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# Love and Virtue in Cavalli's *L'Erismena*

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## Abstract

This study looks at three performances of "Vaghe Stelle" from Cavalli's *L'Erismena* to explore different ways of configuring questions of love and virtue. The focus is on three types of relationship: one couched in the language of the pastoral and the idyllic, suppressing the erotic impulse; the second, where that impulse is carefully controlled in the manner of what has been called "courtly love," and a third, where the erotic impulse has been given free reign. The question of what an "ideal" relationship between love and virtue might be is left unanswered by the composer.

## Key words

love, virtue, *L'Erismena*, Francesco Cavalli, Vaghe Stelle, pastoral, idyllic, erotic, asexuality, performance

It's always a good thing when discussing love and virtue in opera to actually have a character called "Virtue" who sings her own aria. And so we do at the very beginning of Cavalli's *L'Erismena*. And this sober aria, mocking Beauty and Fortune sets the tone in which the actions of the opera take place.<sup>1</sup>

[Air] 167

127  
VIRTUE  
Fortune so wa-ver-ing, Beau-ty so vain a thing; whose pride and ty-ran-ny is your sole ma-jes-ty,

[Continuo]

6 # 6

135  
poor shades of de-i-ty, ye make me laugh at ye;

143  
poor shades of de-i-ty, ye make me laugh at ye.

Ritornello

Ex. 1 F. Cavalli - *L'Erismena*, aria of Virtue, bars 127-150.

While there is no character actually called "Love" in Cavalli's *L'Erismena*, this opera makes *Così fan tutti* seem like a Calvinist tableau by comparison. In the course of the drama, most of the characters are in love with at least two people, and one of the leading protagonists has trouble choosing between three (although one turns out to be her brother and another turns out to be a woman). One might say it's hornier than *Tristan*, but for the fact it's never made entirely clear what this love means, and how desire is meant to be understood. Should we imagine that these characters are simply aching to jump into bed with each other, or are they rather carrying on traditions of flirtation and chivalry... and enacting various approaches to the sometimes elusive relationship between love and virtue?

My goal in this particular presentation is to explore this question by playing around with three performances of a particular aria. I will suggest that performance choices

1 This example, and several examples following come from *Francesco Cavalli-L'Erismena* with the subtitle "*Dramma per musica* by Aurelio Aureli (Venice 1655/56)". The volume containing both the score of the original Italian version and the contemporary English translation was edited by Beth Glixon (Introduction), Nicola Badolato (Italian libretto), Jonathan Glixon (Italian score) and Michael Burden (English score and libretto) and published by Bärenreiter (Kassel, Basel, London, New York, Praha) in 2018. This is a beautifully produced edition, filled with valuable information and of course, as noted above, full versions in both Italian and English.

such as tempo, accentuation, ornaments, expressive devices, and even language may provide different answers.

The aria in question, “Vaghe stelle” has a nice dramatic placement and a lovely history. On the immediate scale, it is sung by Aldimira, a slave who has just moments before been freed from her shackles, and who has fallen in love with the captive Erismena at first sight. Erismena is disguised as a (male) soldier because she is trying to find the man who abandoned her. The fact that Aldimira has been in love with two other men, one of them Erismena’s former sweetheart, makes it that much more complicated.

It is a bit of a convoluted situation for other reasons. The King, Erimante, is in love with Aldimira and has made her queen, but, furious that she seems to have fallen in love with Erismena, orders that the soldier (Erismena) be poisoned. In one of a dozen plot twists, Erismena faints when she recognizes that the poisoner is her beloved Idrapse (who is also in love with Aldamira—until he finds out she is his sister). The King, thinking Erismena is dead, sadistically tells Aldimira that if she can wake Erismena, she can have him. And the aria is what follows with this text<sup>2</sup>:

Vaghe stelle, Luci belle Non dormite. Aprite il sereno De vostri begli occhi, Lasciate, che scocchi In questo mio seno Amore I suoi dardi, Bei lucidi sguardi I lumi deh aprite.	Pretty stars, Beautiful lights, Do not sleep. Reveal the serenity Of your beautiful eyes, Let love shoot its darts Into my breast.
Vaghe stelle...	Beautiful, clear gazes, open your eyes.

**Ex. 2** *Vaghe stelle* (text of the aria).

In the words of Ellen Rosand the aria:

“...in being designed to initiate that action: to rouse the sleeping Erismena, disguised as Erineo, with whom Aldimira has fallen in love. As such it benefits from musical elaboration, which can only increase its impact on the sleeper.”<sup>3</sup>

Complete with its charming little ritornello, perhaps reaching up to the stars, Vaghe Stelle is a harbinger, a kind of “super ancestor” of what will eventually become the full-blown *da capo* aria. We may also note other examples of word painting with Cupid’s darts, and that as usual, as we shall see, all the best and most interesting stuff is in the middle.

