Introduction: Unravelling the Mystery behind "The Sea of Silence and Obscurity"

This book explores the practice of *parlar cantando*. The erudite reader might assume that the study is concerned with the origins of opera in Italy and, generally, with Italian musical culture at the turn of the sixteenth century. Instead, the reader will find him/herself thrown back almost three centuries, to the time of Dante and Petrarch.

A short survey of the history of Italian music from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century would clarify the complexities inherent to the process of Italian musical culture's development, which might be divided into three principal stages.

The first stage involves the sudden emergence of a written secular musical practice in the first half of the fourteenth century. The earliest music found in Italian manuscripts was written for the church. In the 1330s and 1340s, the appearance of written secular polyphony seems unexpected, as if it were leaping out of a formative stage of which we have no traces.[1]

The particular character of Italian Trecento music is evident. Even when French composers used melismas in their secular music, these did not appear consistently on the first and penultimate syllables, as in the Italian repertoire, and the voices did cross. Although the first extant examples of written Trecento music (such as the compositions in the Codex Rossi and the works of Magister Piero, Giovanni da Firenze, and Jacopo da Bologna) display what have been called "vividly Italian characteristics", this character begins to change after a while and the growing influence of French musical culture becomes noticeable. This influence surfaces in the notation, the overall character of the polyphony, and in the disposition of melodic and rhythmic elements, among other stylistic features. However, the main technical

1 'Italian secular polyphony suddenly appeared and flourished in the fourteenth century with no apparent antecedents.' (R. H. Hoppin, *Medieval Music,* p. 433.)

principles that define the Italian Trecento also persist, insofar as the retention of a higher *superius* combined with a lower tenor without voice crossing. Toward the end of the period, moreover, we still find compositions exhibiting purely Italian features, namely in Italian notation, with text underlay in all voices, and retaining the idiosyncratic pattern of placing melismas on the first and penultimate syllables.[2]

The second stage is defined by the surprising disappearance of written documents from the Italian tradition at the beginning of the fifteenth century. This phenomenon is known as *il segreto del Quattrocento,* a label coined by Fausto Torrefranca in 1939,[3] although there is no consensus among musicologists about the duration of this period of silence: Did it last for an entire century or for only fifty years? David Fallows addresses this question:

> We tend to consider the end of the musical Trecento as being in about 1415; before that Italian song is quite distinctive, but after that most of the special Italian traits disappear [...] virtually no indigenous Italian composers can be named between about 1430–1480, to the degree that there has been considerate discussion among musicologists of the *segreto del quattrocento,* the issue of why Italians seem simply to have stopped composing for nearly fifty years.[4]

Reinhardt Strohm was more metaphorical in his characterization of the Quattrocento, when he described it as 'a mysterious, dark age, if not a desert, from the musical point of view.'[5] In any case, we cannot speak of a solid school or a national tradition of written music in Italy during the Quattrocento.

The third stage is defined by the rise of a brilliant new wave of written Italian polyphonic music toward the end of the fifteenth century. This particular juncture in Italian musical life was described eloquently and picturesquely by Nino Pirrotta:

> That period of musical history which […] is generally referred to as the Italian Ars Nova may be compared to an island: an island appearing on the horizon af-

2 See D. Baumann, *Die dreistimmige Liedsatztechnik der italienischen Lied-Satztechnik im Trecento.*

3 F. Torrefranca, *Il Segreto del Quattrocento,* 1939.

4 D. Fallows, *French as a Courtly Language in Fifteenth-century Italy,* p. 433.

5 R. Strohm, *The Rise in European Music, 1380–1500,* p. 541.

> ter a long voyage through centuries of silence and obscurity. The sudden and brilliant rise of this island delights us, but as we are near it and are able to make out the configuration of its shore line we see that after it there is another expanse of silence and obscurity separating it from the larger and more solid continent, the music of the Italian Renaissance.[6]

The shaping of Italian musical culture in general, and specific questions on the origins of written Trecento music in particular, are among the most challenging for scholars studying the period. We have to search for the causes subtending these discontinuities.

Hypotheses on the origins of a written practice in the Trecento underwent significant changes during the 1960s. Up until then it seemed self-evident that forms of thirteenth-century polyphony would have served as referents for the madrigal's stylistic traits, namely the *conductus* and *clausula,* and, for the characteristic melismas placed on first and penultimate syllables, the two-part *organum.* Later, Kurt von Fischer came to the conclusion that fourteenth-century Italian polyphony must have stemmed from an independent and unwritten practice. Pirrotta concurred, suggesting that the roots of written Italian music should be searched in Italy's own oral tradition.

