

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo:

Compositional Techniques of Carlo Gesualdo:

Creation and Innovation

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Music History I

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The Italian Madrigal is a genre of music that served as a primary force of pioneering musical styles and concepts throughout the Renaissance Era. A madrigal is generally any secular vocal text set to music that is intended to portray the human emotions of the text's subject matter. This genre started to take form in the Mid-Renaissance era, and it had three sub-periods of its own, aptly named the Early, Middle, and Late periods, which extended into the Late-Renaissance era. The Late Italian Madrigal, also dubbed its 3rd developmental period, is characterized by liberally-applied chromaticism, virtuosic vocal lines and auditory challenges, and very focused text illustration – which means that the “affect,” or feeling portrayed, changes often across each phrase or every single word.¹

Enter Carlo Gesualdo (c1561 in Naples – September 8th, 1613 in Gesualdo), also known as Gesualdo da Venosa. Gesualdo was an Italian nobleman and musician who held position as the Prince of Venosa and the Count of Conza. He is also credited with what may be considered the most famous murders in music history; these murders were dramatically influential on his music. In 1586, Gesualdo married his first cousin, Donna Maria d'Avalos. Donna Maria later began an affair with the Duke of Andria, Fabrizio Carafa. Suspecting the affair, in 1590, Gesualdo tricked them into being discovered in his palace and proceeded to murder them and display their bodies outside the palace. As a nobleman in this time period, Gesualdo could not be prosecuted, but he locked himself in his palace to avoid revenge from others.²

¹ "Italian Madrigal and Carlo Gesualdo." *MusicHistoryIsThrilling.com*. (1999)

² "Carlo Gesualdo." [New World Encyclopedia](http://NewWorldEncyclopedia.org). *NewWorldEncyclopedia.org*. Last modified December 12, 2013.

These events initiated a slow but dramatic shift in his compositional style. Gesualdo had always been a devout musician; he played lute, harpsichord, guitar, and genuinely enjoyed composition. Following the murders and being hidden away in his castle, Gesualdo began his climb within the musical community; a climb paralleled by dealing with continuous difficulties of death in the family and personal unhappiness. He undoubtedly adopted a darker view of the world, ultimately leading his subsequent compositions to absolutely disregard the progression of music history.³ Music like his was not seen again until the 20th Century era, most directly when Stravinsky made arrangements of his madrigals by hand, and Georg Friedrich Hass wrote microtonal versions of his music.⁴

One of Gesualdo's latest pieces, the 5-voice "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo," was published in his 6th Book of Madrigals in 1611 – just two years before his death. As a direct result of the atrocities Gesualdo faced previous to this composition, he formed a deeply-rooted correlation between death/suffering and physical love. This association is portrayed in the madrigal by the contrast of highly chromatic drudging sections to the diatonic melismatic sections. Associations and analogies similar to Gesualdo's are found in 20th Century compositions intended to portray dismay and turmoil from the World Wars and domestic tyrannies; these feelings of unrest are achieved in 20th Century music via high levels of chromaticism and dissonance.

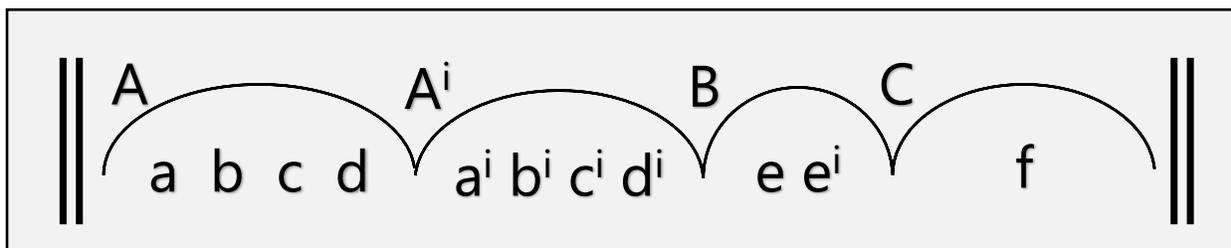
³ George Grove and Sadie, Stanley. *The Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music*. (Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 1988.) 288.

