

An Apparition and A Dream

(The accompanying images are found on p.8, below.)

An apparition...

In the summer of 1982, I first visited the historic city of Padova, one well-known for a number of reasons, but perhaps most significantly for its famous university, one of Europe's oldest. But because of the strategic importance of its railway yard, Padova sustained extensive damage from aerial bombardments during the Second World War. For many lovers of Italian Renaissance art, there may have been no single greater war-time loss than portions of Mantegna's legendary fresco cycle at the Church of the Eremitani fathers, destroyed when unexpectedly strong winds blew bombs off course. (Various efforts at recovery and reconstruction have continued to the present day.) Not far from that church is the Scrovegni (or *Arena*) Chapel, whose entire interior was frescoed by Giotto and his assistants. Having already escaped its *planned* destruction in the nineteenth century, the now-venerated Chapel was spared yet again in the twentieth when bombs falling nearby somehow missed it. Also not far away, but in the opposite direction (at the time of my visit) was Padova's *Museo Civico*, the city's Civic Museum - now transferred into newer buildings in the park, located near "Giotto's" chapel - all of them part of a greatly-expanded museum complex.

But at the time of my first visit, the collections of the *Museo Civico* were housed in a centuries-old palazzo, entered (memorably for me) from a piazza. Once inside, one found oneself in a cube-shaped vestibule not unlike that of Florence's Laurentian Library - and one whose most memorable feature was its own beautiful staircase for accessing the floor above. (Having not been back to the space for some forty years, I hope my memories of its architectural aspects are

accurate. I believe that they are, but as to the work of art I encountered there - its details were seared instantly and indelibly into my memory.) The two branches of the divided staircase came together on a landing located about two-thirds of the way up, then completed their ascent moving in opposite directions (away from the landing).

But on the landing stood what was for me at the time an absolutely gripping sculptural group - in part, I imagine, because its sudden appearance before me as I climbed the right-hand staircase towards the landing was so unexpected; in part because the light shining on the work at the time was so perfect for my approach to it; and in part, too, because the group itself is so compositionally memorable.

The work in question is a *Pietà* group by a son of Padova, sculptor Antonio Bonazza (1698-ca.1762). Its structural organization is such a conspicuously triangular arrangement (almost an 'A-frame') - one all-the-more noticeable when approached from below - that it would gladden the heart of any young art history student assigned to write about it - were such a student ever to be given such an assignment, something almost impossible to imagine today. For not only would Bonazza not make it onto any art-historical list of "the *greats*," he might not make it onto any list of "the *goods*" either. In fairness, after coming to know this work, I've sought out other of his works in and around Padova and, while many do demonstrate his mastery of technique and lively imagination, many can also be seen as more typical of Rococo sensibilities than this *Pietà*, which might be his finest work. (I'm not qualified to say much about that, but I can't resist recalling that oft-quoted adage to the effect that everybody has one really good book in him. If that is the case, this could well be his 'really good' one.)

The work owes more than a little to Michelangelo - but a good bit more to Bernini. The three figures that comprise the group are lightly intertwined in such a skillful way as to belie the artist's carefully

conceived and executed use of perspective. The crumpled body of Christ in the foreground can in no way be seen to lie ‘in repose’ (as we sometimes encounter) but lies more (as Prudentius might say) “in ruin.” This Christ has suffered terrible anguish and died. Standing on a stone ledge or low wall just behind his twisted body, Mary his mother looms - almost as if hovering - prominently over the group, unaware of our presence. Her right hand is raised over her son’s head as if *she’s* about to bless *him*, while beneath her left hand we notice (sitting beside her left foot and behind Christ’s legs) an odd little *putto*, a winged cherub whose unusual presence in such a group is our principal reason for examining this work by a less well-known artist.

In more typical depictions of the *Pietà* scene (and especially in older painted versions), there are often more figures present - one of the other Marys, for example, or one of the Josephs (his earthly father, or perhaps the one from Arimathea who offered the use of his own tomb). Nor would it have been unusual in some depictions to find several *putti* present as witnesses to the scene. But this small angel, one of the three figures present, is no observer, he is a participant, and he is the one whose presence leads viewers into pondering the agony and death portrayed and into mourning with him. For, in the left hand (the *sinister* one) of our little *putto*, we see the long square iron nails - now *bent* from use - that had been driven into Christ’s limbs when attaching him to the cross, while in his right he cradles his own head in grief and lamentation - inviting us to pause and share with him in sorrow. Hardly a decorative element or merely an observer, it is he - despite his own diminutive size and apparent insignificance - who most unobtrusively draws us into the work’s terrible reality.

