

Robert Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's" (1855)



[Victorian Web Home —> Authors —> Robert Browning —> Works —> Theme and Subject —> Image, Symbol, and Motif]

Note: A "toccata" is a touch-piece designed to display the keyboardist's technical prowess. The Venetian composer and musician Baldassare ["Baldassaro" in the poem is an error] Galuppi (1706-85), known for his ecclesiastical compositions while organist at St. Mark's Cathedral and for his light operas (whose librettos were written by the comic playwright Carlo Goldoni), in 1741 visited England, whose music he influenced considerably. In 1887 Browning noted that he owned two manuscript volumes of Galuppi's "toccata-pieces." [\[PVA\]](#)

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 your 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? 10
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning 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?" 20
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 / 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, 40
"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.

Notes

The poem was initially published in the first volume of *Men and Women* (1855), but likely written earlier (between 1847 and 1853). The text has been checked against *Robert Browning, The Poems*, Volume One, ed. John Pettigrew (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 550-552.

Line 6: At the city's famous cathedral, named after Venice's patron saint, in an annual ceremony on Ascension Day, the Duke or Doge as the chief magistrate used to conduct a wedding service with the Adriatic Sea, upon which the city's military and economic power depended. The dropping of a ring into the sea symbolized the fact that the city was during the early Renaissance Europe's greatest maritime power.

Line 8: Shylock's bridge: the Rialto bridge over the Grand Canal, Venice, in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

Line 18: A clavichord is an early piano, a stringed instrument with a keyboard.

Line 19: The musical terms in this line refer to the chords Galuppi used in this toccata. Here, "lesser" means "minor," and a "third" a chord of two notes four semitones apart.

Line 24: The seventh chord on the dominant or fifth, one of the "suspensions" (notes held from one chord to another), demands the resolution of the "octave" or tonic chord.

Line 25: The octave answers or resolves the dominant.

Line 30: "Tacitly" implies an extended rest for the player.

Commentary

Six of the poems in *Men and Women* (1855) deal with the fine arts, about painters such as Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi, and composers such as Baldassare Galuppi and Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha. One of Browning's most haunting monologues is "A Toccata of Galuppi's," in which an English pianist, playing the composition in the nineteenth century, is transported by the music to the evanescent, luxurious world of carnival at Venice a century earlier, but past its prime as an imperial power. The listless, pointless existence of Galuppi's aristocratic listeners is foiled by the perceptive cynicism and erudition of the keyboardist.

Browning's other three "musical" poems — "Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha" (1855), "[Abt Vogler](#)" (1864), and "Charles Avison" (1887) — are most dramatic and less personal and reflective. Browning like many upper-middle class Victorians was brought up listening to the best of classical and romantic music, particularly of German-speaking and Italian-speaking composers. In "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and to some extent in other musical poems, Browning (himself a pianist) presents a theory about music that resembles that articulated by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Idea* (1819, translated into English in 1883), namely that music (unlike the other arts) is "the direct expression of the Infinite Will" (Phelps 397).

In "A Toccata of Galuppi's" Browning plays off his persona's direct knowledge of the contemporary world, Victorian England, with his indistinct, visceral impressions of eighteenth-century Venice, the exotic world evoked so powerfully by Galuppi's music. The toccata fuses the sensibilities of the player and the composer, who (one imagines) was the piece's first performer. We as readers have access to Galuppi's interpretation of the far-off world of Venice at carnival only through the consciousness of the present pianist, whose knowledge of that world is extremely limited. Thus, when the speaker presents his own sense of superiority to the world which the music evokes he is ironically stating his impressions without specific knowledge: he has, after all, "never out of England" (line 9). His imposition of the Rialto Bridge upon the scene comes from an indirect source, Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* (although Browning, of course, had visited Italy many times, and probably composed the poem while in Venice).

The persona imagines the Venetian composer playing the toccata for a group of indolent, youthful aristocrats in spring, before Lent, in the midst of a masked ball or other such revelry. They occasionally turn from their enjoyment of each other and of their possessions to listen to the composer's masterful rendition of his work. Gradually the pianist is overcome by the sense of mortality and decadence that seem to him to lie behind the music, as is suggested in his repetition of "dust and ashes" (lines 35 and 43). He is emotionally overwhelmed by the sense of the transitory nature of all life, but especially human life, conveyed by the long-dead Venetian. He enunciates for us the biblical truism that all mankind is as the grass in "merely born to bloom and drop" (line 40). "This Englishman, terrified by flux and undermined by the seemingly cold, ironic music of the eighteenth-century Venetian composer, longs for certainty he cannot achieve" (Harden 334). The poem may begin in carnival and a celebration of life, but it ends in the gloom of the inevitability of death and decay. Browning

thereby gives us a sense of the limitations and corruption out of which the Venetian achievement sprang — even in the eighteenth century — and so gives us as well a renewed sense of possibility. In this light, "A Toccata of Galuppi's" reveals itself as another of Browning's special cases — an evocation of the fulfilment made possible by an acute but undaunted sense of defeat. [Harden 336]

Embracing defeat but enduring and going on in spite of one's despondency, the persona of this beautiful lyric touches the same chord as the defeatist but heroic Childe Roland.

References

Harden, Edgar F. "A New Reading of Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's.'" *Victorian Poetry* 11 (1973): 330-336.

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