⁴ Alex Rose. "Prince of Darkness." [The New Yorker](#). December, 2011.

“This kind of juxtaposition recurs throughout the piece in a thorough playing out of the text’s dichotomous imagery: between gasping pauses and shimmering held notes of exclamation, life is represented by active linear motion and counterpoint, death and pain by searing chromatic chordal progressions; what emerges from this polarity is an expression of longing fraught with ineffable tension.” – (*Grimshaw*)⁵

Gesualdo’s music is ahead of its time, in the sense that he uses Forms, Techniques, and Harmonies in his compositions that draw inspiration from styles previous to his, as well as foreshadow music written *three centuries* after his lifetime. The overall organization, or “form,” of the piece is the first factor that stands out as progressive. Italian madrigals generally did not have repeated materials, and consequently did not have a specific form. Few genres had specific forms before the Common Practice eras, when Baroque genres were almost all fit into a dance or vocal format. The form of “Moro, lasso, al mio duolo” is based upon semantics of the text in the poem by Pierre Gouin, from which Gesualdo used the title and lyrics:

		<u>English translation</u>
A/Aⁱ	a	I die, alas, in my suffering,
	b	And she who could give me life,
	c/d	Alas, kills me and will not help me.
B	e	O sorrowful fate!
C	f	She who could give me life, Alas, gives me death.



The piece has four main sections, labeled **A – Aⁱ – B – C**. Furthermore, **A** and **Aⁱ** are broken down into four subsections: **a – b – c – d**. **B** is split into: **e – eⁱ**. Finally, for analytical purposes, **C** can

⁵ Jeremy Grimshaw. “Carlo Gesualdo: Moro, lasso, al mio duolo, madrigal for 5 voices (Book 6) W. 6/74”. *AllMusic.com*. 2016 AllMusic.

also be called **f** on the subsection level but does not have any distinct sections within itself. (*The last three pages of this document contain an annotated score, for the readers' reference.*)

A comprises the main material of the piece, and consists of the text of the entire 1st stanza of the poem. **Aⁱ** consists of the same motives and text as **A**, but with some melodic and harmonic alterations. One progressive idea apparent between **A** and **Aⁱ**, is that **Aⁱ** starts and persists primarily in tonal areas that are predominantly in the "subdominant" (IV) key as compared to **A**, and most of the time is *identical* material to **A** that is just transposed to a different pitch level. **B** functions as transitory material that calms after the culmination and crescendo of the previous sections. It is divided into two subsections, **e – eⁱ**, which are an iteration and reiteration of the text from the first line of the poem's 2nd stanza. These subsections are nearly identical – the only differences being that the second instance is at the tonal level of the "dominant" (V) key of the first, and the first interval of the second is a minor 2nd, as opposed to the first Major 2nd. Finally, **C** is ending material; this section is very similar to a Coda in which it has text motives similar to the other sections, but otherwise is new, more final material. That text is the final two lines of the poem.

Within this overall form, Gesualdo employs compositional techniques that help the piece progress for the listener and tie the form together. The technique most integral to the piece is the Renaissance idea of text painting, as each phrase and word has its own mood and function in the music. Gesualdo's correlation between death and love is deeply, *richly* painted throughout the progression of each section of text.

