Transcribing: between listening, memory, and invention

Bracci, G.

Chapter 3
Hortense
"Alas, that person is me"

Find Ortensia
who dies among the lilacs

Amelia Rosselli, *The Dragonfly*

In 2013 I wrote *Hortense*, a transcription for string trio of "Languisce al fin," a madrigal from *Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro quinto* (1611), by Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa. This was the next step in my research on transcribing, and I intended to deepen my experience in this practice by exploring the boundaries of what transcribing could mean, looking for an approach that would allow both a more intimate relation with the original and wider artistic freedom. Audio example 1 presents *Hortense* in its entirety.

Audio 1. Giuliano Bracci, *Hortense*, performed by the New European Ensemble:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Bracci_Hortense_NeUE_orgelpark-2016.mp3
Complete score in pdf:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Bracci_Hortense.pdf

Paying respect

Using Derrida's ideas about the relation to the other, I have argued in the introduction that paying respect to the original is a central ethical matter in the practice of transcribing, but that it truly means operating in "absolute ingratitude." Both the original and the transcriber are affected by their encounter, and their contact produces a contamination on both sides: On the one hand, the original is transformed by the transcriber's musical in(ter)vention, and on the other hand, the transcriber must deal with the presence of a musical work that affects their own musical language.[1] Leaving something untouched means not running any risk of betrayal, but it also means missing the chance for transformation. The transcriber has the opportunity to remove a musical work from a situation where it is protected – an "imaginary museum" (Goehr 1992),

[1] As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, my focus lies on transcribing as a creative practice primarily carried out by composers, which deeply involves the transcriber's imagination and musical language. Therefore, my research excludes transcriptions mainly intended for practical purposes, where transcribers usually strive to minimize the divergence from the original, erasing (or at least trying to erase) their own musical language.

or a metaphorical display cabinet – and where, in order to be preserved, it cannot be touched or contaminated. In doing so – following Agamben's ideas about profanation – transcribing enables a new use of a musical work, which produces a new meaning, a new understanding.
In this context, "meaning" can be seen as a synonym of the term "use." Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, who wrote that "for a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953, § 43), one could say that the meaning of a musical work is the use that one makes of it. A transcriber transcribes an original work, and in doing so, they show a new possible use of it, a new encounter with it.

Context
Examining some transcriptions by other composers will help to understand my own transcription of Gesualdo's madrigal, making more clear the context in which I worked, my references, and my ideal interlocutors.

A work that I did not know before writing *Une petite fleur bleue*, and that afterwards had a strong influence on my research, is Stefano Gervasoni's *Recercar cromaticho post il Credo* (2005), a transcription for string quartet of Girolamo Frescobaldi's ricercar of the same name from the *Fiori Musicali* (1635). This transcription is performed as a self-standing piece, but Gervasoni included it in his second string quartet, *Six lettres à l'obscurité (und zwei Nachrichten*) (2006), as the seventh of its eight movements. It is remarkable that this complete transcription was able to be integrated into the architecture of a larger composition. Gervasoni integrates a musical work from the past inside his own writing, and deals with it without deactivating its otherness. In Gervasoni's transcription, "the music of Frescobaldi is presented in its entirety, although it is traversed by figurations and sounds that distort it: It appears as a foreign body, or as a form of otherness" (Albèra 2015, 376). Gervasoni's writing progressively distorts and corrodes the texture of Frescobaldi's music from within. As if in a kaleidoscope, a game of deforming and multiplying mirrors, Frescobaldi's music is fragmented and projected into a new, complex, and rich musical space.

Two excerpts of Gervasoni's transcription can highlight the relation between Frescobaldi's original and Gervasoni's language. Figures 1 and 3 show a modern edition of the Frescobaldi score. The score and bar references to Gervasoni's transcription (figures 2 and 4) correspond to those included in the string quartet *Six lettres à l'obscurité (und zwei Nachrichten)*, while the audio examples (audio 2 and 3) are from a recording where the transcription is performed as an independent piece.

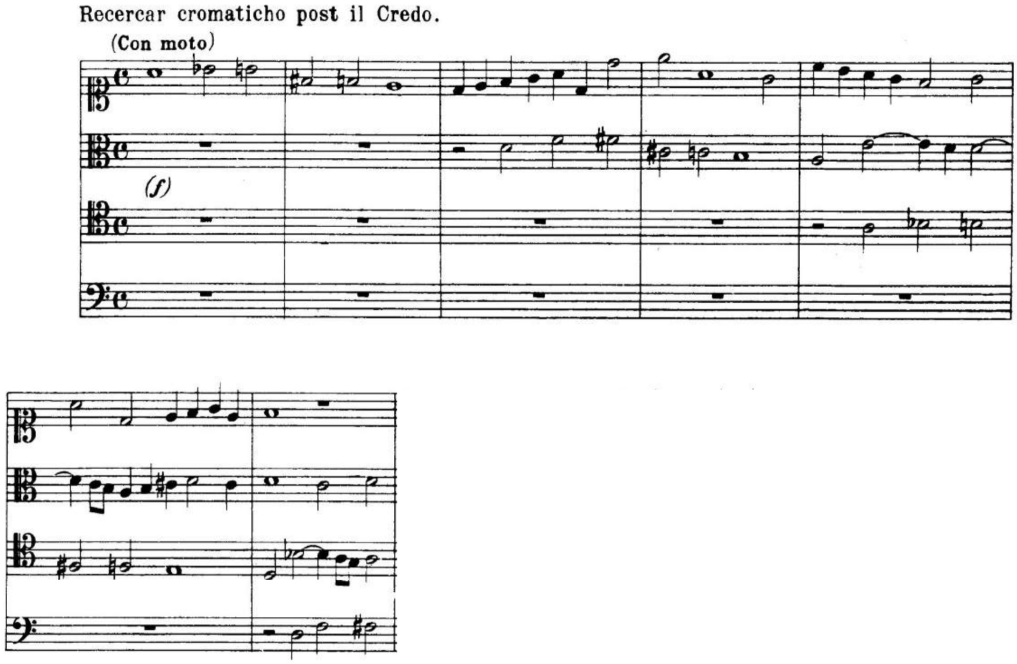


Figure 1. Frescobaldi, "Recercar cromaticho post il Credo" (*Fiori Musicali*), bars 1-7

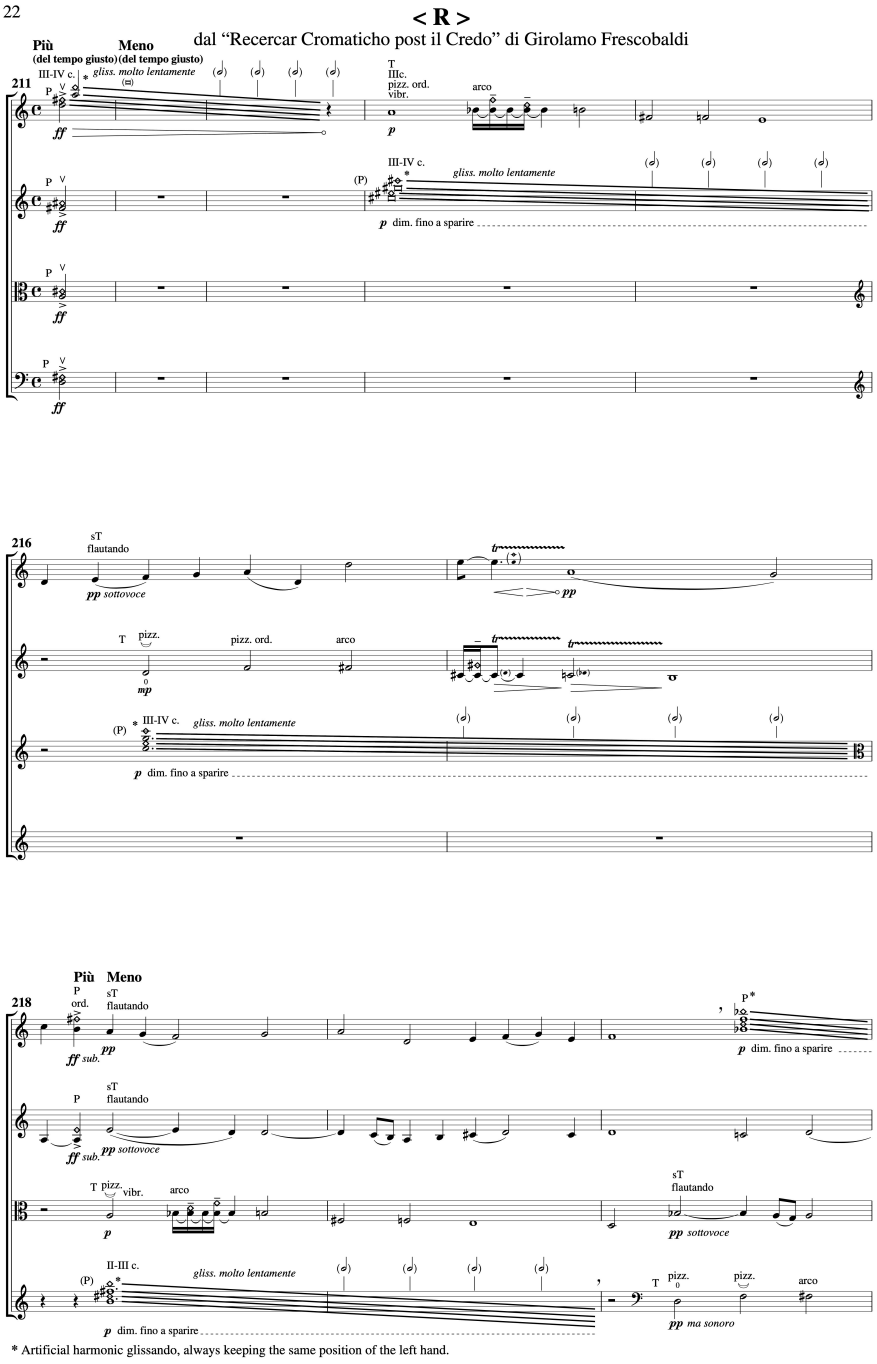


Figure 2. Gervasoni, *Six lettres à l'obscurité (und zwei Nachrichten)*, bars 211–220

