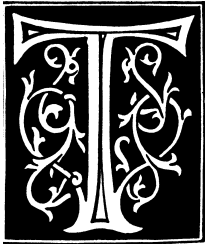


Lasso's Aphorisms of Life and Death

by Michael Procter



The *Lagrime di San Pietro*, Lasso's greatest work and one of the most profound musical treasures of the Renaissance, has been much discussed and frequently recorded. James Haar's masterful commentary in the *New Grove* cannot be bettered, and the reader is referred to that easily accessible treatment. I give here some notes on a companion cycle, still virtually unknown, for it was only recently identified as such and recorded for the first time.

Many commentators have suggested that Lasso, in setting the *Lagrime di San Pietro*, was identifying himself with Peter, seen as an old man looking back ruefully and contritely at the sins of his earlier life. This conventional posture, which we recognise for example in Palestrina's Preface to the Song of Songs (*Canticum Canticorum* 1583/1584), can here be brought into biographical focus when we remember Lasso's medical treatment for "melancholia hypochondriaca" (depression).

The text itself lends further support to the assumption, for Tansillo wrote it in an attempt to redeem himself, after earlier erotic works had caused his writings to be placed on the Index of the Roman Church. Similar considerations lend support to the supposition that the posthumous cycle I have entitled *Melancholia* also belongs to the last works of the composer. It would indeed be tempting to suggest that these pieces were composed in parallel to the great cycle, perhaps as more personal statements, if not exactly as light relief.

The work is not internally linked as closely as *Lagrime*, but the recurrent themes—the transitory nature of mortal things, the foolishness of men, the unique saving grace of the Divine—do bind it together compellingly. The cycle is framed by two biblical texts, and indeed draws most of its texts from the Bible. Many of these however, together with those whose sources cannot be identified (and thus possibly derive from the composer) are acerbic in tone, conceivably targeted at individuals within the Court.

1. Opens with the text from the Epistle to the Ephesians as an invocation to the Almighty, establishing the framework for what is to follow.

Unus Dominus, una fides, unum baptismum, unus Deus et pater omnium qui est super omnes et per omnia et in omnibus nobis. Eph. 4, 5–6.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

2. A familiar text from the Epistle to the Corinthians (only the opening call, *Fratres*, is added) sets the tone: only through Grace can a man be deemed worthy.

Fratres qui gloriatur in Domino gloriatur; non enim qui se ipsum commendat, ille probatus est, sed quem Dominus commendat. 2 Cor. 10, 17–18.

Brothers! He that glorifieth, let him glory in the Lord. For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.

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3. David as a sinner who repents surely stands here for Lassus himself, reconsidering his own position. David's tears perhaps reflect those of St. Peter in the *Lagrima*.

Peccavit David quod solent reges sed
poenitentiam gessit: flevit et ingemuit,
quod non solent reges. Source unknown.

David sinned, as is the habit of kings, but
he showed repentance: he wept and
moaned, which is not typical of kings.

4. An overt contemplation of last things—death, sorrow, mourning and fear—contributes to the valedictory atmosphere of the cycle.

Omnium deliciarum et pomparum saeculi
brevis finis: mors, dolor, luctus et pavor
invadit omnes. Source unknown.

All delightful things and all the pomp of
the world come to a rapid end: death, sor-
row, mourning, and fear invade all things.

5. To whom might this plea for keeping faith with old friends be addressed? To Duke Wilhelm?

Ne derelinquas amicum antiquum, novus
autem non erit similis illi: vinum novum,
amicus novus: veterascet, et cum suavi-
tate bibes illud. *Ecclus.* 9, 10.

Forsake not an old friend; for the new is
not comparable to him; as new wine, so is
a new friend; if it become old, thou shalt
drink it with gladness.

There follow three admonitions, as if addressed to Lassus' sons, or as shafts aimed at particular courtiers:

6. The first extols patience and condemns hasty decisions.

Qui patiens est multa gubernatur pruden-
tia; qui autem impatiens est exaltat stulti-
tiam suam. *Prov.* 14, 29.

He that is slow to anger is of great under-
standing; but he that is hasty of spirit
exalteth his own folly.

7. The midpoint of the cycle is an oddly barbed shaft:

Non des mulieri potestatem animae tuae,
ne ingrediatur in virtute tua et confun-
daris. *Ecclus.* 9, 2.

Give not the power of thy soul unto a
woman, that she should set her foot upon
thy strength, and thou be confounded.

8. It would be interesting to know who the target of this sally was—a stupid person who yet, by pursing his lips, gave the impression of great wisdom!

Qui moderatur sermones suos doctus et
prudens est, et pretiosi spiritus vir erudi-
tus: stultus quoque si tacuerit sapiens rep-
utabitur et si compresserit labia sua intel-
ligens. *Prov.* 17, 27–28.

He that spareth his words hath knowl-
edge and prudence, and he that is of a
cool spirit is a man of understanding.
Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is
counted wise; when he shutteth his lips
he is esteemed as intelligent.

9. A glorious textual sequence reminiscent of Lassus' *Bone Jesu*, combined with a stunning passage referring directly to Lassus' luminous setting of *Iustorum animae*—no doubt a reference to life in the heavenly kingdom. And the 'tribulatio' is surely a reference to Lassus' illness—and the health problems of an old man.

Gloriamur in tribulationibus scientes
quod tribulatio patientiam operatur; pati-
entia autem probationem vero spem: spes
autem non confundit. Rom. 5, 3–5.

Let us rejoice in our tribulations, knowing
that tribulation worketh patience; and
patience, probation; and probation, hope;
and hope putteth not to shame.

10. The most lovely of these pieces, culminating in the wonderful section *longitudinem dierum*, surely expressing Lassus' thankfulness for his long life.

Timor Domini gloria et gloriatio et laetitia
et corona exultationis: timor Domini
delectabit cor et dabit laetitiam et
gaudium et longitudinem dierum.
Ecclus. 1, 11–12.

The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation
and gladness, and a crown of rejoicing.
The fear of the Lord shall delight the heart,
and shall give gladness and joy, and length
of days.

11. Doubt sets in again—has his life been pointless? After all, at the last hour all things come to an end—including *cantus et discantus*, literally to be taken as chant and polyphony.

In hora ultima peribunt omnia: tuba, tibia
et cythara, jocus, risus, saltus, cantus et
discantus. Source unknown.

In the last hour all things shall perish:
trumpet, flute and harp, sports, theatre
and dance, chant and descant.

12. Indeed, all the works of man are meaningless—all that counts are the gifts he has from God:

Laudavi igitur laetitiam, quod non esset
homini bonum sub sole nisi quod comederet
et biberet atque gauderet et hoc solum
auferret de labore suo in diebus vitae suae
quos dedit ei Deus sub sole. Eccles. 8, 15.

Then I commended mirth, because a man
hath no better thing under the sun than to
eat, to drink and to be merry; for that shall
abide with him in his labour all the days of
his life which God hath given him under
the sun.

13. So Praise ye the Lord! One is reminded of that other cyclic work, Lassus' set of Penitential Psalms which, strictly following Modes I to VII for the seven psalms, ends with a Mode VIII setting, titled 'Laudes Domini', being a setting of Psalms 149 and 150. Here is the same device, appropriately setting the shortest of all the Psalms. It provides a final admonition and affirmation.

Laudate Dominum omnes gentes, laudate
eum omnes populi; quoniam confirmata
est super nos misericordia ejus, et veritas
Domini manet in aeternum. Ps. 116.

O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise
him, all ye people. For his merciful kind-
ness is great toward us: and the truth of the
Lord endureth for ever. ❧