A introduces his association of death with love. "I die, alas in my suffering; (**a**)" Gesualdo's musical setting of this line is slow and descends chromatically, which portrays his suffering. The second half of **a** becomes more complex rhythmically and harmonically, and intensifies with much higher pitches; this personifies his blurred view between suffering and physical love. In stark contrast, "And she who could give me life, (**b**)" is brisk and melismatic, as well as focused around a tonal area of C Major. At the end of **b** there is a G Major chord, which to modern ears may sound like a "V" chord in the C Major tonal area. The next subsection, "Alas, kills me, (**c**)" starts with the "Do" of the previous subsection. The text of **c** is intended to be ironic when compared to the text of the previous line, therefore Gesualdo employed an idea that often was not seen until the Baroque era; from the tonal area of C Major and the "V" chord after subsection **b**, there is a sudden exclamation on the pitch Eb, which implies the C minor tonal area. This slow and heavily chromatic subsection still cadences on a Major chord, recommencing Gesualdo's distorted and positive view of death. **A**'s final subsection, "and will not help me. (**d**)." is also slow, but in a more relaxed manner to illustrate an acceptance of death as an escape. Two exactly identical instances of the text/music occur in this subsection which, again, is a method employed by *later composers* to give the ear a resting point.⁶

Aⁱ subsections contain the same text as **A**'s. **a**ⁱ is identical to **a**, but in the higher IV tonal area which gives a slight build to the overall piece via higher pitches. **b**ⁱ has the same motives as **b**, but is much more busy with melismatic material. It is also in the IV tonal area, but ends in F Major, being the I chord in this context, but also still serves as the V of the following subsection.

⁶ Carlo Gesualdo. *Moro, lasso, al mio duolo*. (Montréal: Les Éditions Outremontaises, 2005.) 1-2.

In **c**ⁱ there is no immediate resolution to the new implied "Do", but the shocking pitch (Db in this case) still occurs and the subsection of ironic text continues in a transposed identical form of the **c** material. **d**ⁱ is the climax of the piece, aside from the ending material. Two differences in the music give this instance of **d** a more intensified mood/timbre to effectively mark it as the end of the section. First, the basso voice goes up an octave and reaches its highest pitch in the piece. Secondly, the canto voice, instead of going down a 4th on its last note like in **d**, stays on the high G pitch, which is also the highest pitch for this voice in the piece. These 'thematic developments' climax his view of death in an almost loving and excited way.⁷

B is transitory material used to approach the final section. "Oh sorrowful fate, (**e**)" is a transition into this section where the old "Do" (pitch C) becomes the new "Te" in a minor mode based on pitch D, in order to bring back a more somber mood. Just as someone may exclaim these words upwards and with a sigh, the contour of the music goes up and reaches a dissonant pitch relationship between the voices that resolves into a Major chord – *a sigh of relief, as opposed to distress?* **e**ⁱ has the same text and music as **e**, but is transposed up a perfect 5th (the "dominant" key area), and the first interval is a minor 2nd instead of a Major 2nd.⁸

C is the final ending material, similar to how a Coda works, in that it only has bits of motive/text material from previous sections. This format in itself is a concept, once again, used in much later music. "She who could give me life, Alas, gives me death, (**f**)" is the ultimate buildup and climax of the death to love association Gesualdo was stressing. There are sporadic voice

⁷ Ibid. 2-3.

⁸ Ibid. 3.

entrances on distance pitches on the exclamation “Ahi!” (Alas), unstably shifting harmonies, and no point of breath. In general, all of the voices slowly ascend in pitch, just hectically crescendoing. Finally, Gesualdo once again employed to resolve the piece and finalize his view on the subject. The piece reaches its climactic finale on an E Major chord, with a 4-3 suspension in the quinto voice. This suspension resolves into an A Major chord, as if it were “V – I” motion to an Imperfect Authentic Cadence.⁹

Gesualdo used other compositional techniques in his musical setting of the Pierre Gouin poem that can be highlighted by examining specific passages. Some of these techniques are ones he drew from compositional styles before his time. The first example is the use of duets between voices. This particular technique is often attributed to early Renaissance composer Josquin de Prez, and his focus on “point of imitation” between voices.¹⁰ Gesualdo’s implementation of this technique can be seen in **b** where there are duets offset by 2 beats or happening simultaneously. **b**ⁱ has duets directly together, followed by the line in a solo voice. Following is a duet in **b**, measures 6 – 8.¹¹

5

E chi mi può dar vi - - - ta,

— mio duo - lo, e chi mi può dar vi - - - ta,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Barbara Russano Hanning. *Concise History of Western Music*. (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company. 2014.) 122.