Audio 2. Gervasoni, *Recercar cromaticho post il Credo*, bars corresponding to figure 2, performed by the Quartetto Prometeo: http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Gervasoni-AUDIO-Recercar-cromaticho-EX.1.mp3

In the opening bars, where the individual voices enter gradually, we can distinctly observe many of the elements that characterize Gervasoni's transcription. First, Gervasoni fills the pauses with very slow, artificial harmonic *glissandi* on two strings. Initially, these glissandi are only descending, but in the final section, they are both ascending and descending. The glissandi, coupled with sudden accents (like the one in bar 218), are elements that immediately sound alien to the original, revealing the hand – and the thought – of the transcriber: They make it clear that the transcriber is not, and does not want to be, invisible. The silence from which a musical piece emerges is often an implicit, undefined context. In contrast, Gervasoni fills the musical pauses – the silence – with these harmonic glissandi, immediately emphasizing the mediated nature of our listening experience of Frescobaldi's music. In a metaphorical sense, they are the cuts that traverse the canvas – the musical space – upon which the transcription is written.

Second, Gervasoni does not distribute the individual voices of Frescobaldi's polyphony among different instruments, a technique seen in Webern's transcription of Bach's "Ricercar a 6" and also used in subsequent examples in this chapter by other composer-transcribers. Instead, with the exception of a small three-bar episode (251-253, shown in figure 4), each instrument of the quartet is consistently assigned one of the four voices of the ricercar. Through his instrumental writing, Gervasoni delves into each voice, fragmenting it from within. He employs various timbral interventions through a rich array of performing techniques such as trills of harmonics*, sul tasto* and *sul ponte* passages, *flautando*, *col legno*, and other bowing techniques. For instance, the first six notes of the second violin (bars 216-217; see figure 2) each utilize a different technique: *pizzicato* with the nail; *pizzicato ordinario*; *arco*; the subsequent C♯ alternating with an artificial harmonic that projects it a twelfth higher; a trill; and *arco ordinario* again. These frequent changes in sound production fragment the individual voice through hyper-articulation: Gervasoni engages in a close combat with Frescobaldi's writing, creating a highly expressive effect.

Finally, Gervasoni intensifies his interventions as the transcription progresses. In response to the tempo changes (*con moto*, *poco più mosso*, and *più mosso*) in the original (see an excerpt in figure 3), Gervasoni transcribes the first part without transposing it, transposes the second part (bars 248-253) a semitone higher, and places the third and final part (from bar 254 onward) a minor third higher. These transpositions, heard in audio example 3, accentuate the increasing tension – almost a frenzy – in which Frescobaldi's original accelerates and is gradually eroded from within. Moreover, to heighten the sense of crowding in the third part, Gervasoni introduces "diminutions," to borrow the term from the Renaissance meaning to embellish individual long notes of the melody by dividing them into smaller units.

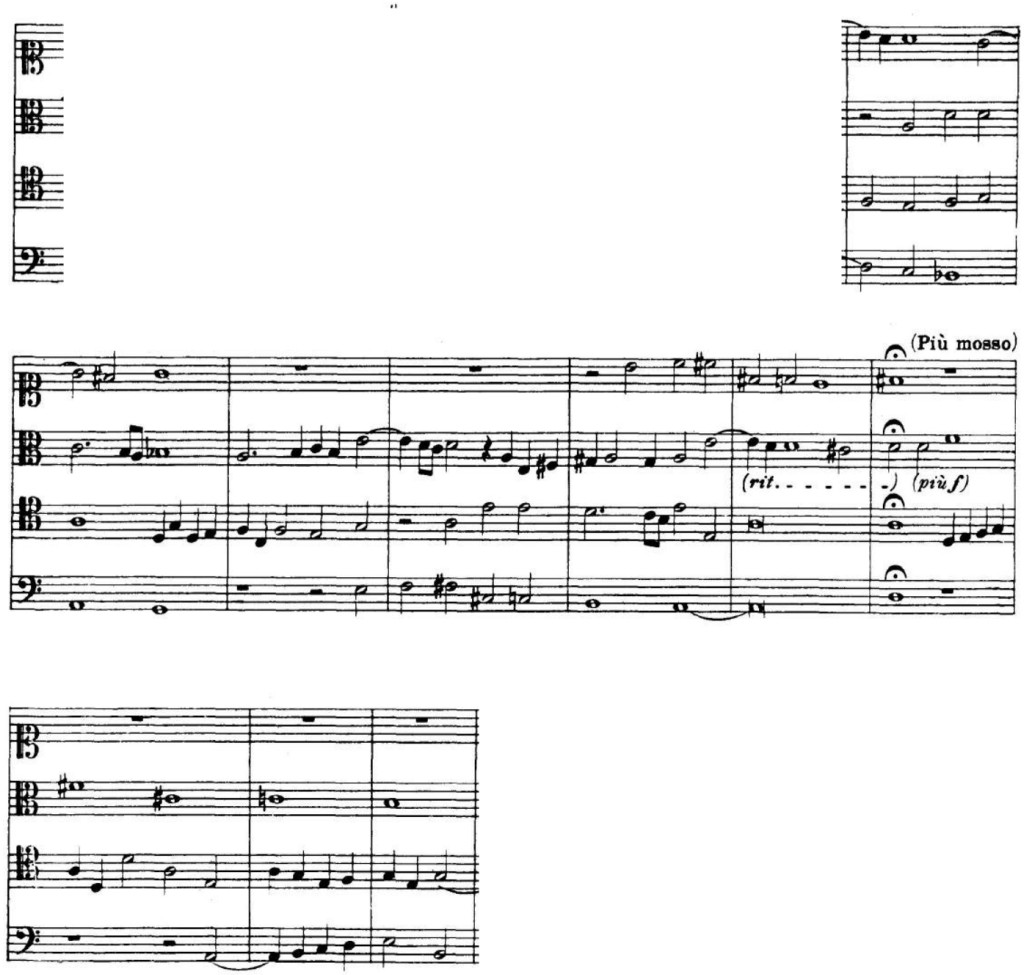


Figure 3. Frescobaldi, "Recercar cromaticho post il Credo" (*Fiori Musicali*), bars 35-44

