take legal action
against witches and sorcery
present in this house.

You are in danger here.
No duty to love a madman,
Léonora d'Este!

Fontanelli:

We will leave now.

Gesualdo:

Fine, get out of here.
 Léonora,
 don't try to save me.

Léonora:

Your Highness,
 God bless you.

Léonora finally breaks down, pulling herself together for this formal good-bye.

SCENE 3A. SECURING THE LEGACY

Interlude: Morning light on piles of papers, prints and scores – his legacy.

Gesualdo and his assistant are working - moving objects, collecting and sorting, Harmony, but also a strange empty feeling of conclusion.

Gesualdo is in a sound mind – an uncommon state of concentration and clarity.

Gesualdo:

Only music left.
 I have to secure my legacy.
 Edit! Print!
 They steal my music! Change it!

Shadow > *Stella: glasses on*

You did yourself imitate Luzzaschi.

Gesualdo:

I'll secure him too for eternity!
A genius at the archicembalo.

Look close:

My madrigals from Ferrara!
My triumph of complexity
outshining all the others...

Shadow / Stella:

They say God wants simplicity.
Clarity!
You provide chaos.

Citing the ideas of the Counter-Reformation:

“...everything to be executed clearly,
and at the right speed
...constituted not to give
empty pleasure to the ears”

Gesualdo:

The words
of my uncle Carlo.

But I do collect
all my sinful legacy,
all my music
of forbidden complexity.
Music from a diverted soul.
My dissonance from hell.

Shadow / Stella:

We do.
We do collect your legacy.
Edit it. Secure it.

SCENE 3B. INTERLUDE AND MADRIGAL

Continues to work with Stella, the loyal assistant. Looking through bunches of music, moving checking and sorting. Finding a madrigal and giving the parts to the ever-present madrigalists. Gesualdo lets them perform it as, at first, an example of complexity - as part of working with editing. But the music is slowly affecting deep levels of Gesualdo, sliding him into final despair. Life turns to an end.

.Madrigalists: *From “Ardo per te, mio bene” (?)*
...dolcissimo il languire

SCENE 4. A LIFE OF STRIFE AND PASSION.

Aria / dialogue: A reflective and more 'modern' down-to-earth chat.

Gesualdo:

Black bile rising.
Again and again
drowning my brain,
darkening my soul
and the world around me.
Only pain and music left
to ease my torments.

Are you my shadow?
You have seized my mind.
No more light.

Shadow: *In half darkness:*

I am your shadow.
Always there.

Gesualdo:

Life. My life.
What a strange odyssey
of duty, passion,
pride and pain!
A transit to this final hell.

Shadow:

But you were Prince!

Gesualdo:

The lousy relative
of an illustrious Saint.

Shadow:

Did you secure your ancient line?
Did you save the glory of Ferrara?

Gesualdo:

No. I didn't.
But I struggled
to do what they said.
I killed Maria.
Married a lump of ice.
Honour till death and destruction!

“Our life a divine comedy
with me the clumsy puppet,
controlled by unknown hands.”

Shadow:

No. Not unknown.
Strings of musical desire ruled your life.
What they call “sinful pleasure”
seized you.

Gesualdo:

Yes.
Comforted me!
Aroused passion!

Maria: (Her voice)

As a shadow, a vision from a life gone by. Maria's voice and spirit pass by, recalling a passion more devastating than any other.

SCENE 5. A FAILED LIFE

Gesualdo:

I killed my love!
Honour, not music,
commanded my life
till death and destruction.
My ancient line erased.
My castle rebuilt, only
to boast my failure.
My children killed by God
and his powerful servants.

All lost.
Maria dead.
Children dead.
Yearning, joy,
passion, hunger,
all gone.

Nothing left but a shadow.
And music.

Madrigalists:

Beltà poi che t'assenti,

come ne porti il cor;

porta il tormenti.

Chè tormentato cor.

può ben sentire

la doglia del morire,

e un alma senza core,

non può sentir dolore.

Gesualdo:

Shadow, help me!
Ease my pain!
(mortification – whipping, cutting etc.)

Ferrara! – Lost!
My joy, my nest
of musical desire.
Maria! A clear flame,
extinguished in her beauty.
Me! A surviving filthy flare.

Shadow:

Evil spirits
seizing your soul,
strangling you.
Oh, these crazy beasts!

Gesualdo:

“If your bed is cold,
get colder yourself”

Shadow:

...as your uncle told you.

Gesualdo:

But I can turn no colder
than the terror inside me.
No pain can defeat this pain.
Being colder would mean
freezing to death.

Shadow:

Soothing pain with pain.
Life with death.

But Carlo, you also
faced torment with beauty.

Gesualdo:

Yes ...I did.
With the razor-sharp beauty
of sinful dissonance.

Shadow:

“...dissonance;
its tension demands
an onward motion to a stable chord”.

Gesualdo:

Yes ...
Sharp discord resolved
in harmony,
My painful discord
resolved...

Gesualdo is dead.

Madrigalists:

Chè le da morte...

Shadow:

Now gone.
Just your shadow left.

His ever-present madrigalists seize the moment and venture forward, encircling their master.

SCENE 6. EPILOGUE .

Shadow:

His name was Carlo Gesualdo,
Prince of Venosa.

The characters who shaped his life subtly reappear:

Maria: *As the 12-year-old girl in the prologue*

Little Carlo!
Named after his uncle,
the great Carlo Borromeo.

Alfonso:

Musician and Murderer.
Mad!

Fontanelli:

But his music though a final enigma
of passion, pain and beauty.

Madrigalists:

Chè le da morte...

Shadow:

Carlo!
I am your Shadow
your image,
your imprint.
Still here.

FINE

Giovanni Battista Doni in 1635:

*“When choosing music for theatre - for action of a MELANCHOLY nature,
one plays a madrigal by GESUALDO, Principe di Venosa, on the viols.”*