¹¹ Carlo Gesualdo. *Moro, lasso, al mio duolo*. 1-2.

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65

C. Ahi! mi dà mor - te. Ahi! Ahi! mi dà mor - te.

Q. mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi da mor - te, Ahi! mi da mor - - - te.

A. ahi! Mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - - - te.

T. mi da mor - te, ahi! mi da mor - te, ahi! mi da mor - te.

B. mi da mor - te, Ahi! mi da mor - - - te.

© Les Éditions Outremontaises, 2005

Gesualdo was also on the pioneering edge of a texture shift that occurred into and through the Baroque era: Polyphonic vs. Homophonic music. This madrigal has sections that hint at both styles of texture. The previously pictured **b** subsection and **C** section are highly polyphonic, with voices imitating each other and moving separate from one another. But on the other end, sections like **a** and **d** move mostly together, giving a homophonic texture. Pictured next is the highly chordal **d**¹⁵

40

C. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta.

Q. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta.

A. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mo ai - ta.

T. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta.

B. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Not only is homophonic texture evidenced by the excerpt from **dⁱ**, but also another compositional technique that is a major style feature of the Common Practice eras. Measures 39 – 41 comprise an independent phrase. Notice that this phrase is *exactly* repeated in measures 42 – 44. Similar to **dⁱ**, many other sections of the piece employ repeated material. The overall form itself has **A – Aⁱ**, where material is brought back in a slightly altered manner (“Thematic Transformation?”). **B** consists exclusively of two 4 measure phrases that are just transposed versions of each other and shifted up one voice-part level (**e – eⁱ**).¹⁶

The image shows a musical score for five voices, with measures 45 and 50 indicated. The score is divided into two systems by a vertical bar line. The lyrics are "O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te".

Measure 45 (left side of the bar line):

- Staff 1: Rest
- Staff 2: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te,
- Staff 3: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te,
- Staff 4: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te,
- Staff 5: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te,

Measure 50 (right side of the bar line):

- Staff 1: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te
- Staff 2: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te
- Staff 3: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te
- Staff 4: O do-lo-ro-sa sor-te
- Staff 5: Rest

This myriad of techniques definitely shows Gesualdo’s creativity and mastery as a composer. There is one attribute to his music, though, that really exemplifies his struggle with mental illness; his use of the attribute resembles music composed over *three centuries* after his lifetime. The attribute is harmony, even though most music from Gesualdo’s era did not necessarily employ the concept of harmony as it is known today.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The first instance of a highly progressive harmonic implement is in the first 4 measures. This implement is a type of “transformative harmony.” Transformative harmony is a way of employing mostly step-wise motions in voices to smoothly switch between relatively unrelated chords. The opening of “Moro, lasso, al mio duolo” is similar to a Late-Romantic era technique that was postdatedly named Neo-Riemannian theory. This technique involves changing chords by one semi-tone at a time, and often eventually arriving back at the original chord (Ex: C – E^{6/4} – E^{6/4} – Abm⁶ – Ab⁶ – Cm – C). Shown here in **a**, the basso and quinto voices move down by semi-tones, and the progression goes as follows:¹⁷

The musical score shows four voices: Quinto, Altus, Tenore, and Basso. The chords above the staves are C#, Am⁶, B, and G⁶. The lyrics are: Mo - ro las - so al mio.