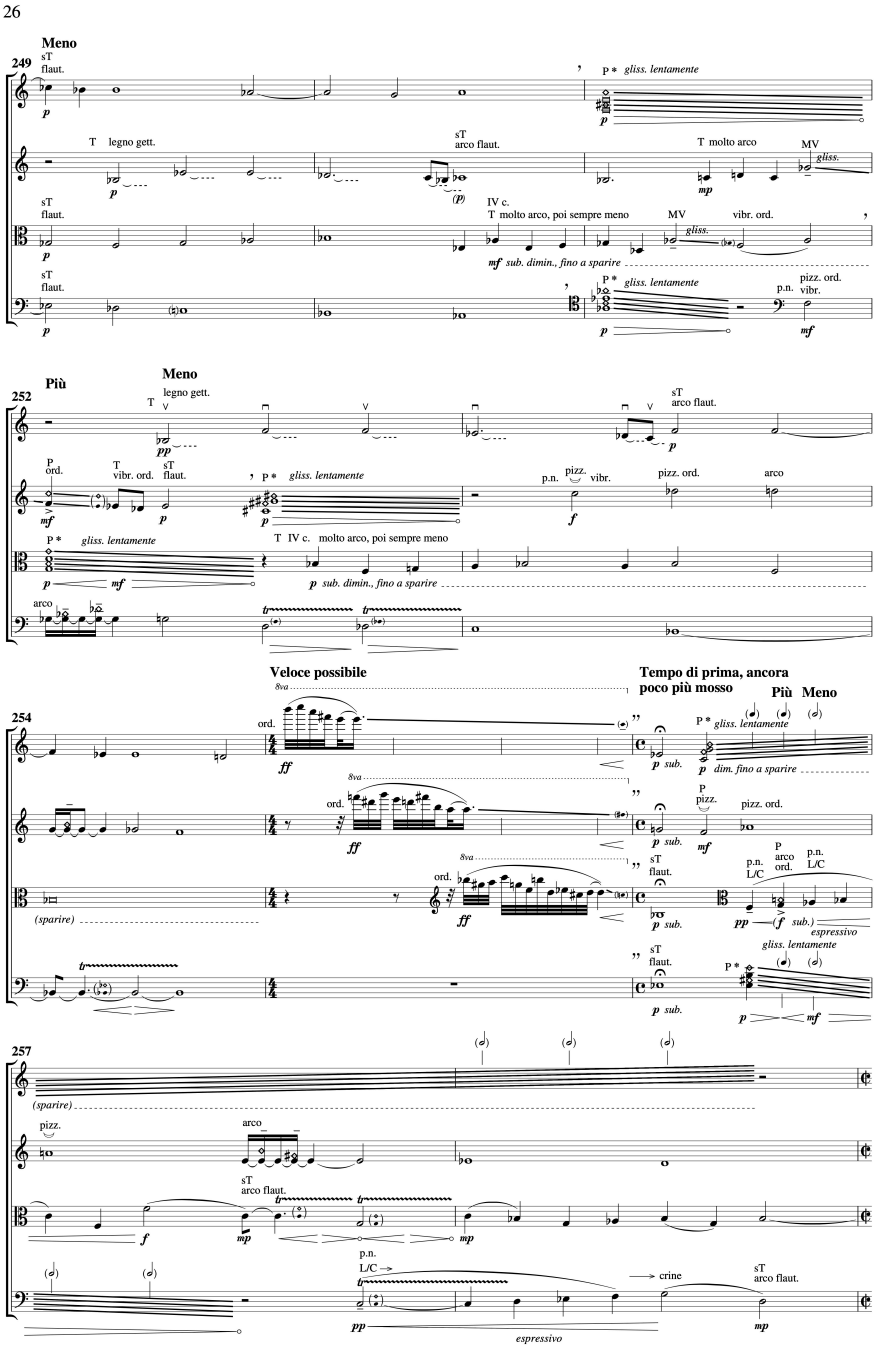


Figure 4. Gervasoni, *Six lettres à l'obscurité (und zwei Nachrichten)*, bars 248-256

Audio 3. Frescobaldi, *Recercar cromaticho post il Credo*, bars corresponding to figure 4, performed by Quartetto Prometeo: http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Gervasoni-Frescobaldi-AUDIO-ESEMPIO-2.mp3

Studying transcriptions and listening to them provides valuable insights into a transcriber's thoughts and their relation to the original musical work. As I have argued in chapter 1, it is the action of transcribing that defines the original as such. The notion of what constitutes the original is therefore not a settled matter. Instead, it becomes the choice of the transcriber. Nevertheless, the very presence of an original – and hence the opportunity to compare it with its transcription – allows for a questioning of every note in the transcription, tracing how the original has been transformed through the transcriber's relationship with it, their way of thinking, and their listening. The gap between the original and the transcription reveals the language of the transcriber, and in this sense, studying transcriptions can offer a privileged pathway to the music of transcribers who are also composers.

As mentioned earlier, the choice of a slow tempo in a transcription can be related to a qualitatively different attention to the original. The composer and double-bass player Stefano Scodanibbio's transcriptions – apart from being in slowed-down tempi – possess as a distinctive quality an intimacy with the originals. As a child, I studied classical guitar, and listening to Scodanibbio's transcription (2009) of Fernando Sor's étude op. 35, no. 22 (1828) gave rise to some of my most concrete and almost physical musical memories: the attention to every single sound and to the different ways the fingers touch a guitar string – e.g.., pizzicato, *appoggiato*, with the fingernail, or with the fingertip. This is, of course, a personal perception tied to a musical memory that is both auditory and tactile, but it is an example of how transcribing can render someone's closeness to a musical work: an intimacy defined by tactile timbral details, brought near through a meticulous examination, as if observed through a magnifying lens – or better, as if listened to in slow motion.
I argue that, beyond my own perception of this transcription and my personal memories, the strong relation between Scodanibbio's timbral accuracy and the related variety of performing techniques has an important role in making audible the intimacy with the original, the intensity of the relation with it. An excerpt of Scodanibbio's transcription for string quartet can be heard in audio example 4.

Audio 4. Scodanibbio, excerpt from "Fernando Sor: Studio op. 35, no. 22" (*Quattro Pezzi Spagnoli*), performed by Quartetto Prometeo:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Scodanibbio-Sor_-AUDIO_Quattro-Pezzi-Spagnoli-Studio.mp3

Transcriptions can highlight or reveal hidden sides of original works. One can listen to Wendy Carlos's music for Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) with this perspective: Carlos's "March from *A Clockwork Orange*" and "Title Music from *A Clockwork Orange*" are electronic transcriptions of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Symphony no. 9 (1826) and Henry Purcell's *Funeral of Queen Mary* (1695). The way in which these transcriptions transform the

originals can be perceived as the distorted reality experienced by the main character, a violent and charismatic young man leading a small gang. Or, to mention an example in a very different vein, Mozart's music can be experienced as a reflection on the enchantment and apparent simplicity of childhood in Gervasoni's *Adagio ghiacciato* (2012) for violin and toy piano (or prepared piano), heard in audio example 5.

Audio 5. Gervasoni, *Adagio ghiacciato (d'après Mozart)*, performed by Aldo Orvieto, piano, and Saori Furukawa, violin:
https://youtu.be/SN1yuyttjGs?si=E00zmPruXf6qW3zZ

In the booklet for Quartetto Prometeo's *Reinventions* CD, Scodanibbio's aphoristic program notes about his transcriptions for string quartet distill many of the topics that I am dealing with in my research:

> Kaleidoscopic appearance, through the use of harmonics
> Bowing technique and slowed-down tempos
> Reclothing – estrangement
> Original figures emerging 'in shadow'
> As if somehow in mist (mannerist painting)
> Or behind a gauze (Degas)
> But also divisionism (Webern!) and Baroque philology.
> (Scodanibbio 2013)

Here Scodanibbio refers to the way in which an original work can appear kaleidoscopic in a transcription: The slowed-down tempo and an extremely detailed use of contemporary instrumental techniques – e.g., harmonics, bowing techniques such as *sul tasto* and *sul ponte* – are some of the tools transcribers can use to dissect and fragment the original, highlighting particular details. A crucial point is that through transcribing, it is possible to compose the distance that separates and at the same time connects the original and the transcriber (and then the audience): Scodanibbio describes this distance as a shadow from which the original emerges, or as a gauze interposed between an observer and an object. Both of these metaphors describe a form of mediation constituted, for instance, by the passing of time, by the historicity of the original work (and of the transcriber), or by individual or collective memories. In the same sense, Dieter Schnebel uses the image of a sound screen (*Blendwerk*) when writing about his *Schubert-Phantasie*. And Gérard Pesson describes, when writing about his *Nebenstück*, the transcriber's memory as a sea into which the original musical work has sunk. As I mentioned in chapter 1 when discussing Schnebel and Pesson, the medium of transcribing through which we can access an original work is at the same time perceived as an obstacle to an impossible immediate – non-mediated – perception.

Scodanibbio ends his program notes by mentioning Webern and Baroque philology. While Webern's transcription of J. S. Bach's "Ricercar a 6" from the *Musikalisches Opfer* is an unavoidable reference for composer-transcribers, and, in Scodanibbio's words, "the unsurpassable example from the 20th century" (Scodanibbio 2019, 294), Baroque philology and especially the present-day Historically Informed Performance (HIP) movement constitute an important example of a critical approach to the music of the past directed towards the research of an original sound through investigation and experimentation on period instruments and their performance practices. The HIP approach is significant, as it rarely takes for granted what an original is, critically questioning the originality of manuscripts and acknowledging the historicity of the music being performed. Furthermore, HIP musicians and researchers aim to rediscover lost performing practices, and in doing so, have (re-)invented forgotten sounds.

Richard Barrett's transcription of "Deuil angoisseus" by the Franco-Flemish composer Gilles Binchois (ca. 1400–1460) is a distinct and recent example of a possible way of embracing Webern's legacy in transcribing a polyphonic work. In particular, Barrett's work shows how the individual voices can be distributed to different instruments and also projected onto higher octaves through the use of string harmonics. Barrett's transcription of "Deuil angoisseus" is the third of *3 chansons* (2021), the composer's collection of three transcriptions for ten instruments of music by Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474), Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300-1377), and Binchois. In the score's performing notes, Barrett makes explicit an unexpected closeness to the HIP aesthetic when he writes:

> […] at the same time, while 'modern' instruments are used, they should be approached in such a way that bears in mind the kinds of instruments that might originally have been used to play this music. In particular, vibrato shouldn't be used, articulation should be sensitive without sounding 'classically' polished, and the different registers of each instrument should again be timbrally distinct rather than homogenized. (These are all features of my own compositions also!). (Barrett 2021a)

This aesthetic positioning shows how early and contemporary experimental music can share some important features, particularly the attention to the singularity of the timbre and to the individuality of every register of the instruments, in contrast to a classical approach, where good articulation is intended to be "polished" and the different registers of the instruments are as homogenized as possible. This aesthetic principle guides the training of the performers, but it has primarily determined the transformation of how the instruments are built along the centuries.

Coming back to Barrett's transcription of Binchois's "Deuil angoisseus" and the fragmentation of the single voices, it is insightful to compare the first three "bars" of the original (figure 5), with the first three bars of the score (figure 6).