While the work is dazzling, given the brilliant whiteness of its now cleaned polished marble, it was - when I first chanced upon it - far more viscerally gripping, ghost-like and unearthly in appearance. Its location there on the landing was, in every possible sense, a

heightened context in which to have experienced it. The afternoon sun, streaming through windows far above, illuminated it perfectly for me (and for me alone, since I was the only visitor at the time), helping to make Bonazza's Berninian excesses with the drapery of Mary's gown easily read and followed. And painfully clear, too, were aspects of Christ's broken body - his ribs and veins especially - and, of course, the sickeningly bent nails held up for our attention by the sorrowful little *putto*.

But of course, it wasn't merely the rays of sunlight from above on the densely involved sculpture that drew me in so quickly, because everything except those features in highest relief was so shaded, so shadowed and completely darkened by what might well have been centuries of accumulated dust, dirt, and grime. If the piece had ever been cleaned, it would surely have been long before my visit. So the unexpectedly (and lingeringly) powerful impact on me of this *Pietà*, a work from the hand of an artist considered by almost no-one to be of the first rank, can be understood in several ways.

The first is that I myself do (somewhat obviously) feel it to be - when considered alone and placed neither above nor beneath works by some other artists - a work of a certain greatness: in the spatial arrangement of its three figures (especially their perspective); in the intricacy of its highly-evolved *concetto*; in the sheer virtuosity of its execution. The second might be the degree of real surprise I felt in discovering it sitting quietly there on the landing; not even my best guidebook had advised me to expect it. The third must surely be its appearance *in situ* - the context in which I first experienced it - in that beautiful vestibule, positioned on the landing I was climbing to reach (while gazing upwards, of course), and its warm illumination in rays of afternoon sunlight that made it so easy to 'read' initially, despite (and yet, also in part because of) the griminess of its many recesses.

But above all, it was the work's ghostly, other-worldly appearance that electrified me and made me stare and allow myself to be drawn in. We should remember, too, that in older English usage (and as is still the case with German), "spiritual" and "ghostly" are synonyms. Things in and of this immediate world that can be seen and touched are said to be "worldly," while those more properly concerns of the soul or 'spirit' are referred to as "spiritual" (or, in times now past) as "ghostly." Bonazza's *Pietà* is a spiritual work of course, deeply and profoundly so. But when I first experienced the work, it also had a "ghostly," not-quite-of-this-world appearance that endowed it with an even greater affect for me than it might otherwise have had - one that would prove surprisingly durable over the years.

Which is a good thing, because it cannot be experienced in anything like that way today; quite the opposite is the case, in fact. Anyone searching now for the *Pietà* will find it at the end - at the *very* end - of one of the modern wings of Padova's greatly expanded *Museo Civico*, hard by an EXIT. (It does sometimes feel like the work was only grudgingly allowed into the museum's new wing...) Since it sits mere inches above the floor, today's viewer looks down on it (or on most of it, anyway), much as a curator must have 'looked down on it' when deciding to shove it back into its tight corner, jammed in so near other works as to make it impossible to see decently from *any* vantage point. If it could be raised a bit, that would help. And while I assuredly don't miss the dust and grime from decades before or want them restored, the work's nearly infinite carved intricacies are so difficult to read in today's clean, polished marble as to be more bewildering for the eye than engaging to it. After raising the group a bit, lowering the wattage of the too-close electric lights could also help us some in finding our way into this scene, so painstakingly created by Bonazza for our reverent contemplation.