Voice	Chord	Notes
Quinto	C#	F#4
Quinto	Am ⁶	F#4, C#5
Quinto	B	F#4, B4
Quinto	G ⁶	F#4, G#4, B4
Altus	C#	F#4
Altus	Am ⁶	F#4, C#5
Altus	B	F#4, B4
Altus	G ⁶	F#4, G#4, B4
Tenore	C#	F#4
Tenore	Am ⁶	F#4, C#5
Tenore	B	F#4, B4
Tenore	G ⁶	F#4, G#4, B4
Basso	C#	F#4
Basso	Am ⁶	F#4, C#5
Basso	B	F#4, B4
Basso	G ⁶	F#4, G#4, B4

Another harmonic implication of Gesualdo’s is what was codified in Common Practice eras as a “V – I” progression. In spots such as **B** moving into **C**, the former seemingly ends in a Half Cadence on a B Major chord, and then the latter starts in the key area of E Major, which implies a V to I progression. Similarly, the very end of the piece goes from an E Major chord with a 4-3

¹⁷ Ibid. 1.

suspension into an A Major chord, strongly implying a V to I motion. It is interesting to note that **C** as a section is set up in a key area of E, and progresses to an ending in the key area of A. This progression is yet another possible implication not seen commonly until the Common Practice eras.

The most liberally used harmonic feature in this piece, “chromatic mediant relationships,” is also the most ahead of its time compared to any other technique. The entire piece is full of multiple, repeatedly progressing chromatic mediants. A chromatic mediant is a relationship between two harmonies of which their roots are a M3 or m3 apart, and both harmonies may be a Major or minor quality. Another piece with liberal usage of the technique is *Hodie* by 20th Century composer Ralph Vaughan Williams – many high-energy moments in this piece go between semi-related Major/Minor chords (with some extended harmony, which is not often used by Gesualdo) of which the roots are a 3rd apart. Aside from just mediants, there are many progressions between harmonies that often go to a chord of a relatively related root, but with an unexpected quality of the chord itself. All passages previously cited in this document contain these chromatic relationships.¹⁸

One final harmonic implement applies to the larger ‘form’ of the piece, which may be the most impressive forward-thinking aspect of this entire early piece. Within the repetition and alteration of material between sections **A** and **A**ⁱ, Gesualdo had taken *most* of the harmonic material from the former and ‘copied/pasted’ it, transposed up by a Perfect 4th; this transposed

¹⁸ Ibid. 1-3

material from **A** is **Aⁱ**. To compare, the following two figures are the first four measures of both **A** and then **Aⁱ**:

The image displays a musical score for four voices: Quinto, Altus, Tenore, and Basso. The score is divided into two sections. The first section consists of four measures with the following chords: C#, Am⁶, B, and G⁶. The lyrics for these measures are: Mo - ro las - so al. The second section also consists of four measures with the following chords: F#, Dm⁶, E, and C⁶. The lyrics for these measures are: Mo - ro las - so al mio. The lyrics are written below the corresponding staves.

Although the idea of transposing the next section to the “subdominant” key area may not have been conceptualized in early music, Gesualdo may have applied a similar theory-based method from the early 11th Century. Previous to Gesualdo, early music pedagogue and theorist, Guido

d'Arezzo, formed a system of "hexachords" for music education purposes. These hexachords roughly translate to the modern major scale, just without the 7th scale degree. One of these is based on pitch C, and is called the *hexachordum naturale* (natural hexachord). The other is based on pitch F, and named *hexachordum molle* (soft hexachord). In "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo," subsection **b** is based around the key area of C, and subsection **b**ⁱ is based around the key area of F. This transposition from the *naturale* to the *soft* may very well be a precursor to the common progressions of "closely related keys" – even more so, considering the other major hexachord, *hexachordum durum* (hard) is based around pitch G.¹⁹ "F - C - G" are examples of closely related keys in the circle of 5ths.