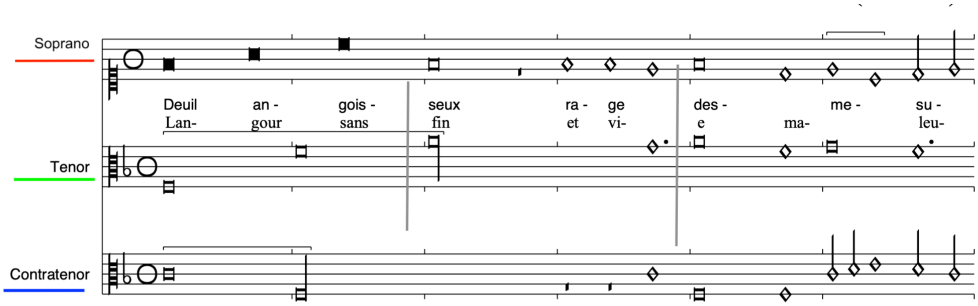


Figure 5. Binchois, "Deuil angoisseus," incipit

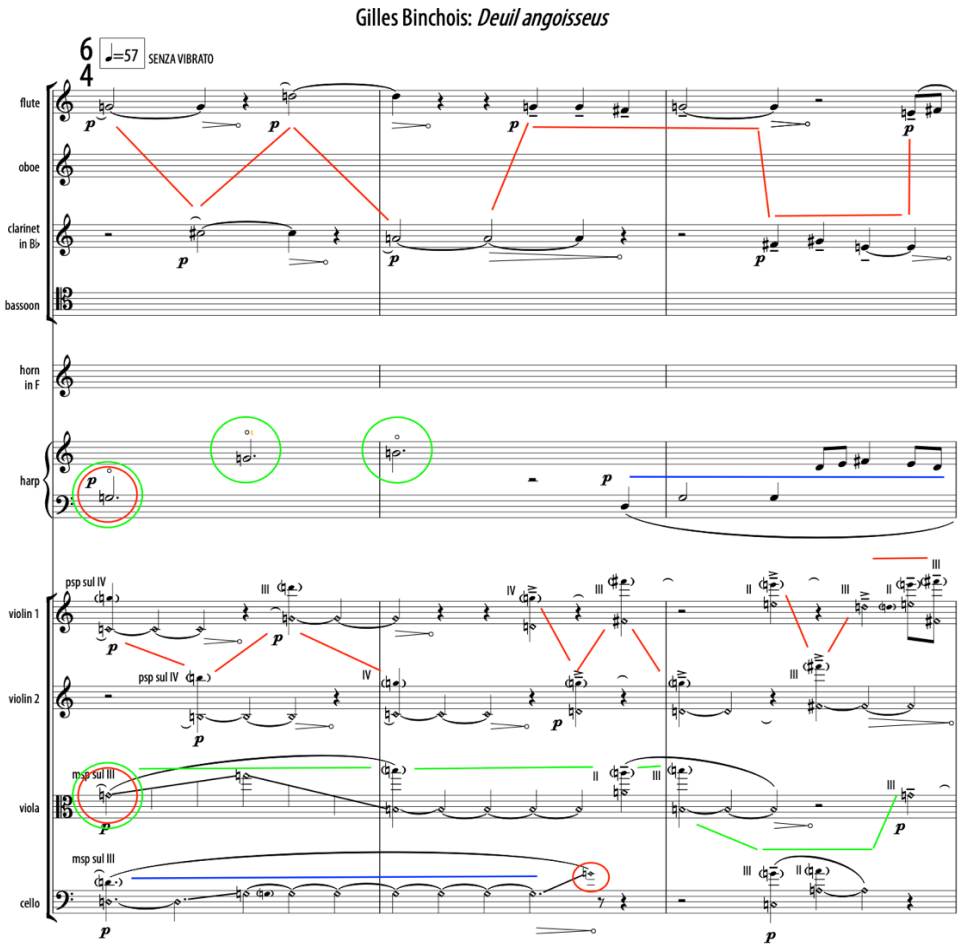


Figure 6. Barrett, "Gilles Binchois: Deuil angoisseus" (*3 chansons*), bars 1-3

Audio 6. Barrett, "Gilles Binchois: Deuil angoisseus" (*3 chansons*), bars 1-3, performed by Ensemble Studio 6: http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Barrett_Binchois-audio-example.mp3

Barrett's transcription has been transposed up a major second from the three manuscripts that contain this piece. This option allows for a larger use of the strings' natural harmonics (i.e., harmonics performed on open strings).
As can be seen in figure 6, I have highlighted the three voices of the original in the first bars of Barrett's score in order to show how he divided them among the instruments. The soprano line, outlined in red, is played by the flute and the clarinet, never playing exactly together, but alternating and overlapping. The same line is doubled and alternated by the two violins, who play harmonics *poco sul ponticello* one octave higher. In the second and third bars, when the soprano line becomes more articulated, the division between the flute and clarinet pair and the two violins is no longer upheld.
On the one hand, Barrett's writing maintains the recognizability of the soprano line, but on the other, it highlights and isolates the single notes, thanks to their individual timbral treatment. The tenor line, outlined in green, is transposed up one octave, played by harmonics on the harp and viola: The first G coincides with the one played by the flute, and in this way, the soprano and tenor lines meld together even more. Furthermore, the viola connects the three first notes of the tenor line with a glissando of natural harmonics on an open string. The cello does the same, connecting its first two notes (D and G) with a glissando of harmonics on its third open string. The way in which the cello disappears *al niente* in bar 2 – a glissando of natural harmonics that ends on the G which belongs to the soprano line (played by the flute) – is a small but relevant detail, showing the transcriber's attitude in inhabiting the original's polyphonic space: Even elements such as the ending point of a glissando that disappears *al niente* belongs to the original's polyphony. This passage can be heard in audio example 6.
The projection onto higher octaves and the large use of natural harmonics and glissandi determine a very characteristic sound, which, in a way, uses the notes of the original not only as notes of one voice in a polyphonic piece, but also as a network of points that delimits the glissandi and frames a distinct sound world inhabited and produced by specific instrumental gestures. Here again is the legacy left by Webern's transcription of J. S. Bach's *Ricercare*, and the capacity of transcribing to occupy a polyphonic space in diverse ways, enabling the emergence and actualization of connections that are virtually present in the original polyphonic texture.

Transcribing Gesualdo

Transcribing Gesualdo's music in 2013 was not a random choice for me, as it was in fact the 400th anniversary of the composer's death. Furthermore, Gesualdo was not only one of the most important composers of the late Renaissance, but he is also a central figure in the landscape of contemporary transcriptions. Transcribing his music therefore also means encountering his legacy in the works of other composers and entering into the discourse constituted by the several transcriptions of his music created in the context of contemporary music.

Glenn Watkins, the musicologist and leading expert of Gesualdo's music, dedicated "Stoking the Flame," the eleventh chapter of his book *The Gesualdo Hex: Music, Myth and Memory* (Watkins, 2010), to transcriptions of and works inspired by Gesualdo's music. He describes the interest many contemporary composers have in Gesualdo, but he never delves into any musical detail. Some remarkable examples he includes are Louis Andriessen's *Principe* (1974), Ton de Leeuw's *Lamento Pacis* (1969), and Peter Maxwell Davies's *Tenebrae super Gesualdo* (1972). Watkins also includes an appendix titled "A Gesualdo Breviary" that lists a number of works inspired by Gesualdo's music.[2]

Unlike Watkins, musicologist Marilena Laterza presents a detailed analysis of four transcriptions of Gesualdo's madrigal "Moro, lasso al mio duolo" in the second part of her book *Gesualdo more or less. Sulla riscrittura nella musica contemporanea*: Salvatore Sciarrino's *Le voci sottovetro* (1998) for voice and ensemble, Luca Francesconi's *Respondit* (1997) for five instruments and electronics, Bruce Adolphe's *Oh Gesualdo, Divine Tormentor!* (2003-4) for string quartet, and Peter Eötvös's *Drei Madrigalkomödie* (1990) for twelve voices. This analysis enables her to explore different transcribing attitudes and approaches to the same original musical work, and to illustrate her understanding of the practice of transcribing as a "creative hermeneutic experience," and as a "dialogue between the present and past," where the transcriber must question not only the original "but also themselves, because the answer, the interpretation, and the rewriting find place in the mediation between the transcriber's world and that of the original one." Laterza effectively uses the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's ideas from *Wahrheit und Methode* (1972) to present transcriptions as "incarnated acts of interpretation" and as "fusions of horizons" (Laterza 2017, 53–55). Her perspective resonates with Peter Szendy's idea of considering transcriptions as "traces of actual attitudes of listening" (Szendy 2008, 102). Furthermore, following Gadamer's ideas, she makes explicit that the transcriber's finitude – i.e., their prior involvement and partiality – is not a barrier to approaching a musical work from the past, but rather an enabling condition. The transcriber's

[2] An update to Watkins's extensive list of works inspired by Gesualdo's music can be found in more recent publications. These include Marilena Laterza's book *Gesualdo more or less*, which offers detailed analyses of works based on Gesualdo's music by composers such as Bruce Adolphe, Brett Dean, Luca Francesconi, Georg Friedrich Haas, Bruno Mantovani, Lucia Ronchetti, and Salvatore Sciarrino. Other examples based on Gesualdo's music are included in a list of transcriptions from 1985 to 2016; Laterza's selection aims to demonstrate the widespread adoption of the practice of transcribing music from the past among contemporary composers (Laterza 2017, 159-171). Other relevant sources include the essays collected in the conference proceedings *Gesualdo dentro il Novecento* (Tortora 2017), particularly the second part of Dinko Fabris's article "Gesualdo: a Renaissance Myth for the Third Millennium: A Tribute to Glenn Watkins" (Fabris 2017). In this article, Fabris presents an updated bibliography and provides an in-depth discussion of two recent operas by contemporary composers who have been deeply influenced by the life and music of the Prince of Venosa: Francesco d'Avalos's *Maria di Venosa* (completed in 1992, recorded in 2005, and performed live in 2013), and Bo Holten's *Gesualdo-Shadows* (2014).

horizon, determined by their historically determined situatedness, is not something fixed, but it is susceptible to change in the practice of transcribing itself, thanks to a process of mediation between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, with neither remaining unaffected.

