

*ROBERT BROWNING, "IL MAESTRO DI S. MARCO"
A STUDY OF THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE OF
"A TOCCATA OF GALUPPI'S" **

On first reading "A TOCCATA OF GALUPPI'S" one is puzzled at the misleading title. How can Galuppi have his name connected with the form of the toccata when this latter had its birth in the 16th. century and its splendour in the seventeenth, while Galuppi lived in the eighteenth century? Besides, though Baldassare Galuppi came to be a "maestro di S. Marco", his fame is due to compositions for buffo opera and mainly for the sonatas. Could Browning have made such a mistake? Very unlikely. Some hidden intention must lie beyond the simple denotation of "toccata" and "Galuppi"; this intention comes into light as one traces up the musical structure of the poem. There are two clear instances: first, Browning indirectly presents himself as a composer of toccatas. He proposes to "play" before the audience, just as Renaissance "maestros" played toccatas at S. Marco, before the ceremony started. He is going to display his virtuosity in dealing with words in the same way as Merulo did when at the clavichord. The toccata was only a free form in which a good musician displayed his touch and ability in composing elaborate constructions with flowing movements in notes of equal length, for expert performance; after having provided the tonality for the chorus he would start playing around the musical phrase as elaborately as possible, so as to satisfy his pride and demonstrate his talent¹.

Thus Browning is now going to show his virtuosity as a poet by decorating a theme which seems to be constantly hammering on his mind — a mind given to theological enquiries. Here, it seems, is the answer to the first part of the riddle — he sets the tonality: his anguish at

*See poem on page 95

the meaning of life and death and his uncertainty at what will happen to the soul after quitting the body. Then he sets off to play around it (the given tonality) with images of Venice, representative of life (temporal values). It is at this moment that he shows his ability in creating lively movements, colourful chords, subtle omissions. Venice comes up as a symbol of earthly life, with its carnivals, its symbolic yearly procession when the Doges were wed to the sea by throwing into the water a golden ring, declaring themselves married to it and then being blessed by the Patriarch²; and, perhaps more strongly, with all the dionysiac elements that the Venetian feasts brought forth. The images of the courtesan and the gallant spring up in between the descriptions of a concert (maybe at S. Marco) or a street party (from stanza four to the first line of stanza ten). His ability is superb for he can create the feeling of real life, of garrulous people happy to live intensely the present moment, whose only values are money and the flesh. He brings together the idea of Venetian life and Shakespearean symbolism when he says that "the sea's the street there; and 'this arched by. . . what you call/. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept he carnival". This bridge must be the Rialto bridge, which was not where Shakespeare's Shylock was to be found; but as that Jew stands for avarice and cruelty, the idea of temporal power due to money is very pertinent here; that because Browning has used the paradoxical statement "the sea's the street there" followed by the subtly ironical affirmation that it is arched by a bridge symbolical of this power — instead of having the sky/heaven above it, Venice had the solid ("with houses on it") bridge, representative of wealth. He goes on to playing with the idea of *lus*: first young sensuality (stanza IV); then he brings forth the image of the famous Venetian courtesan — a woman who had, besides beauty and sensuality, a well trained mind, being used to the cultural life of the time. It is known that rich merchants from all parts of Italy would go to Venice in search of the pleasures afforded by its splendours and its women; for these women were able to offer, besides sex, good companionship and enlightened talk. (Might not Titian's "VENUS OF MUSIC" have some link with this sort of idea of pleasure?) The woman described in stanza V seems to be typically a Venetian woman — either a courtesan or a family woman given to forbidden love. The poet skillfully places the lovers (very likely at S. Marco, because toccatas were played before religious ceremonies, there) in such a way as to present his ironical stance, when he says that "they'd break talk off and afford/She, to bite her mask's black velvet — he, to finger on his sword"; notice, here, that, after the ironical "afford" he touches on the sexual images of the devouring woman, through the strong connotations of the words "bites", "black velvet"; and of the wooing gallant, with his fingers touching the sword (another phallic symbol). . . Even the rhythm is

changed, at this point. There's a break in sound, too. From the constant lively trochaic foot, he changes to iamb and so he states that the lovers hold their desire so as to seem to be listening to the music being played. The barrier to the fulfilment of their desire is echoed, on the sound layer, in the barrier to the flowing of the trochaic movement. Here one has the picture of the lovers, more intent on their purposes than on the music, while the musician is comically placed before them, "playing stately at the clavichord".