2 I am grateful to Francesco Izzo for his assistance in refining this translation.

3 Rosand, Ellen. *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1991, p. 317.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the aria 'Vaghe stelle' from Francesco Cavalli's opera *L'Erismena*. The score is arranged in six systems. The first two systems are for the vocal line, with lyrics in Italian. The lyrics are: 'Va - ghe stelle lu - ci belle non - dormite non - dormite non dormite'. The tempo marking 'Ritov.' (Ritardando) is written above the first and last staves. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments.

Ex. 3 *Vaghe stelle* (ritornello and first section).

I should add that this aria was famously included in Vol. 4 of Burney's *A General History of Music*, which led it to have an afterlife in music history classes, where I first learned it when I was a grad student at Columbia almost fifty years ago.

The first performance I will discuss features Leonardo Garcia Alarcón directing la Cappella Mediterranea, with Susanna Hurrell in the role of Aldimira.<sup>4</sup>

The aria is performed brightly at about half note=92 bpm. While a quick tempo can possibly suggest certain motoric possibilities related to sexual activity, most of the musical devices associated with deep expression—vibrato, various kind of rhythmic distortions—vanish at quick tempi, and not much nuance is possible. So, while this performance has a marvelous celebratory air to it, and the singer does a wonderful job of acting suggesting both her excitement and also an attempt to wake up the sleeping Erismena, it forfeits elements of seduction, and in my view does not capture any strong erotic expression.

4 Francesco Cavalli (1602–1676): *Erismena* [online]. *YouTube*. 6. 3. 2023. Time: 1:03:56. <https://youtu.be/SyrwtZbvGe8?t=3836>.

Aria. Atto 2° sc. 7<sup>ma</sup>

- ete rampollo tien per fatollartua fe - te. Va - ghe stel - le lu - ci bel -

- le non dor - mi - te non dor - mi - te va ghe stelle

Ritornello

lu - ci bel - le non dor mi te non dor - mi - te

Ex. 4 *Vaghe stelle* (aria), in Ch. Burney *A General History of Music*, Vol. 4.

And this leads to our questions around love and virtue. What does it mean to be virtuous in relation to *romantic* love? I am grateful to my colleague Cathal Twomey for drawing my attention to the question of *asexuality* in baroque opera, because this performance could almost be seen in the context of asexual love, reminding us of a pair in another of Cavalli's operas, *La Calisto*, Diana and Endymion. In that opera, Diana's vow of chastity means that this couple have agreed never to consummate their relationship, and that certainly is understood as one possible form of virtue. Note, this doesn't mean they are not in love: they love: they hug, they kiss, they cuddle, but they have decided to stop short of penetration and climax.

And to me, this first performance plays on the aspects of the aria that most suggest pastoral adolescent giddiness, rather than a desire for mature sexual activity, more Pamina than Isolde. The singer is clearly stimulated in some way, but there is no real sense that she is somehow sexualized by the prospect of *Erismena's* waking.

Let me now set up the second performance. It is well known that *L'Erismena* is the first opera in English (we saw a bit of that in the first example from *Virtue's* aria).<sup>5</sup> At some

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion of this see *Francesco Cavalli-L'Erismena* with the subtitle "Dramma per musica by Aurelio Aureli (Venice 1655/56)", starting on p. XLVIII with the section titled "Bargrave's English *Erismena*". Also see Michael Burden's source notes on p. 355-357.

point after 1650 an English language version of the opera was created, and not much is known about its contexts. We're not entirely sure who created it (possibly an opera lover named Robert Bargrave); who may have translated it, or whether it was ever performed in whole or in part. But it is a gorgeous piece of translation, one of those where you might almost be tempted to say: better than the original. The relatively naive "Vaghe stelle, luci belle," becomes the florid, "Stars transcendent, lights resplendent!" The imperative, "Non dormite," becomes a question, "Why thus sleep thee?" "Let love shoot its darts into my breast" (in the Italian) becomes a bit of post-Elizabethan theatricality, "Let love play its part on the stage of my heart." While of course theoretically any piece can be performed at almost any speed, it is difficult to imagine how the English language version of this aria, could ever be performed at the same speed as the Italian we have just heard. An indeed the tempo is about half note=76 bpm.