Among the transcriptions considered by Laterza, Sciarrino's *Le voci sottovetro* (1998) is an important case study for my research. For the works that I have mentioned up to this point, I have not needed to consider the presence of a text. Indeed, my *Une petite fleur bleue* is a transcription of Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali* for organ, and Webern's *Fuga Ricercata* is a transcription of J. S. Bach's *Musikalisches Opfer*, which, even if lacking instrumental designation, cannot be considered a vocal work, or at least does not have any words to be sung. Transcribing a madrigal thus presents itself as a new and substantially different situation.
Sciarrino's transcription of "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo" from Gesualdo's *Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro Sesto* (1611), is one of four transcriptions of music by Gesualdo that constitutes Sciarrino's *Le voci sottovetro* (1998). Here, Sciarrino's adapts a five-voice madrigal to an ensemble of one voice and eight instruments. This example makes clear how Sciarrino composes the vocal part of his transcription, selecting a new path for his singer through the original polyphony, and creating a new melody that was nevertheless virtually present in the original. The beginning of Gesualdo's madrigal can be heard in audio example 7 and seen in figure 7.

Audio 7. Gesualdo, "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo" (*Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro sesto*), performed by Ensemble Métamorphoses:
https://youtu.be/6dVPu71D8VI?si=9DdkXCisx4tHV-4l

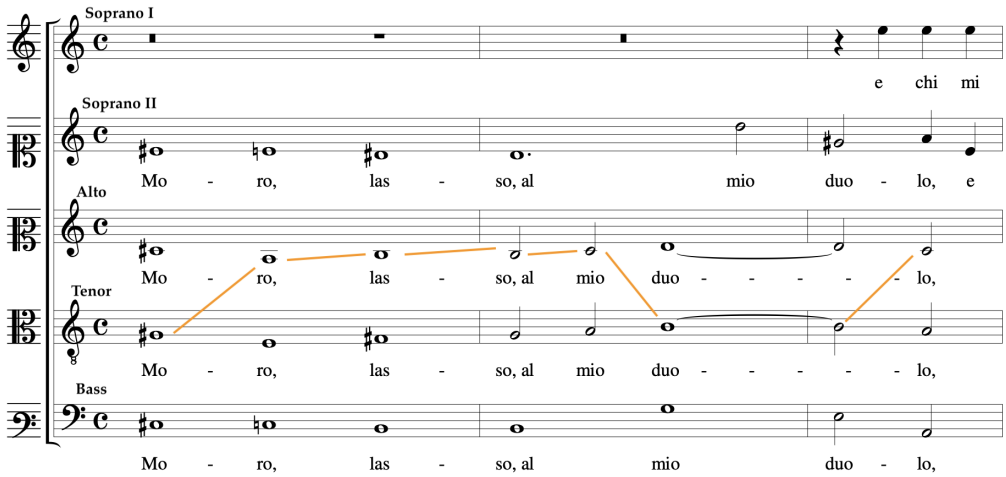


Figure 7. Gesualdo, "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo" (*Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro sesto*), bars 1-3

In the score of the original, I have highlighted the vocal line of Sciarrino's transcription. Figure 8 and audio example 8 present an excerpt from Sciarrino's transcription.

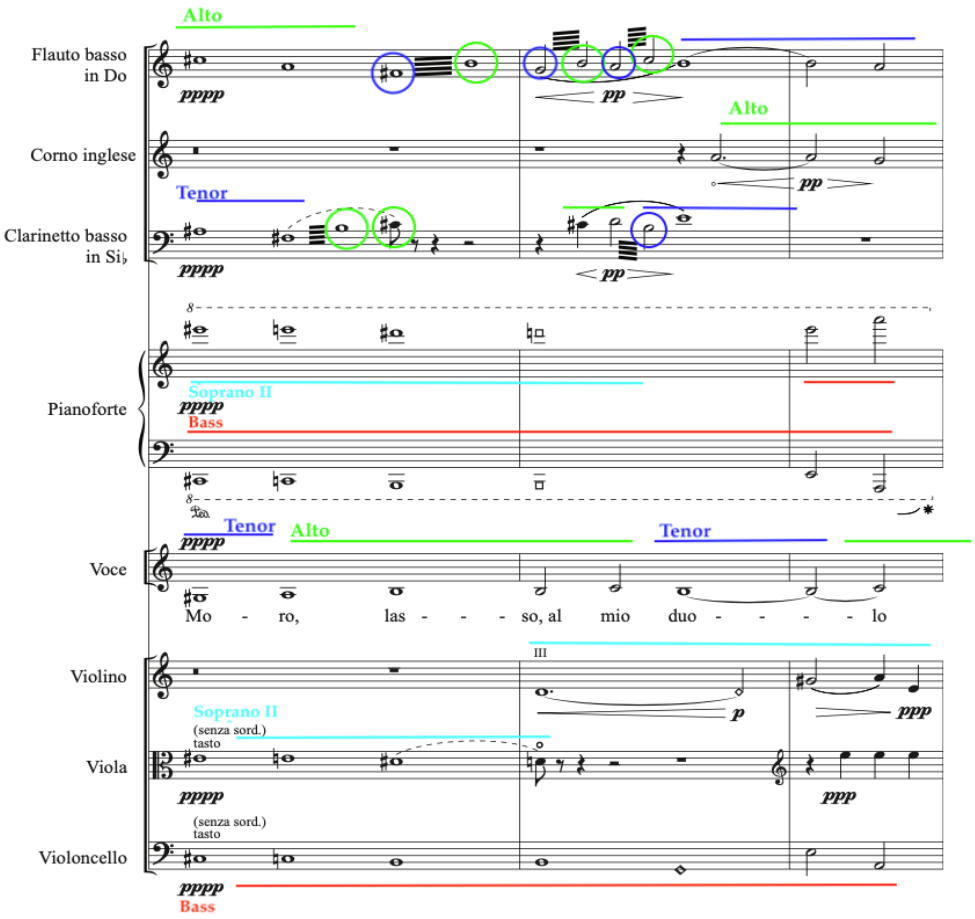


Figure 8. Sciarrino, "Moro, lasso" (*Le voci sottovetro*), bars 1-3

Audio 8. Sciarrino, "Moro, lasso" (*Le voci sottovetro*), bars 1-3, performed by Ensemble Recherche:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Sciarrino_Gesualdo-esempio-audio.mp3

Sciarrino derives the vocal line by selecting fragments from all five voices of the madrigal. In the three bars shown in figure 8, the voice alternates between the alto and the tenor lines of the original. The bass flute and the bass clarinet also share these two lines, alternating between themselves and blending through *tremoli* in bars 1 and 2. The soprano II line is divided between the violin and the viola, while the cello plays the bass voice's line. The musical space is further expanded by the piano, which plays the two outer voices – soprano II (before the soprano I enters) and bass – with one of them three octaves above and the other two octaves below the original.

As in some of the previous examples, the voices of the original polyphony are fragmented and distributed among the instruments, and the original polyphonic texture becomes a space inhabited by new sounds. Sciarrino's vocal line has a new character and new melodic intervals – it is a simple ascending melody; nevertheless, the notes of this melody are all present in the original, in different voices. More importantly, in Sciarrino's transcription, the presence of a single voice singing the poetic text of the original transforms a polyphonic madrigal into the lyrical intimacy of a Lied for voice and instruments.

The transcriptions by Gervasoni, Barrett, Scodanibbio, and Sciarrino that I have discussed so far illustrate various personal approaches to engaging with musical works. All of them inhabit and transform the polyphonic space of the original works with great attention to timbral dimensions and refined instrumental writing. In this way, they compose and stage (make audible) the mediation of the original works. Working on *Hortense*, my transcription of a Gesualdo madrigal, I continued to align with this approach, but I sought to engage with the original and its vocal nature primarily through the madrigal's poetic text.

