

Dinko Fabris

Music and gesture in Caravaggio's paintings: a film

'Caravaggio's genre-like portraiture is found in all the figures, perhaps most strikingly in the topmost Mary with her individual features, arms flung upward' (Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York, 1983), p.176: the painting is reproduced on the cover of the book). This assessment of a painting such as the *Entombment of Christ* (Rome, Pinacoteca Vaticana, dated 1603–04) outlines the role of gesture in Caravaggio's paintings; he is perhaps the first 'modern' painter to insert theatrical gestures in what we can define as a multimedia spectacle. His major contribution to the new Baroque aesthetics does not concern his use of light, but, as acknowledged by his contemporaries, the high degree of the naturalistic reproduction in his paintings. Assembling light and naturalist reproduction, Caravaggio used gesture to give movement to the characters. What we also gain from this painter's masterpieces is a fourth dimension: the sound that was in the background of his painted scenes. In 2002 the totality of Caravaggio's gestures, generating multimedia non-verbal suggestions (through light, costumes, body movements and dance, music), has been the centre of an extraordinary performance, presented by Deda Cristina Colonna (a well-known actress and dancer) and Mara Galassi (one of the best double-harp players of today). The performance, after a successful tour, is now a film, produced by the Marco Fodella Foundation for Early Music in Milan (www.fondazionemarcofodella.it).

It was filmed in a very special place, the Basilica di San Marco in Milan, a medieval church reworked in the Baroque, and visited by the child Mozart. The church offers a stunning set: a splendid chess-board floor and carved wood choir. Francesco Vitali, director of the film and director of photography, as well as lighting designer for the performance, used this marvellous ambience to re-create the play of natural light in Caravaggio (using real candles). This was not mere chance: in addition to his activity as a director, Vitali has gained a reputation as a lighting designer and photographer. His use of the steadycam allows him to follow continually the movement of the actress-dancer, whom the spectator senses as so close as almost to be able to touch.

Deda Cristina Colonna, a marvellous dancer and a magic voice for the rare sentences pronounced during the perfor-

mance, wears various layers of costumes designed by Barbara Petrecca, reproducing the atmosphere, if not directly the source, of Caravaggio's original scenes. For the other protagonist of the film, the harpist Mara Galassi continually playing in a corner, Petrecca has also designed a single sumptuous costume from a late Renaissance model, evoking the celebrated Ladies of Ferrara, the trio of female professional virtuoso players that included the harpist Laura Peverara.

Music is the connective tissue that ensures the project's continuity, while the images (drawn from different paintings) are presented in cycles. The gesture, the spoken voice and the music are the living parts of the performance, reflecting Caravaggio's main technique of painting: 'dal vivo'. It would have been quite easy to use the music directly inserted or referred to in Caravaggio's paintings (on which see the articles by Franca Trinchieri Camiz and Agostino Ziino cited below), but the authors preferred to let the music suggest a wider context: the places and events from the time of the painter. The same occurs with the spoken texts, including fragments from writers not only contemporary with Caravaggio, but also living before or after him.

I will try to summarize here the succession of the main paintings cited or described during the film. (Only a title and a short reference will be given for each painting; in many cases the painting is extant in several replicas in different collections (with different titles).) The first is *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (1597, original in Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum), a motionless space entirely occupied by the dragging of the protagonist's dress; at the same time she listens to a *Fantasia* by Francesco da Milano, originally for lute but performed on the harp, and her voice reads an extract from Vasari's *Life of Giorgione*. The dancer Colonna, then, acts a double role, impersonating in turn the young gentleman and the gipsy in the *Fortune teller* (1593–4, Paris, Louvre), accompanied by dance music on the harp (anonymous Italian manuscript of the mid-16th century) to justify her shift from one character to the other.

The three following scenes (*The basket of fruit* (Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana); *Bacchino malato* (Rome, Galleria Borghese); *Boy peeling a fruit* (New York, private collection)) are accompanied by music by the Roman lute virtuoso Lorenzino (see Dinko Fabris's entry in *New Grove II* and the article by Marco Pesci cited below). The spoken texts are excerpts from contemporary accounts of Caravaggio's life (Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti* (Rome, 1642) and Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672)).