The central tonality comes back in stanza VII, with the musical notations embodying the author's doubt; here virtuosity is to be found in the interlacing of his own anguish with the lovers' main desire, the "dominant persistence" which follows up in stanza VIII. As to poetical construction his ability lies in creating colloquial language — the lovers' whispers during the concert — through the insertion of the sibilant sound into the perfect rhythm of trochaic octameters which make up the frame of the whole poem. The octave divided into two parts is one of the commonest musical periods, with its division into two phrases encompassing some meaning in themselves³. If one scans Browning's "Toccata" one will easily find this construction; only in stanza VIII, as in musical variations, does the subdivision into two parts disappear and, as in music, with it there goes the balance achieved so far. That is the consequence of the melting of the lovers' control into one single yearning, the persistence of physical desire. Even the musical aspect of masculine and feminine notations coincides with its counterpart in poetry⁴. These notations — masculine and feminine — are to be found, in the poem, in two levels: A) the diction is noted in masculine ending at the end of the octameters and the feminine one at the end of the tetrameters inside them, in all stanzas; B) Rhetorically, the Doges, the merchants and all the wealth and power they symbolize are accompanied — or enriched? — by the feminine images of the courtesan and her gallant, with the suave, light touch of courtship.

He returns then to the attitude of the virtuoso of toccatas: in stanza IX, full of caesuras and exclamatory end-stopped lines, he brilliantly ends up his musical elaboration, to return to the initial chords indicative of tonality, in stanza X, and from there to the close of his performance. The virtuosity found in this mixture of movements, of notes of equal length — the trochaic foot — is such that through the rhetorical elements before mentioned — (caesuras and exclamations) one has the sensation of different moods contained in one expressive chord. The juxtaposition of contradictory feelings is beautifully orchestrated. The sound stratum coincides with the level of meanings as the rhythm resulting from that mixture of equal notes, elevation, dwindling, and stops is juxtaposed to the meaning contained in the laudatory ejaculations about Galuppi's art together with the sense of sadness. This con-

tradiçtory meaning reaches its climax in "that was music! good alike at grave and gay!" The praise to Galuppi is in fact an applause of Browning himself. The virtuoso has managed to exhibit his talent to the utmost.

Now to the second part of the riddle: why did Browning choose Baldassare Galuppi as the title name? Like Browning, Galuppi was able to put together, in his works, mysticism, scenic and theatrical devices⁵. Besides, he was well known and, especially in England, much praised as a composer of sonatas, not of toccatas. Well, Browning's "Toccatà" has the structure of the "forma-sonata", which is the first movement of a Sonata proper; this "forma-sonata" is made up of three parts: the exposition of a theme, the development, and the re-exposition⁶ - Browning structures his poem exactly like a "forma-sonata". His exposition of the theme is condensed in the first stanza: Galuppi's music, as the poet hears it, brings back to his mind some heavy self-awareness which, he has no doubt, "is very sad to find". He doesn't say clearly what his doubt or anguish is, but the reader is directly made certain of its existence. And the sad tone brought about by the nasal assonance is obvious enough to prepare the reader/listener for what is to come. In the second stanza the tonality is changed (from the third line onwards) and he starts picturing Venice, already analysed by us, as the symbolization of temporal values which are to be the opposing mode to his initial doubt. With this introduction, duality is created and the second tonal ambience seems to prevail over the first. The light touch of imagery, the rhythmical movement of the lines produced the necessary liveliness of Venice and the idea of temporality and finiteness that it embodies. The picture is so vivid that one has the feeling of seeing the city, as, perhaps, one might, in an opera by Galuppi. The development goes on with the dual forces fighting in his mind. The temporal values with all their limited happiness and excitement take hold of the show and leave the espiritual yearning lurking behind. But the quest continues - there come out "thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh", "those suspensions, those solutions" up to a point when the lovers, now turned into mouthpieces for the poet, ask the troubling question: "Must we die?" and again the "dominant persistence" of lechery springs up to be ambiguously counterpointed by the "I" (one lover or the poet?) which asks the question: "Did I stop them?", and the certainty of the final answer: "till it must be answered to". The first tonality comes back - it is the beginning of the re-exposition: the "octave struck the answer" - death will come and replace pleasure (stanza X). Now, with slight variations, - the poet's search for the best preparation for death - the "forma-sonata" reaches its third, climatic moment. In his virtuosity, Browning brings into his construction the allusion to Milton (in the same tonal ambience) in the latter's sonnet "ON HIS BLIND-