Hortense

I explicitly intended for *Hortense*, my transcription for string trio of Gesualdo's madrigal "Languisce al fin," to go one step further than *Une petite fleur bleue*, in terms of transcribing with more artistic freedom. In continuity with my previous experience in transcribing one of Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali* (translated as "Musical Flowers" in English), I chose the title *Hortense*, which denotes a flower, but also signifies a female name and is a reference to a passage of Amelia Rosselli's poem *The Dragonfly* (1958). While the connection to Frescobaldi's musical flowers is apparent, it is valuable to briefly explore certain texts where flowers manifest a profound association between past, memory, and tradition on the one hand, and future and desire on the other. Flowers, in this context, assume a symbolic role that permeates my transcriptions. It is worth noting that the title of Frescobaldi's collection of pieces likely alludes to the term "anthology," which originates from ancient Greek and literally translates as "collection of flowers." *Une petite fleur bleue* also references Raymond Queneau's novel *The Blue Flowers* (originally published in French as *Les Fleurs bleues* in 1965), a work that was also significant for my larger project, *Tutto chiudi negli occhi*, a transcription that I will discuss further in chapter 5. The expression "blue flowers" appears only twice in Queneau's novel, both times when the Duke of Auge, one of the two main characters, contemplates the historical situation from the summit of a tower. One instance is found at the very conclusion of the narrative, where the Duke "went over to the battlements to consider, be it ever so little, the historical situation. A layer of mud still covered the earth, but he could already see, blossoming here and there, some little blue flowers" (Queneau 1985, 224). This description of the little blue flowers blossoming up through the mud reminded me of the opening of T. S. Eliot's seminal poem *The Waste Land:*

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
(Eliot, 1922)

Flowers signify memory and remembrance, and, at the same time, new life and desire that blossom from a "somewhat confused" historical situation (Queneau, 1985, 7). Transcriptions share with flowers this entanglement of memory and novelty.

Also in continuity with *Une petite fleur bleue*, I chose to transcribe a polyphonic piece for strings, and I kept the same approach concerning the slowness of the tempo: As I wrote in chapter 1, I wanted a tempo slow enough to allow ample space for articulating – and subsequently perceiving – the continual shifts in sound. Simultaneously, I aimed for a pace not so slow as to disrupt the linear melodic connection between each note. My intention was for these two aspects – my intervention on the timbral dimension and the melodic linear continuity of the original – to be perceptible concurrently. I sought to enable the listener to shift their focus between the two, perceiving their interrelation.
A substantial difference with *Une petite fleur bleue* was that the original on which *Hortense* is based is a madrigal for five voices singing a text. I opted to transcribe it for a string trio, which posed a notable limitation due to the challenge of transcribing five voices for three instruments. This limitation compelled me to make clear musical choices to adapt (and adopt) the original work effectively.

In madrigals, the relationship between music and words is fundamental, with music employing madrigalisms – i.e., devices such as word-painting – to render and illustrate the text. Though the text of the madrigal is not actually sung in *Hortense*, it nevertheless deeply informed the music: I engaged with the formal choices that Gesualdo derived from the poetic text, dividing the composition into subsections that correspond to the text's fundamental meanings. (The verses are written in the score, readable by the musicians, to indicate the different sections of the transcription.) In this way, the presence of a text, especially a poetic one, has often become a central element in my transcribing process.
Gesualdo's setting of the poetic text uses various musical solutions and dedicates a more or less extensive space to each verse. Transcribing Gesualdo's madrigal allowed me to closely consider his musical choices and play with his music, transforming and adapting it to a new context. In transcribing the madrigal for a string trio, I drew guidance from both the text and Gesualdo's musical interpretation of it. During this process, I made deliberate additions and omissions, expanding certain passages while leaving out others.

Before going into the details of my transcription, it is useful to read the text of the madrigal (and its English translation):

Languisce al fin chi da la vita parte
E di morte il dolore
L'affligge sì che in crude pene more.
Ahi, che quello son io,
Dolcissimo cor mio,
Che da voi parto e per mia crudel sorte
La vita lascio e me ne vado a morte.

The one who is departing life languishes in the end,
And the suffering of death
So afflicts him, that he dies in cruel pain.
Alas, that person is me,
My sweetest heart
I leave you, and, my cruel fate is such
That I leave life for death.

Gesualdo dedicates nine bars to the first line, as presented in figure 9 and audio example 9.

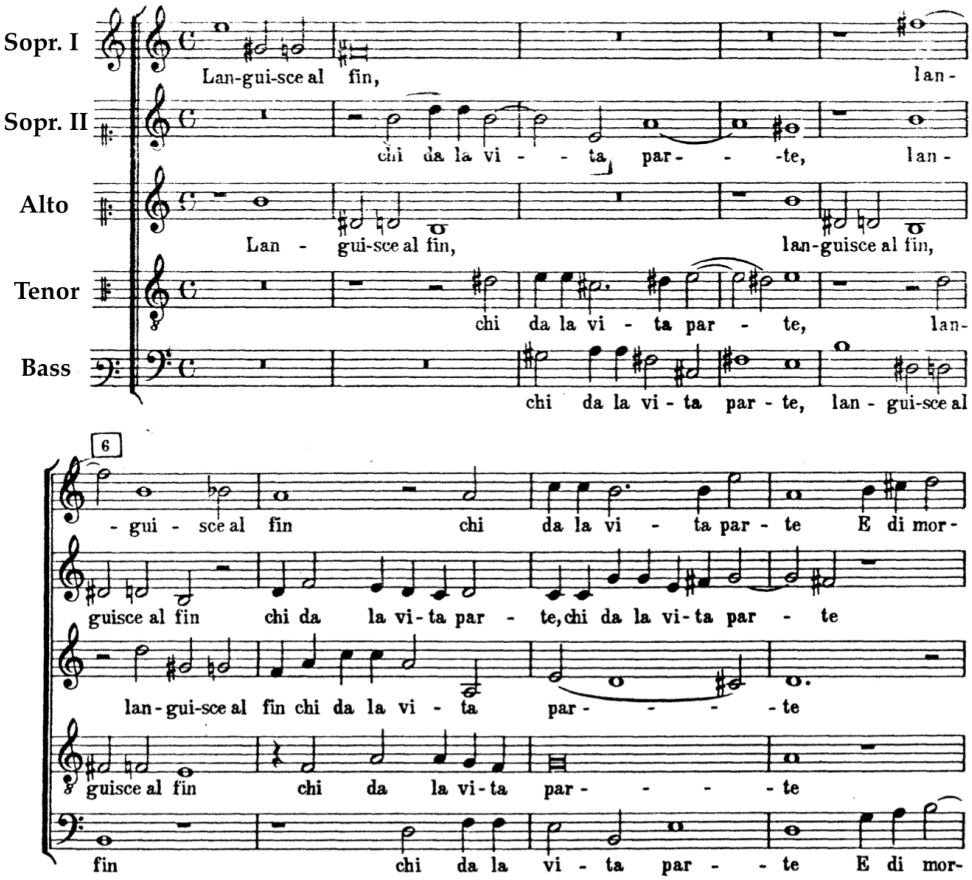


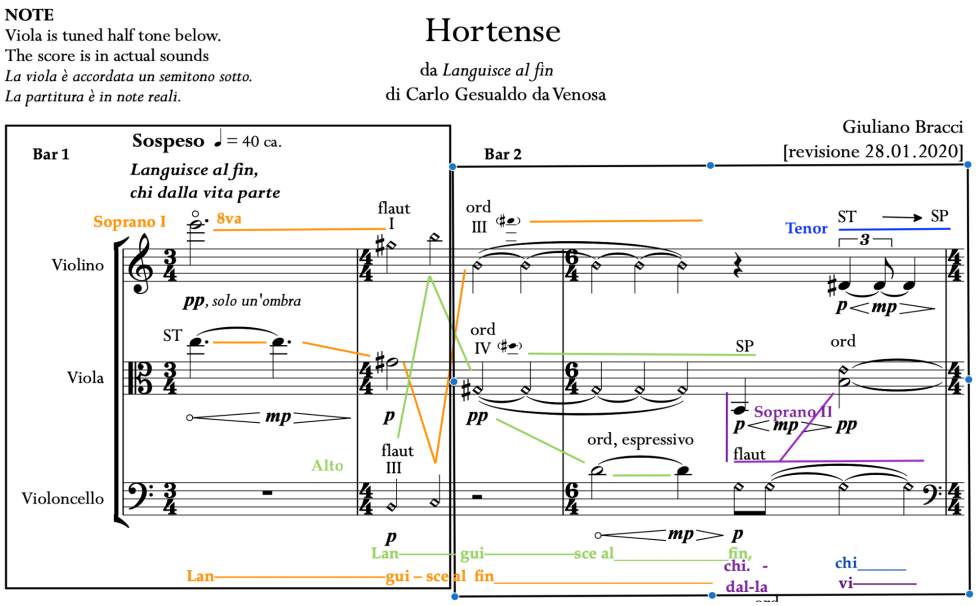
Figure 9. Gesualdo, "Languisce al fin" (*Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro quinto*), bars 1-9. A complete score can be consulted here:[3]
https://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Gesualdo_Languisce-al-fin_SCORE.pdf

Audio 9. Gesualdo, "Languisce al fin" (*Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro quinto*), performed by Ensemble Métamorphoses, bars 1-9:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Gesualdo_languisce-al-fin_audio_esempio-1.mp3

In *Hortense* all of these bars are transcribed – even if a voice is sometimes partially omitted – and the same section lasts more than double the time (compare audio example 9 with audio example 10). The tempo is slowed down quite extremely, which creates space for listeners to focus on the timbral details obtained by a palette of performing techniques, and on the broader use of registers.

Audio 10. *Hortense*, performed by the New European Ensemble, bars 1-13:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Bracci_Hortense_NeUE_orgelpark-2016-audio-esempio-1.mp3

As an example of the relation between *Hortense* and "Languisce al fin," I will focus on my transcription of the very first two bars of Gesualdo's madrigal. In figure 10, each black square corresponds to one of Gesualdo's bars.



[3] It is noteworthy that the *New Gesualdo Edition* (Caraci Vela, Fabris, and Ziino, 2017-present), a new critical edition of the complete works by Gesualdo, is in progress at the Bärenreiter Verlag.