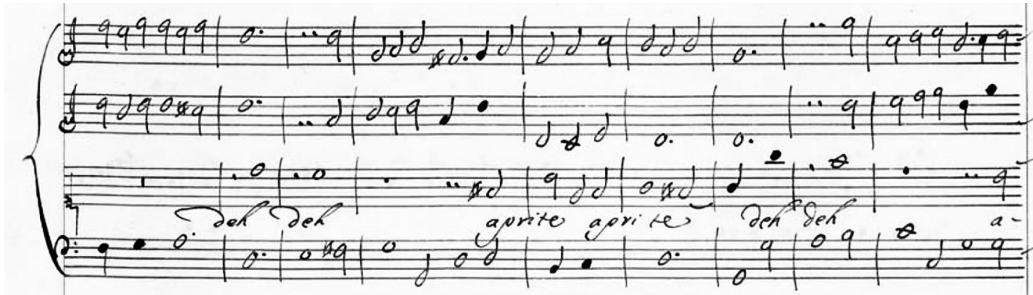
Vaghe stelle,	Stars transcendent,
Luci belle	Lights resplendent,
Non dormite.	Why thus sleep thee?
Aprite il sereno	Display the serene
De vostri begli occhi,	Of your beauteous eyes,
Lasciate, che scocchi	Let love play its part
In questo mio seno	On the stage of my heart,
Amore I suoi dardi,	Shoot hither his shafts
Bei lucidi sguardi	And fix here his dart.
I lumi deh aprite.	Ye splendors so clear,
	Unveil and appear.
Vaghe stelle...	Stars transcendent...

**Ex. 5** *Vaghe stelle*, possibly translated by R. Bargrave.

Encountering this version, sung by Carole Bogard and conducted by Alan Curtis, suggests that "Vaghe stelle" could also be construed as a kind of seduction aria, not a mere "wake up" (or rather, a different kind of wake up) the equivalent of a knight singing of his ladies' attributes, appropriate in its way considering the gendered role reversal here. But I would once again draw your attention to the middle of the aria, particularly what I would call the "wordless middle" a place of strangeness and power.<sup>6</sup>

We might think that we are suddenly in a scene from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. What I have called the wordless middle in this case comprises two syncopated "Oh's" which could be construed either as a marveling at the beauty of the beloved, or the way this singer performs it, possibly an internal anticipation of the climax of the sex act itself.

<sup>6</sup> Cavalli, Pier Francesco. *L'Erismena: A Venetian Baroque Opera (In English)* [3 LP]. VOX, SVBX 5213, USA, November 1969.



Ex. 6 A wordless middle part of the aria.

We may also consider that the English “Ye splendors so clear, unveil and appear” with its invocation of the spirit world from plays like the *Tempest*, goes along with what David Buch writes in his book *Magic Flutes and Enchanted Forests*:<sup>7</sup>

“In his opera *Erismena* (Venice 1655), Cavalli has the Iberian slave Aldimira sing a conjuring aria, ‘Vaghe stelle,’ as she casts a spell over *Erismena*, who has fainted.”

And where is love and virtue here? Of course, it is all a matter of interpretation, but in this case one could argue that by having the most explicit musical metaphors for the erotic “stuck” in the middle, surrounded by a pretty but relatively naive pastoral, this is a kind of virtue that occurs when one feels sexual desire, but sublimates it, or maybe it’s a stretch to say that desire is sublimated *by the formal design itself*. Whether ultimately, we think sublimation of desire is virtuous or masochistic is a matter of opinion of course. One could consider the entire world of courtly love, in Cathal Twomey’s words, “a fetish of erotic sexual denial,” and understand that this denial was considered highly virtuous. Of course, we could take the opposite tack, and suggest, well, that getting someone to love you by casting a spell on them is hardly virtuous practice.

The third and final recording is by Ruth Ann Swenson.<sup>8</sup> While I do believe there is a practical limit on how quickly one can perform the English text, there is no limit on how slowly one can perform the Italian version. And the slow tempo of about half note=60 bpm (with little ritardandos at the end of phrases) allows this to be by far the most overtly sensuous performance, the richest in nuances of tempo, ornamentation and interpretation broadly, anachronistic or not. To me at least, this sounds like a woman deeply in love and in the grip of great desire, desire that intends to be satisfied when the sleeper awakes. And perhaps paradoxically this leads to what we might consider yet another kind of virtue in love: the acknowledgement that experiencing sexual desire and actually seeking consummation has its own virtues, and not only in the socially sanctioned world of marriage; that virtue is not only a matter of chastity or denial, but resides in the act of love itself.

7 University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 27.

8 Ruth Ann Swenson, Warren Jones. *I Carry Your Heart* [CD]. EMI Classics CDC 724355615824. Track No. 2. USA, 1996.



The notion that performance choices cannot merely alter our experience with an aria slightly, but can result in radically different responses is, I suppose, nothing terribly new, but I still find myself amazed and just how different our reading of an aria can be depending on how things like the sound “O” is performed. The word “nuance” suggests something small, but in music, it can be very large.

Listening to “Virtue” at the opera’s opening we certainly may hear the starkness of chastity and denial at the beginning of the aria, but Virtue’s sensuous little laugh suggests that the composer knew the matter was not so simple.

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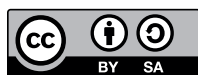
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