As for the little *putto*, our spiritual guide to the work, whose curved left arm draws the eye quickly from the instruments of agony (the nails he holds in his hand) to his own agony as he cradles his head

in despair... Well, he's still there of course, and he can be studied (if he's noticed at all) and understood however a viewer can manage. But while it's a painful thing for me to have to admit, it's probably fair to acknowledge that he might also be overlooked now, like some piece of visual clutter. As a musician, it is impossible for me not to compare this situation to that of a musical passage of a certain complexity that - if played too fast and without sufficient clarity in the delivery of the individual lines, to allow them to be followed in a meaningful way - can soon turn into a sort of meaningless jumble. It is, or so I believe anyway, very much the same sort of problem here, and anyone who loves this work (as do I) ought be forgiven for deriding its presentation now as shameful - if not downright sinful.

But then, things sometimes change. Among today's most admired and beloved works in the field of classical or "art" music are works that, when I was a student, there were neither live performances nor recordings of. We weren't certain how to understand aspects of their notation, we had little idea of what some of the instruments they called for sounded like, and we still knew almost nothing about suitable performance styles for them. Tastes and interests change over time, as does (alongside them) our own understanding.

And to an extent, the same is true in the visual arts. When I made my first trip to Italy, I had a notebook prepared with lists of those works I most hoped to see. But there were two artists whose works were more important to me at that time: Piero della Francesca; the 'other' painter named Michelangelo, the one who came from a small town near Milano called Caravaggio. According to statisticians, the latter's works currently attract more viewers to museum exhibits than do those of any other painter. Piero's famous fresco cycle on "The Legend of the True Cross" at the church of San Francesco in Arezzo can now be visited (for not-so-negligible a fee) in a timed visit of around twenty minutes - about enough time for any first-time visitor to make a quick, cursory survey of the monumental work and decide which panels to examine in detail. It feels now like some other

world (if not actually a dream) in which a visitor could spend the *morning* there, until - after looking and listening intently for a long-enough time - Piero's famously "static" figures could be noticed moving around a little, making small noises, and then eventually be overheard conversing (among themselves at first - to be sure), but then... sometimes, (maybe), even with an attentive visitor or two.

But during the War, when it became necessary to make up lists of works that *had* to be protected - priority lists, as it were - neither of my own 'priority' artists was on such a list. When a bomb ripped a hole in the roof of San Francesco's chancel, exposing Piero's now-revered cycle to the elements, it had to wait *months* for a temporary covering to shield it. When the Berlin museum where it then hung was being emptied of its most important paintings so they could be shipped elsewhere for safer-keeping, Caravaggio's earlier version of "The Angel Dictating the Gospel to Matthew" was passed over - left hanging in place on the gallery wall, only to be destroyed soon in a bombing raid.

Time passes; tastes change. Perhaps someday Bonazza's *Pietà* will be re-evaluated and displayed more suitably; that's clearly my hope. But for now, the work is safe and clean (*very* clean), and the sorrow of the little *putto* might not be overlooked by everyone who glances briefly at the sculpture; he may still touch a few hearts, as Bonazza surely meant him to do.



(Author's photo)



(Wikimedia Commons)

A Dream...

In the summer of 1995, I was intensely involved in the composition of a sizable choral work, a sort of requiem for unaccompanied choir in memory of a friend. While she herself had escaped the Holocaust, most of her family had not. Since she was Jewish and came from an educated and culturally-involved family in Warsaw, the text of my 'requiem' for her could not (obviously) use the traditional Christian text of the Requiem. Something both more appropriate and better suited to her own life as a linguist, a journalist, an historian, and (eventually) as Director of Libraries at a major American university was needed. It was a great joy when the eminent Polish-Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz agreed to allow me the use of his poems for the text - and then later agreed to do a reading from them at the work's premiere. Friends offered me the use of their house in the woods so I could think and write without being disturbed. (Their kindness proved nearly invaluable, since the project would turn out to be a considerable challenge.)

The musical work lies in five movements, with each presenting the complete text of one of the Milosz poems. In the third movement - by far the most intense - the four-part choir divides into two choirs that converse responsively and then argue over each other (almost shouting at times), while the fifth provides the work's conclusion in a spirit of reflection and repose. (While not yet written, I already had a sense of how the final movement was going to work and was not worried about it.) But the third movement had been a challenge to compose, requiring endless revisions and adjustments, and I was fearful there would be more of the same with the fourth, whose text is - if somewhat less anguished - a good deal more elusive, harder to grasp - and therefore also likely harder to set as music. I was braced for rough sledding.