Figure 10. Bracci, *Hortense*, bars 1-4

Audio 11. Bracci, *Hortense*, performed by the New European Ensemble, bars 1-4:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Bracci_Hortense_NeUE_orgelpark-2016-audio-esempio-2.mp3

The pulse of 1/2 in "Languisce al fin" corresponds to the pulse of 1/4 in *Hortense*, a simple adaptation of the notation. Furthermore, in *Hortense* I freely extended the duration of every syllable of the text to respond to the musical needs of the new context. Therefore, there is no longer an exact correspondence in terms of bars and durations between *Hortense* and the original Gesualdo madrigal. Durations, as well as bar lengths and their divisions, follow the breath of the musical events. They follow my listening of Gesualdo's music – the wider sense of transcribing as a form of listening – and Gesualdo's approach to setting a poetic text to music.

As in the previous examples, I have highlighted in the score of the transcription the individual voices of the original madrigal. However, the unity of these voices is not maintained in the transcription. Similar to *Une petite fleur bleue*, the individual notes create a polyphonic texture that gives room to imagining new melodic connections – connections that are virtually present in the original – and new instrumental gestures.
Throughout the transcription process, I maintained a constant awareness of the vocal nature of the original work. I imagined the words themselves being transcribed, and their meaning and sounds – the vowels, the syllables, and their accents – were crucial factors in my musical decisions. Figure 10 and audio example 11 – which I will discuss in detail below – provide a concrete example of this approach. In Figure 10, I have explicitly matched each note in *Hortense* with the corresponding syllable from the madrigal's text. Even though the madrigal's voices are fragmented and dispersed across different registers, the instruments continue to echo a – by now – concealed poem.
The primary transformations applied to the original composition include the adoption of a slower tempo, the freedom to utilize different octaves and registers, the introduction of doublings, and the use of harmonics. Furthermore, I exercised the liberty to extend certain notes, allowing them to intersect and collide with subsequent notes. In this way, I simulated a resonant acoustic space, allowing notes that appeared subsequently in the original to coexist simultaneously. This technique, akin to what occurred in *Une petite fleur bleue*, holds a closer relationship with Gesualdo's musical style, particularly evident in the descending chromatic lines. Chromaticism – a distinctive expressive device in Gesualdo's music – produces melodic tension. The tension between the notes

only exists in the listening experience, as it is there, as if in a virtual acoustic space, that the notes coexist and collide. In transcribing, I worked with this virtual acoustic space, actualizing what is virtual in the listening experience.

Audio example 11 makes clear how the beginning of Gesualdo's madrigal is transformed in *Hortense*. The madrigal begins with the soprano I singing the syllable "lan" on the note E, while in *Hortense*, the viola plays this note with a dynamic that mimics the vocal gesture of a *messa di voce*, the gradual swelling and diminishing of sound that gives shape to a long note. The viola is doubled, one octave above, by the violin playing a static harmonic sound, an icy shadow projected into the high register. The second note of the soprano I – a G♯, on the syllable "gui"– is again shared by the viola and the violin, this time with the violin's harmonic two octaves higher than the viola. The cello also enters at the same time, playing the B (on a harmonic that sounds two octaves above the written B) of the alto; this note then passes to the violin which projects it up one octave. The melodic descending chromaticism (G♯–G♮) in *Hortense* becomes both melodic and harmonic, as the G♯ is held longer by the viola, while the cello plays the G (a harmonic notated as a C). The same collision happens with the melodic interval D♯–D♮ originally sung by the alto on the text "-gui-sce," and highlighted in green in *Hortense*: The viola holds the D♯ while the cello plays the D♮. The alto line then concludes with the B of the viola.
The phrase of the soprano II – "chi dalla vita…" in the original, highlighted in purple in *Hortense* – is divided between the cello ("dal-la") and the viola ("vi-ta"). Following the same principle to emphasize and render Gesualdo's chromaticism, the cello prolongs the D (notated as a natural harmonic G) that then collides with the D♯ of the tenor voice played by the violin. The word "chi" of the soprano II line is not omitted, but implied by the same note (a low B) played by the viola.

The original lines of Gesualdo's madrigal are reshaped. The chant stays present, although transformed and hidden by the instruments. These are a few minute details, but my transcription also transforms the original at a wider formal level. Gesualdo set the poetic text to music, and in doing so, he allocated different space to different verses, imbuing them with varying formal significance within the madrigal. His musical decisions were influenced by the expressive possibilities of the text. Through transcribing and trying to gain access to the composer's musical choices – as if they were still open and could be different – I was able to get a closer perspective on Gesualdo's work. This allowed me to adapt his music into the novel context crafted by my transcription.

While I meticulously transcribed the verse "languisce al fin, chi dalla vita parte," the subsequent verses served as a creative departure point, albeit not fully

realized. The presence of three instruments coupled with the extremely slow tempo and deep attention to the timbral dimension led me to create a synthesis, a reshaping, in order to convey Gesualdo's original. Every repetition within Gesualdo's madrigal is a deliberate element, serving the intricate interplay of voices. In the significantly elongated duration of the transcription, these repetitions, if fully rendered, would have risked verbosity, so to speak. However, the most substantial formal intervention did arise directly from the text.

In the first part of the poetic text, the narrator speaks in the third person about someone who is dying. In the central verse "Ahi, che quello son io" (Alas, that person is me), there is a sudden shift to the first person, marking a formal turning point. As shown in figure 11, Gesualdo emphasizes this line significantly: The voices sing "Ahi" together only once, and the verse is given two bars isolated by rests (bars 21-22). The absence of repetitions and the clarity of homorhythm – "Ahi" – make this line highly impactful to the listener. Immediately afterwards, the voices momentarily abandon their imitative approach and proceed homorhythmically, or nearly so, singing the continuation of the line, "dolcissimo cor mio" (my sweetest heart), in bars 23-26. These effects can be heard in audio example 12.

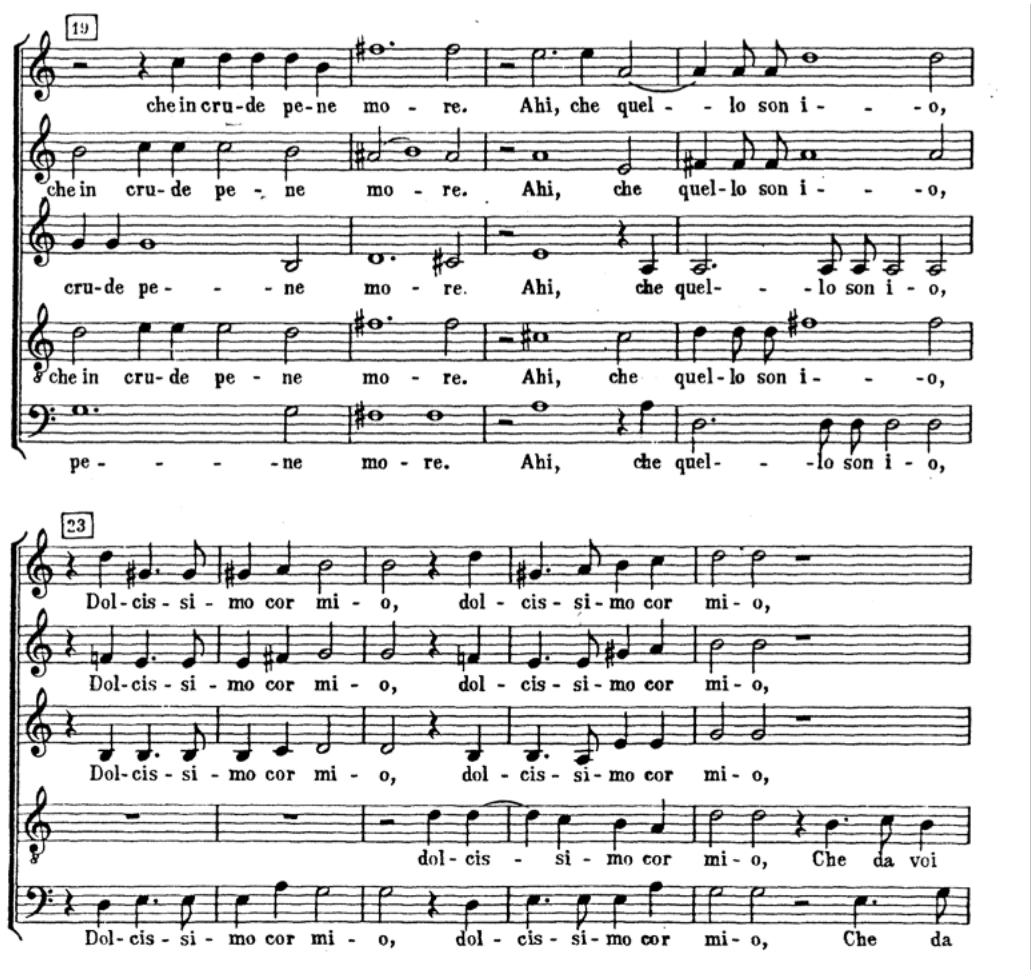
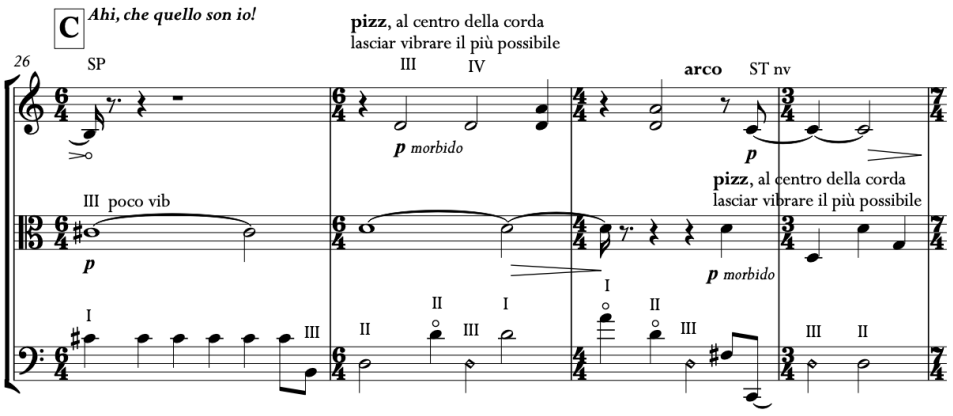