The following remarks by Pirrotta speak to the significance of the unwritten tradition and its relevance to the written musical repertoire:

> The history of music […] is essentially the history of written music [...]. Yet we fail to recognize that for all its importance, written music represents only one aspect, and a very special one, of our musical tradition. The fact that we have little hope of reconstructing what music existed beyond it is no justification for ignoring the gap that exists in our knowledge. To reach a proper balance in assessing what we know, we should make every possible effort to explore the extent of that gap. Instead, we tend either to forget it or, in the most favourable case, to minimize it by assuming that the unwritten tradition was the expression of inferior layers of culture. I do not need to consider how valid this assumption would be, if it were true. I know it is untrue, at least for the Middle Ages and most of the Renaissance.[7]

6 N. Pirrotta, *Marchetto de Padua and Italian Ars Nova,* p. 57.
7 N. Pirrotta, *Ars Nova and Stil Novo,* p. 27.

The melismatic character of Trecento compositions led to the conclusion that, subtending this cultural wealth, there must have been a rich heritage of improvised singing. This idea was commonly accepted by musicologists, and, since then, most studies of the fourteenth-century madrigal and performance practice of the period are assuming the oral roots of written art music in Italy as a basic premise.[8] As Pirrotta suggested, this oral tradition, which in general goes beyond Medieval and Renaissance music in Italy, had to be differentiated from the popular type of singing encountered in so-called folk music. Rather, when speaking of this tradition, the reference is to a more ambitious and professional practice that did not involve the less educated classes. However, neither Pirrotta nor his followers could identify this kind of singing or the principles on which it was based. Yet, it has been evident all along that oral practice might furnish us with the key to understanding processes at work in Italian musical culture of the time. The main aim of the present study is to probe the nature and define the features of this unwritten musical tradition, in terms of itself and in relation to the extant written repertoire.

The search for this mystery led to an area that today is assigned more specifically to the domain of philology rather than to musicology, namely the practice of reciting poetry aloud. There are grounds to consider this type of activity as possibly foundational in Italian musical culture. The practice of reciting verses was an elitist professional activity because it involved very subtle and specific skills, such as knowledge of phonetics, word pronunciation, the nature of syllables, verse structure, and so forth, all of which required specialized preparation from performers and listeners alike (for instance, a familiarity with grammar and rhetoric for its creators and listeners). Up to now, this oral practice of poetry recitation has not been considered as a possible source of written Trecento music in either Romanistic or musico-

8 N. Pirrotta, *Tradizione orale e tradizione scritta nella musica; Ars Nova and Stil Novo; New Glimpses of an Unwritten Tradition.* K. von Fischer, *On the Technique, Origin and Evolution of Italian Trecento Music; Das Madrigal 'Si come'al canto della bella Iguana'.* J. Haar, *Essays on Italian Poetry and Music in the Renaissance, 1350–1600.* T. Brooks, *Improvisation in the Madrigals of the Rossi Codex.*

logical studies. In certain respects, our inquiry draws us closer to an area of musicology that touches upon questions on performance of vocal music in earlier periods. It is therefore more surprising that the musical component of poetic delivery has remained largely unexplored by musicologists.

This neglect is paradoxical, given that, in general, word-music relationships as a focus of musicological research have drawn considerable attention from scholars. At this juncture, Don Harrán's *Word-Tone Relations in Musical Thought* is particularly relevant.[9] From the perspective that 'the intimate relation between music and language acts as a motivating force for the development of Western musical culture,'[10] Harrán examined the parameters from which the text-music rules of correlation can be deduced. One of these, the purely linguistic or grammatical, influences the music or the melodic design of any musical composition, operating through the lexical and syntactic structure of the language.[11] Rhetoric, another parameter, is connected

9 D. Harrán, *Word-Tone Relations in Musical Thought.* The main part of Harrán's book is devoted to a discussion of the rules of *word-tone relations,* as they appear in treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Regarding earlier music, such as that of the Trecento, the question arises as to why treatises of the period exclude or hardly deal with this topic. To explain this absence, Harrán quotes G. Schünemann: 'The rules of text placement, transmitted by oral instruction of the singing teacher, did not need to be fixed in writing as long as the musical practice belonged to the basic tools of the singer.' (D. Harrán, *Word-Tone Relations,* p. 334.) Schünemann's is a very reasonable explanation for the absence of discussions of this topic in earlier treatises, considering that knowledge was orally transmitted during the period in question. Apparently this issue was not deemed appropriate or necessary in written theoretical works.