But what happened instead was much closer to pure "flow" (as it's sometimes called); both larger ideas and smaller supporting details

seemed ready to emerge whenever I needed them. It was still slow, painstaking work, but there was no backing up or scratching-out, no stopping to consider where it ought to go next - something of a surprise considering the poem's many ambiguities and my lack of a planned structure for setting it. In a way, it felt at the time a bit like sculpting, because stone, once cut away, is gone, and the musical lines, once in place, felt almost *etched* there - even if written only in pencil on paper. Rather than my usual approach, one that depends on a frequent looking back to guarantee control over the music's unfolding, I decided I'd really need in this case to assume the role of amanuensis and instead become more like a scribe to the music's unfolding of itself - without trying to be its composer. My careful revising of the movement could come later...

When I set to work the following day, I first reminded myself *not* to interfere by revising what was already written (as I might normally have done) but instead to press on, letting the music come to me - *if* it would. Fortunately, it *did* come, much as it had the day before. Yet, merely while arranging the manuscript pages, I happened to notice something from the day before, something so odd that I had to stop for a moment to consider it. While the writing was perfectly clear, what it said made no sense to me at all - yet I'd written it.

I had called for a single soprano, positioned away from the rest of the choir, to sing a simple ascending two-note figure, with the two pitches slurred together on the syllable "Ah" (which doesn't appear anywhere in the poem). The two pitches formed the melodic interval of an ascending perfect fifth, a quite common interval that's easy to sing, whether ascending or descending. It's so common, in fact, so ordinary, so very *usual*, as not to warrant even noticing it - except that as it appeared in my score from the previous day it was just *wrong* - completely, impossibly wrong.

The figure did not align vertically (rhythmically) with the rest of the music, and its own *apparent* meter was wrong. It was dissonant with

the other musical lines in a meaningless way. Its one slurred syllable “Ah” appeared nowhere in the poem. So why was the figure there? And why had I repeated it - written it down *twice*?

I finally decided that, while working the day before in something of a heat, I’d thought of it and recognized it as a potentially useful idea - i.e. as something I might be able use sometime - and had jotted it down quickly (before it could get away), without bothering to find a blank sheet of staff paper - something I’d done before on occasion. That explanation seemed to make sense - at the time, anyway - so after copying the figure down on another sheet, I erased it from the spot where it obviously didn’t belong. Then I got back to work on the movement, hoping I’d be able to carve out more new material - and I was. Later, since I’d put in another good day of productive work, I went to bed pleased with the progress I was making.

In my experience, there are few comments as likely to torpedo a fun conversation among friends as is the remark, “You know, I had the *strangest* dream the other night; I wonder what you guys think it means...” That dread-inducing query always makes me recall the sign once posted by P. T. Barnum: “This Way to the EGRESS” - as I start looking around for one. While neurologists insist that we all *have* dreams, some of us seem unable to recall them once awake. I’ve little doubt the reader will be relieved to know that I’m such an individual: I don’t remember a single one of my dreams - or, rather, I don’t seem to remember a one of my *single* dreams. My *multiples*, however, can often be very memorable. (And what I mean by “my multiples” is any dream that, although it occurs numerous times, never changes: it’s always the same dream, regardless of whether it occurs nightly, or more randomly over a longer period, or even - in one particular case - over several years.

While I must have been sleeping very deeply at the time, I gradually became aware of some other presence with me in the dark; someone else was there. As he gradually became clearer to me - and he was alone - I was left speechless by the encounter, having neither seen nor thought about him (or so I believed) for some thirteen years. I’d

recognized him immediately, of course - the little *putto* from the Padova *Pietà* - and (when finally able to speak) I asked him, "Why are you here?" He waited a while before responding, but then stated simply (and without ever looking up at me), "I belong here."

The next day's work was productive, too - if truncated a bit by the need to leave the woods to make a grocery-and-gas run. Once back, and after eating some dinner, I thought I might see if I couldn't add just a little more to the score before calling it quits for the night, even though my evening hours are typically used for revising what's already on the page - not for adding new material to it. I'd also begun to suspect that, if things went well for me again, I could probably finish the movement the next day, and I wanted to see if that still seemed likely.