Figure 11. Gesualdo, "Languisce al fin" (*Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro quinto*), bars 19-27

Audio 12. Gesualdo, "Languisce al fin" (*Madrigali a cinque voci. Libro quinto*), performed by Ensemble Métamorphoses, bars 21-27: http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Gesualdo_languisce-al-fin_audio_esempio-21-27.mp3

In *Hortense*, this line also corresponds to a sudden change, explicitly opening a window into my own music. When transcribing, the transcriber focuses on the original and on listening to the "other." The abrupt shift in the text from the third person to the first suggests that the person being talked about, the other, is in fact the one who is speaking – or, in this context, transcribing. Thus, to these verses, I have matched a reverse quotation: Inserted within my transcription of the madrigal by Gesualdo is a quotation from *Un giardino chiaro* (2013), a piece for piano and string quartet that I wrote two years before completing *Hortense*. This quotation – which is, in a way, also now a transcription for a string trio – occupies the entire section C (bars 26-34) of *Hortense*, shown in figure 12. In bars 35-39, Gesualdo's melody for "dolcissimo cor mio" flows seamlessly upon the quotation. This passage can be heard in audio example 13.



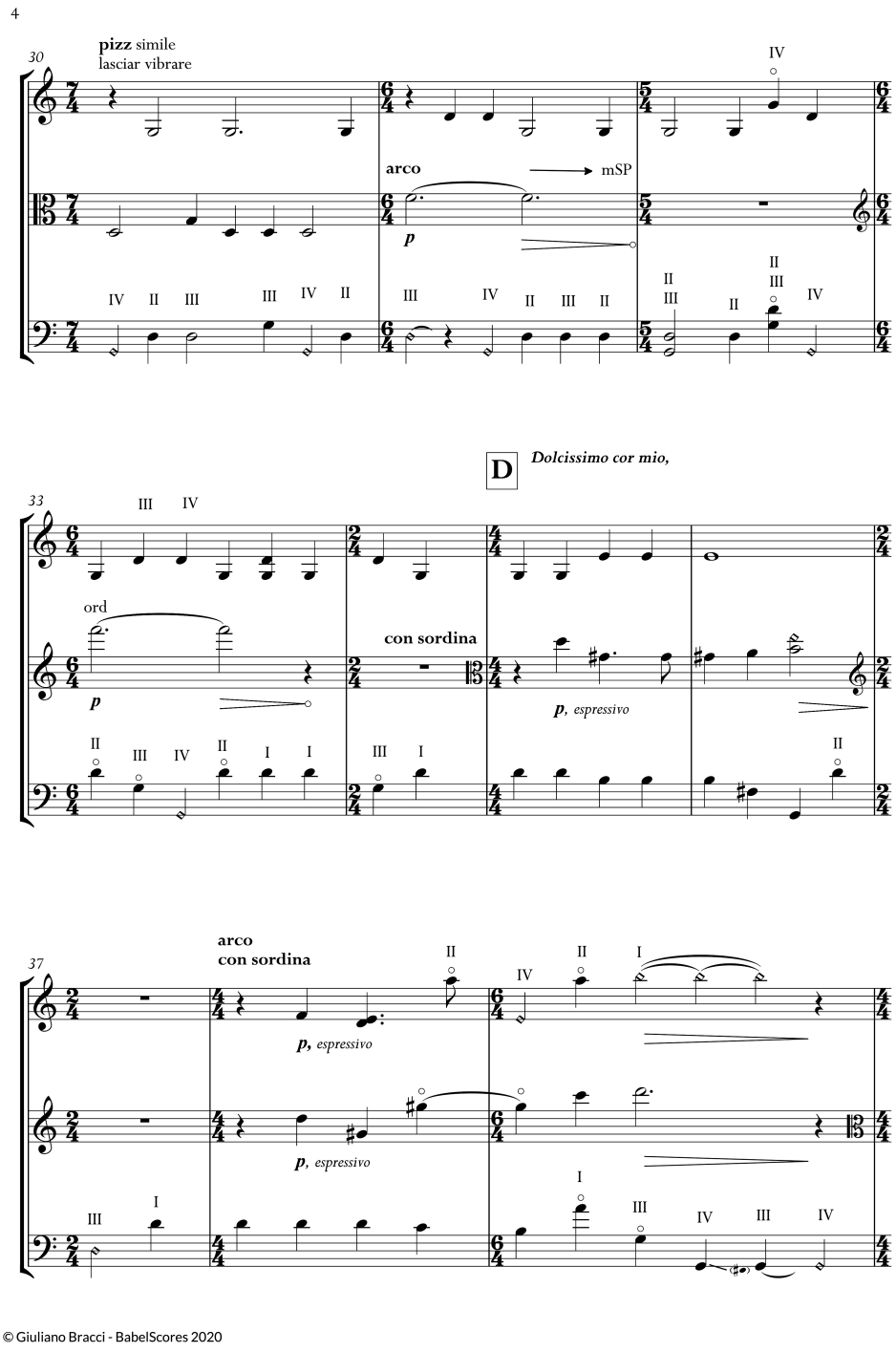


Figure 12. Bracci, *Hortense,* bars 26-39

Audio 13. Bracci, *Hortense,* performed by the New European Ensemble, bars 26-39:
http://giulianobracci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Bracci_Hortense_NeUE_orgelpark-2016-audio-26-39-nuova-versione.mp3

Conclusion

Aiming to shed light on the multifaceted nature of the practice of transcribing, I have used this chapter to discuss the motivations that led me to create *Hortense*. With this piece, I continued exploring the boundaries of what transcribing could mean, seeking an approach to the original that was simultaneously more intimate and more free, and following Derrida's idea of showing respect for the original by acting ungrateful, assuming the "risk of betrayal" and looking for strategies to create openings that would allow the original musical work to contaminate and transform my language as a transcriber. Before addressing my transcription work, I examined recent experiences of other composer-transcribers such as Gervasoni, Scodanibbio, and Barrett. While discussing these examples, I delved into themes related to transcription, such as intimacy with the original work, the ability to account for the inevitably mediated perception of an original piece, and the possibility of embracing Webern's legacy regarding transcription. By examining excerpts from scores and recordings, I connected these themes to concrete musical choices, both technical and aesthetic.

For further critical contextualization, I placed *Hortense* and my transcription practice within the landscape of Gesualdo's music transcriptions. I then dove into the details of a page from Sciarrino's *Le voci sottovetro*. Subsequently, I explored Laterza's understanding of transcription as a hermeneutic mediation between the transcriber's world and that of the original work, an approach rooted in Gadamer's ideas of the fusion of horizons. Laterza's concept of transcriptions as "incarnated acts of interpretation" highlighted that the transcriber's situatedness is not a hindrance but the very enabling condition for engaging with an original musical work. Moreover, and more importantly, the transcriber's inherent situatedness is a dynamic element that can evolve within the very practice of transcription. Similarly, it works the other way around: Due to one's situatedness – which is, in a way, always singular – a transcription can take various forms.

Hortense presents one significant difference compared to *Une petite fleur bleue*: The original contains a poetic text. This presence altered my approach to the original work and broadened my perspective on transcribing, adding an additional layer of meaning to this practice. Moreover, my decision to transcribe a five-voice madrigal for a string trio forced me to move away from a literal rendition of the original voices, compelling me to explore new solutions.

In the process of transcribing, a triangulation emerged between Gesualdo's music, the madrigal's poetic text, and my transcription. The text of the madrigal became a map through which I navigated Gesualdo's music, providing concrete guidance and enhancing my understanding of it. This triangulation also created a broader space of freedom compared to my previous work: A more articulated context allowed me to engage with the original in diverse ways, culminating in

the idea described in the last example – suggested by the poetic text – of incorporating a quotation from my own music within the transcription, explicitly transitioning from a third-person to a first-person narrative.

In conclusion, my relationship with the madrigal's text, and thus the triangulation of text-original-transcription, allowed me to explore new aspects of this practice, giving a central role to the poetic words of a vocal work even in the process of creating an instrumental transcription. This new relationship with an original mediated by a poetic text had significant implications for my practice, particularly in *Una notte*, my transcription for voice and orchestra of a Schubert Lied that is at the heart of the next chapter, and that lies on the fertile boundary of what can be understood as transcribing.