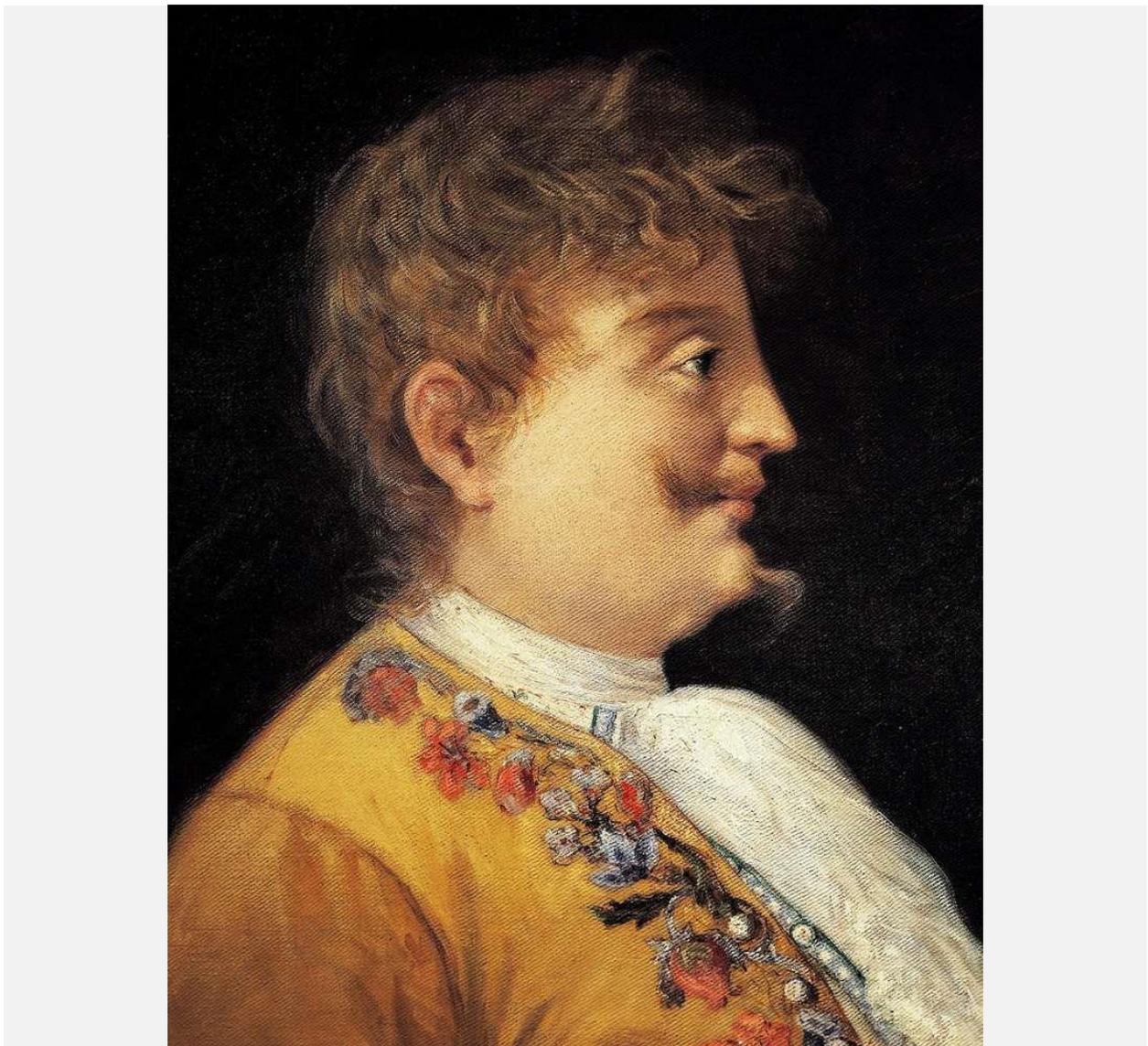


# Carlo Gesualdo: Murder, Witchcraft, Choral Music

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For centuries, the Italian nobleman and composer [Carlo Gesualdo](#) (1566–1613) has been a figure of fascination, although his fame rests more on the troubled life he led than the unusual, challenging musical compositions he left behind. The main events of his life seem to have come out of a gothic novel, beginning in 1590 when he and several collaborators brutally murdered his wife, Maria d’Avalos, and her lover, Fabrizio Carafa, after setting a trap to catch them in bed together. Even though by dispatching his unfaithful wife, Gesualdo was acting within the aristocratic social codes of revenge (and so was never prosecuted), the murder created an uproar in Naples; the lurid details were disseminated in the press and were soon embellished with even-more-lurid rumors. Fearing retribution, Gesualdo withdrew to his family castle in the town of Gesualdo.

In 1594 he married again, this time to Eleonora d’Este, a noblewoman in Ferrara. He wasn’t especially committed to the marriage—he abused Eleonora and was unfaithful to her, and they often lived apart—but Ferrara was an important center for music, and it was there that he cemented his reputation as a composer. His compositions were mostly for voice, and he probably worked with Ferrara’s famous ensemble of singing women, the [concerto delle donne](#). But his life remained turbulent; a contemporary account describes him as depressed whenever he was doing anything not related to music. He resorted to unusual measures to cure his physical and mental suffering, engaging in occult practices with his mistress and reportedly employing male servants whose job it was to beat him daily. In 1603 Eleonora initiated legal proceedings against his mistress, which led to a trial for witchcraft. The mistress and another woman were convicted and (strangely) sentenced to live in Gesualdo’s castle. He lived the last years of his life in isolation and seems to have been regarded by locals as a sinister figure; it is probably significant that in a painting that was commissioned by Gesualdo for his church a few years before his death, he is depicted as a penitent standing on the brink of purgatory.

The connection between Gesualdo’s music and his unhappy life is not hard to see. The principal feature of Gesualdo’s musical style is his use of extravagant jarring harmonies that are alternately astonishing and unsettling for the listener. His most-famous compositions are his six books of madrigals (secular compositions that set short poems to music for a small group of singers); the fifth and sixth books—containing pieces such as [“Beltà poi che t’assenti”](#) and [“Moro, lasso, al mio duolo”](#)—are known for their daring use of harmony and their disorienting, almost nightmarish beauty. Gesualdo’s great religious work, the *Tenebrae Responsoria* (a set of vocal compositions for the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday before Easter), is less wild than the madrigals but still distinctly [unsettling](#), especially when compared with the serene religious masterpieces of near contemporaries such as [Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina](#) and [Tomás Luis de Victoria](#).

In the 20th century Gesualdo’s music enjoyed a renaissance; composers and listeners marveled at how his use of harmony prefigured the breakdown of traditional forms of harmonic organization in the works of modernist composers such as [Schoenberg](#) and [Stravinsky](#)