During a time when music was just beginning to become treated as an art form outside of the liturgy, Carlo Gesualdo was composing in ways that later were accredited to compositional greats such as Bach, Schubert, Wagner, and Stravinsky. Gesualdo was able to synthesize and effectively implement earlier composers' techniques into his own works. His ability as an innovator, especially, has been underrated and passively brushed away as a being a result of insanity. The analyzation of "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo," on the contrary, confirms numerous direct examples of compositional techniques that are highly common and integral to compositions created after Gesualdo's lifetime. *Further research and analyzation of his musical works may prove Carlo Gesualdo to have been an unprecedented musical genius as well as one of the most creative and innovative composers known to music history.*

¹⁹ Margo Schuller. *Hexachords, somization, and musica ficta*. (2 March, 2000.)

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Édition «urtext» modernisée, selon
un fac-similé de la réimpression
de Gardano, Venise, 1616.
(P. Gouin)

Moro, lasso

Madrigali a Cinque Voci - Libro VI (1611)

*Je meurs, hélas, de ma douleur,
Et qui peut me rendre la vie,
Ah! me tue et ne veut m'aider.*

*Oh destin douloureux
Qui peut me donner la vie,
Ah! tu me donnes la mort.*

(Trad. P. Gouin)

Carlo GESUALDO
Prince de Venosa
(v. 1560 - 1613)

A

a 5 **b**

Canto: E chi mi può dar vi - - - ta,

Quinto: Mo - ro las - so al mio duo - lo, e chi mi può dar vi - - - ta,

Altus: Mo - ro las - so al mio duo - - - lo, E

Tenore: Mo - ro las - so al mio duo - - - lo, E chi mi

Basso: Mo - ro las - so al mio duo - lo,

C

10

C. E chi mi può dar vi - - - ta, Ahi! _____

Q. E chi mi può dar vi - - - ta,

A. chi mi può dar vi - - - ta, e chi mi può dar vi - - - ta, Ahi! che m'an -

T. può dar vi - - - ta, e chi mi può dar vi - - - ta, Ahi! _____

B. E chi mi può dar vi - - - ta, Ahi! che m'an -

2

d Aⁱ
ai

15 20

C. — che m'an - ci - de E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. Mo - ro

Q. Ahi! che m'an - ci - de E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. Mo - ro

A. ci - - - de E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. Mo - ro

T. — che m'an - ci - de E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. Mo - ro

B. ci - - - de E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta.

25 30

C. las - so al mio duo - lo, E chi mi può Dar ai - - -

Q. las - so al mio duo - - - lo, E chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, —

A. las - so al mio duo - - - lo, e chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, e chi mi

T. las - so al mio duo - lo, e chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, e

B. — — — — — E chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, E chi

35 cⁱ

C. ta, e chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, Ahi! — — — che m'an - ci - de

Q. — e chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, Ahi! che m'an - ci - de

A. può dar ai - - - ta, Ahi! — — — che m'an - ci - - - de

T. chi mi può dar ai - - - ta, Ahi! — — — che m'an - ci - de

B. mi può dar ai - - - ta, Ahi! che m'an - ci - - - de

3

di B e

40 45

C. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta.

Q. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te,

A. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mo ai - ta. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te,

T. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te,

B. E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta, E non vuol dar - mi ai - ta. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te,

ei C/f

50 55

C. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te Chi dar vi - ta mi può, ahi! mi dà mor - te.

Q. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te Chi dar vi - ta mi può, Ahi! mi dà mor - te, ahi!

A. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te Chi dar vi - ta mi può, Ahi! mi dà mor - te,

T. O do - lo - ro - sa sor - te Chi dar vi - ta mi può, Ahi! mi dà mor - te, ahi!

B. Chi dar vi - ta mi può, Ahi!

60 65

C. Ahi! mi dà mor - te. Ahi! Ahi! mi dà mor - te.

Q. mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - te.

A. ahi! Mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - te.

T. mi dà mor - te, ahi! mi dà mor - te, ahi! mi dà mor - te.

B. mi dà mor - te, Ahi! mi dà mor - te.