NESS"; in his doubt about how to serve God best and consequently be prepared for death, Milton says: "They also serve, who only stand and wait". Browning alludes to this idea and, with a touch of ironic subtlety, states: "But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve", this rich loan of intertextuality sets his first mood: to accept death and do nothing, not even worry ("While I triumph over a secret wrung from nature's close reserve"); but Galuppi's music brings back the main theme: his doubt about and his enquiry into the immortality of the soul. And he goes on with his musing: those who have deeper values, such as intellectuality, those won't die, they must be immortal (stanzas XII, XIII). This certainty he tries to apply to his own predicament; hasn't he displayed virtuosity in his "Tocatta"? But the doubt with which Galuppi's music is loaded keeps "creaking" in his mind and the initial tone is brought back: he is sad and "want (s) the heart to scold"; he opposes the two values once more: the rich sensual Venetian women, what will become of them when they are dead? And as an echo to his thought there comes the explanation for the obscure sense of sadness: he is old and afraid of death. The re-exposition is complete now with a turning to the initial statements: "this is very sad to find!" and "But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!" This turning is here in order to place the author himself inside the oppressive situation — though he has applied to atemporal values, that's to say, art and culture, he is old and afraid: "I feel chilly and grown old".

The "dramatic principle" has been achieved in Browning's "forma-sonata"; modulation was perfect and enthralling; now, at this final chord, one feels the urge to stand up and applaud.

NOTES:

1. **ABBIATI, Franco**; *Historia de la música*, t. I, Imprenter Nuevo Mundo S.A., Mexico, 1958 (trad. Baltasar Semper) — p. 427.
2. **PLUMB, J. H. et alii**, *El Renacimiento, Cultura y Arte de una Epoca*, Barcelona, Ed Labor, S.A., 1961, pag. 257:
 "El día de Ascension de 997, el dux Pietro Orseolo detuvo su galeón en la entrada de mar que une la laguna veneciana con el Adriatico, derramó su libación en las aguas y recibió la bendición de su patriarca antes de partir a aniquilar a los dalmatas. Durante ocho siglos fue repitiéndose la misma ceremonia año tras año, aumentando en complejidad y esplendor a medida que la propia Venecia iba haciendose más rica y poderosa, hasta que llegó a covertirse en una de las grandes procesiones rituales del mundo occidental. La gran nave oficial de los dux,

el "Bucentauro", resplandeciente de carmesi y oro, alejábese de la Piazzetta a los cantos de los coros. Detrás de ella seguían el Consejo de los Diez, la señoría, los patricios y los embajadores, en sus dorada góndolas. Al llegar al Porto de Lido, el Dux, puesto de pie en la popa del "Bucentauro", arrojada a las aguas una sotija de oro, con estas palabras: "Oh, mar, nos desposamos contigo en señal de nuestro fiel y eterno dominio!" Aquella mezcla de paganismo, cristianismo y fausto oriental, era algo tan simbólico para Venecia como sus bodas con el mar".