When I opened the score and began looking through what I'd added, hoping for a better sense of how the movement might eventually conclude, I was stunned to discover that two additional iterations of that same "wrong" figure had appeared in the score - two *more* of them, and since they now had some space between them, each new appearance seemed to feel more insistent than the previous. I was intrigued (at that point), but I was far more *confused* by what was happening, so much so that I didn't try to add anything further. I gave up for the evening and before long went to bed - perhaps (as I now seem to be recalling) in a not-quite-sober state.

And then, of course, he came to me during the night. Once again, I asked why he was there and again (and still without looking up) he insisted that he belonged there. (As wonderful as this story has become for me, I've still told it very few times - and then only to some composition students. It's more than a little embarrassing to relate it even today, because by this point I still hadn't understood what was happening.)

The next morning when I started work, I took a careful look at those two recent appearances of the “wrong” figure. The first was just as wrong as when it had initially appeared (and in the same ways). The second was still as wrong metrically, but it was less harmonically inappropriate, less dissonant with the rest of the texture. It had not changed at all (and it never *would* change); the rest of the texture was changing. Rather than remove them, I decided to leave the two figures in place where they were - to ignore them, basically, since they were ‘merely’ a treble descant floating above the actual choral texture anyway - and see what might happen, since the movement was moving towards its conclusion.

What remained to be written came to me easily, and the anguished linear complexities of the choral texture gradually fell away, leaving instead a purely chordal choral texture as the ending approached. But then, at five measures from the end, I watched *almost* passively as my hand wrote in once again that same ‘wrong’ figure - floating above the texture and still “off” metrically, but now harmonically consonant, as the other voices had come into agreement with it. The movement (the fourth) ended rather peacefully, leaving me in the perfect frame of mind to begin working in the benedictive stance of the fifth. I decided to leave the fourth for the moment (rather than puzzling further over it) and to continue on into the fifth. But just before doing that, I turned back to the spot where I’d removed the first appearances of the troublesome figure and restored them - I wrote them back in just as they had been - planning to re-evaluate it all during the next day’s process of revising. I went to work on the fifth movement, which (as it turned out) I’d have completed in two more days.

He came to see me again that night, and (just as we’d always done) we exchanged our same two lines of now-scripted dialogue.

Having never before composed a choral setting of a significant poem without first making an ‘outline’ of some sort to use as a guide, I was

amazed by how easy the process of revising the movement was. There were a few little slips to correct - occasional bits of missing punctuation or misplaced syllables of text - but there was nothing of any consequence to fix - apart, of course, from dealing somehow with all those all-too-obvious 'problem' spots.

I suppose it must have been about then when I finally realized that all those 'wrong' appearances of the strange descant figure weren't actually "problematic," that instead, they were merely *surprising* - unexpected to the listener (and unplanned by the composer). And it must have been about then, too, that I finally came to understand - and it still embarrasses me to have to admit it - that my nocturnal visitor, my so-very-wise little *putto*, had been trying all along to tell me not to keep removing those appearances of the un-planned and (as yet) still not understood descant figure. He'd known, I suppose, that - when heard in the context of the completed movement - they would come to make sense, to make *perfect* sense, actually.

The following day, my final act of 'revision' to the work's fourth movement, with all the descant appearances back in place (just as they'd been given to me), was to label the first one of them thus, as it now appears in the printed score of the work:

(the sorrowful angel)

Naturally, I wondered when going to bed that night if he might come again, and he did - just as before. I waited longer than usual before asking him my question, but then - just as I was about to speak - I decided instead to remain silent... and he responded in kind. Then, and of course without ever so much as glancing up, he faded away into the darkness.

He's never been back, not in the more than twenty-five years since. Were he to come to me again, I'd be very glad to see him - only this time I wouldn't be rude and ask why he was there. But I have seen

him again. A decade or so after his last visit, I was back in Padova (this time for musical reasons), and I went looking for him. I did finally find him, down at the far end of that new gallery where he's stored now. It was good to see him again, looking so clean and fresh after his centuries-overdue bath - but then also rather sad to find him 'cornered' as he was.

But then, you've heard about that already...

© Carl Smith, 2021