

Don **Carlo Gesualdo**, Prince of Venosa, Count of Conza (1566–1613)

Ahi, disperata vita — first published in *Madrigali libro terzo*, 1595

Among history's great composers, Carlo Gesualdo is the only known murderer. On 16 October 1590 the nobleman Gesualdo (heir to the independent Principality of Venosa) caught his noble wife (daughter of the Marquis of Pescara) and her noble lover (the Duke of Andria) *in flagrante delicto*, brutally murdered them in their bed, and proceeded to display their mutilated bodies at his doorstep. The ensuing scandal was extraordinary, but Gesualdo quietly retired to his private estate in the town of Gesualdo, about fifty-five miles west of Naples. Four years later, he visited Ferrara, one of Italy's most musical cities, where his first book of madrigals was published and he married the duke's niece. (His second wife traveled frequently; one wonders what their dinner-table conversations were like.) As the years progressed, Gesualdo rarely left his castle. The estate was very wealthy, allowing him the luxury of hiring a company of soldiers (to ward against retribution from his victims' families), a fine group of court musicians, and even a palace printer. Gesualdo's passion for music developed from melancholic obsession to monomaniacal depression.

If the statement that began the previous paragraph is true, so is its inverse: among history's known murderers, Gesualdo was undoubtedly the greatest composer. His 1594 visit to Ferrara brought him in contact with Luzzasco Luzzaschi and other leading madrigalists. As Gesualdo aged and grew increasingly insane—to the point of appointing a servant to flog him daily—his music became increasingly complex. The melodies grew more disjunct, the harmonies more chromatic. He had his music performed and published, evidently more for his own edification than for broad dissemination. *Ahi, disperata vita* dates from his third book of madrigals, which is harmonically and expressively more adventurous than his first two. Cascading lines reflect a "life of despair", and close, imitative textures depict "happiness in flight." The pangs of lost love are clear in his chromatic harmonies, the likes of which would not be heard again until the twentieth century.

Ahì, disperata vita,
che fuggendo il mio bene,
miseramente cade in mille pene!
Deh, torna alla tua luce alma e gradita
che ti vuol dar aita!

Alas, life of despair,
that, my happiness in flight,
miserably lapses into a thousand torments!
Oh, return to your soulful and gracious light
which will bring you help.

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