3. SPALDING, W. R., *Manuel D'Analyse Musicale*, Paris, Payot, 1950, (trad. M. Firmin Roz), pag. 62.

4. Idem, pag. 66:

"Les deux manières de terminer une phrase, appelées masculine et féminine, correspondent exactement aux effets semblables du mètre d'une strophe poétique. Quand le dernier accord de la cadence, quel qu'il soit, tombe sur un temps fort, c'est-à-dire sur le premier temps d'une mesure, la terminaison est dite masculine; quand l'accord tombe sur un temps faible de la mesure, la terminaison est dite féminine".

5. *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, Ed. Instituto G. Treccani, Milano, 1932, Vol. XVI, pag. 340:

6. CARPEAUX, Otto Maria, *Uma Nova História da Música*, Zahar Ed., Rio de Janeiro, 1958, pags. 123/124:

"Chama-se assim o novo princípio de construção do primeiro movimento, do mais longo e mais importante, de uma sonata. O Andante ou Adágio pode ser uma meditação musical. O Allegro final pode contentar-se com repetição, pouco variada, de um tema; é a forma do Rondo. Mas o primeiro Allegro tem de ser mais elaborado. Carl Philip Emanuel Bach partiu de uma forma simples: um tema é sumariamente exposto (exposição); depois muda a tonalidade; no novo ambiente tonal, continua o desenvolvimento; enfim, a exposição é (com modificações mais ou menos ligeiras) repetida na tonalidade original (recapitulação ou reprise). O fato importante, nesse esquema, é a mudança de tonalidade, a modulação: é um princípio dramático. Mas depois C.P.E. Bach aperfeiçoou esse esquema pela introdução de um segundo tema, contrastante, que entra em espécie de luta dramática com o primeiro tema. Eis a sonata-forma completa".

A TOCCATA OF GALUPPI'S

I

Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad
to find!

I can hardly misconceive you; it would
prove me deaf and blind;

But although I take uour meaning, 'tis
with such a heavy mind!

II

Here you come with your old music, and
here's all the good it brings.

What, they lived once thus at Venice where
the merchants were the kings,

Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges
used to wed the sea with rings?

III

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and
'tis arched by . . . what you call

. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it,
where they kept the carnival:

I was never out of England — it's as if I saw
it all.

IV

Did young people take their pleasure when
the sea was warm in May?

Balls and masks begun at midnight, burn-
ing ever to mid-day,

When they made up fresh adventures for
the morrow, do you say?

V

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round
and lips so red, —

On her neck the small face buoyant, like
a bell-flower on its bed,

O'er the breast's superb abundance where
a man might base his head?

VI

Well, and it was graceful of them — they'd
break talk off and afford

— She to bite her mask's black velvet —
he, to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately
at the clavichord?

VII

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive,
sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions,
those solutions — 'Must we die?
Those commiserating sevenths — 'Life
might last! we can but try!'

VIII

Were you happy?' — 'Yes.' — 'And are
you still as happy?' — 'Yes. And you?'
— 'Then, more kisses!' — 'Did I stop them,
when a million seemed so few?'
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it
must be answered to!

IX

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they
praised you, I dare say!
'Brave Galuppi! that was music! good
alike at grave and gay!
'I can always leave off talking when I hear
a master play!'

X

Then they left you for their pleasure: till
in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing,
some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where
they never see the sun.

XI

But when I sit down to reason, think to
take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from
nature's close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I
creep thro' every nerve.

XII

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking
where a house was burned :
'Dust and ashes, dead and done with,
Venice spent what Venice earned.
The soul, doubtless, is immortal — where
a soul can be discerned.

XIII

'Yours for instance: you know physics,
something of geology;
'Mathematics are your pastime; souls
shall rise in their degree,
'Butterflies may dread extinction, — you'll
not die, it cannot be!

XIV

'As for Venice and her people, merely born
to bloom and drop,
'Here on earth they bore their fruitage,
mirth and folly were the crop:
'What of soul was left, I wonder, when the
kissing had to stop?.

XV

'Dust and ashes!' So you creak it, and I
want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too —
what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I
feel chilly and grown old.

Robert Browning