10 D. Harrán, *Word-Tone Relations,* p. 1.

11 'By coordination of word and tone is meant how they relate on the various levels of syntax, accentuation and general expression. In early and non-European musical cultures, to be sure, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate composition from performance: the composer was likely to be the performer, hence discharging the activities of both simultaneously. When the Greeks speak of a suitable music as one expressing the content of words, their remarks apply equally to composition and to performance – they conceived of the two as forming a unity.' (*Ibid.,* p. 7.)

instead to expressive effects and especially to performance.[12] Probing the poetic features that pertain to music-word relationships, Harrán observed that, in humanistic circles, the rules of quantitative verse in languages such as Latin and Greek, which differentiate between long and short syllables, were applied to Italian qualitative verse, which is based on a particular system of metric accents and a fixed number of syllables per line.[13] However, the structure of Italian verse calls for a more in-depth treatment, especially when delivered in a loud voice, a subject on which Harrán does not delve into specifically, and, as stated above, has not been treated enough by musicologists.[14]

12 Regarding rhetoric, Franco A. Gallo also provides an illuminating explanation: 'Ma il più interessante motivo di affinità tra musica e retorica quanto all'uso della *vox* era rappresentato dalla pratica, comune ad entrambe le arti, di variare il tono vocale in conformità all'argomento del testo rispettivamente cantato o declamato [...]. Nella declamazione l'oratore procurava di modificare il tono della voce adottando quello di volta in volta maggioramente conveniente alla natura degli argomenti trattati [...]. Come il tono di voce, così anche l'atteggiamento fisico doveva [...] concordare [...] con argomento trattato. Il saper mantenere nelle pratica dell'arte questo difficile equilibrio distingueva appunto l'oratore dal volgare istrione.' [But the most interesting determinant of the affinity between music and rhetoric, regarding the use of the *vox,* was represented in the practice, common to both arts, of changing the vocal tone to conform to the text's argument respectively sung or declaimed [...]. In recitations, the orator took pains to change the tone of voice by adapting it as far as possible to the nature of the subjects spoken about […] Like the tone of voice, so also the physical behaviour had to […] suit […] the subject. Knowing how to strike this difficult balance in performance distinguished the orator from the vulgar histrionic.] (F. A. Gallo, *Pronuntiatio: ricerche sulla storia di un termine retorico-musicale,* p. 39.)

13 'Another inconsistency in humanist-inspired composition is the imposition of the principle of quantitative meter on languages whose accentuation is qualitative or whose verses are ordered according to the number of their syllables (Italian, French) or their accents (German).' (Cf. D. Harrán, *Word-Tone Relations,* p. 87.)

14 Michael Long has attempted to analyze some poetic texts of the Trecento musical repertoire with regard to the rules of *scansio* and has tried to find a link between the number of syllables and the number of *tempora* (breves): 'It is highly probable that these works which display a demonstrable relationship between number of syllables and number of *tempora* more accurately represent the compositional style of c. 1330.' (M. Long, *Musical Tastes in Fourteenth-Century Italy,* p. 14.) Unfortunately, Long did not specify why he assumes a direct proportion between the quantity of syllables and the number of breves. Moreover,

A recently published work that treats the topic of word-music relationship systematically is Thomas Schmidt-Beste's *Textdeklamation in der Motette des 15. Jahrhunderts.*[15] Although the focus here is the musical setting of the Latin texts, some conclusions from this study would have to be considered for their relevance to humanistic theories of versification.

The past decades have seen the publication of a fair number of philological studies devoted to the metrics and phonetics of Italian verse and the appropriate recitation of poetry.[16] It is interesting to note that the commonly accepted notion of the so-called divorce between poetry and music in thirteenth-century Italy, advanced by Vincenzo de Bartholomaeis,[17] is once again attracting scholarly attention and is being reconsidered. In her analysis of this alienation, particularly as addressed in works by Aurelio Roncaglia,[18] and, more recently, by Joachim Schulze,[19] Maria Sofia Lannutti observes that these two scholars have reawakened the interest of non-musicologists in performance aspects of poetry, and have stimulated re-evaluations of the function of music in Italian poetry.[20]

when comparing the poetic and musical line, he considers the entire musical line, inclusive of its melismas, whose duration does not depend on the text.

15 Th. Schmidt-Beste, *Textdeklamation in der Motette des 15. Jahrhunderts.*

16 On this topic, the conference held in Cremona in 2004 on poetry and music relationships is worthy of mention.

17 V. de Bartholomaeis, *Primordi della lirica d'arte in Italia.*

18 A. Roncaglia, *Sul 'divorzio tra musica e poesia' nel Duecento italiano*. In fact, the main question regarding the divorce between poetry and music concerns the separation between the creator/poet and the performer, as Roncaglia observes: 'la grande magioranza dei poeti aulici italiani componevano solo testi verbali, lasciando un loro eventuale (non obbligatorio) rivestimento melodico a musici professionalisti.' (p. 390.)

19 J. Schulze, *Sizilianische Kontrafakturen,* pp. 1–30. See also Schulze, *Ballata und Ballata-Musik zur Zeit des Dolce Stil Nuovo,* pp. 8–16; Schulze, *Cantari e mustrari alligranza;* Schulze, *Amicitia vocalis.*

20 '[...] ha il merito di aver risvegliato tra i non musicologi l'interesse per gli aspetti esecutivi del genere lirico romanzo e di aver sollecitato una nuova valutazione della funzione della musica nella lirica italiana.' (M. S. Lannutti, *Poesia cantata, musica scritta,* pp. 157–158.)

The affinity between poetic structure and musical setting often is considered self-evident and even trivial, requiring no further inquiry or evidence.[21] On the other hand, as the philologist Aldo Menichetti says, even if the intuition that poetry and music are connected by an extraordinary closeness were assumed, the representation of poetry as 'music in words' remains, in general, only an accepted metaphor. This intuition, however, must be based on more substantial grounds.[22] The philologist Pietro G. Beltrami claims that every poem calls for a specific analysis of its structural components when it is considered in its musical setting, that is, in relation to "microstructures" such as "syllabism" and verse scansion in particular.[23]

21 On this point, N. Pirrotta observes that 'poetry itself was music – poetry of any sort, which differs from prose in that it is the result of words being combined harmoniously according to proportions of duration, recurring stresses, patterns of rhyme, and symmetrical dispositions of lines, units of meter and stanzas, as well as that orchestration of sounds and rhythmic elements, which 'beautify the harmony of the [overall] structure ('que […] pulcram faciunt armoniam compaginis') to which Dante's theory of versification specifically calls our attention.' (N. Pirrotta, *Music and the Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi,* p. 22.)

22 'L'intuizione che poesia e musica siano legate da una straordinaria affinità è, si può dire, universale; la designazione della prima come "musica di parole" resta, tutto sommato, una metafora accettabile. Non pare probabile che tale impressione di omologia abbia motivazioni per così dire genetiche, che cioè perpetui la memoria di una mitica nascita gemellare [...] e nemmeno che essa poggi sulle effettive, ripetute e spesso prolungate congiunzioni delle due arti nelle varie forme della poesia per canto, dal madrigale trecentesco al melodramma dell'Ottocento (e oltre): l'intuizione deve avere radici più sostanziali.' [The intuition that poetry and music are connected by an extraordinary closeness is, one might say, universal. The representation of poetry as "music in words" remains, in general, an accepted metaphor. The homological connotation does not seem to be genealogically motivated, as if it were preserving the memory of a mythological twin birth [...], even when the conjunction of the two arts is placed in the context of a repeated and continuing convergence of different forms of *poesia per canto,* from the Trecento madrigals to the Ottocento melodrama (and even later); this intuition must be based on more substantial grounds.] (A. Menichetti, *Metrica italiana,* p. 66.)

23 'La domanda si può presentare anche per quanto riguarda le 'microstrutture', in particolare il sillabismo e i rapporti di scansione del verso: e quanto a ciò bisogna dire che la risposta non può essere univoca, ma deve essere elaborata caso per caso.' [This question also might be relevant to "microstructures" such as

Therefore, the present study inevitably has become an interdisciplinary inquiry that attempts a coalescence of philology and musicology in an effort to explore the musico-poetic dimensions of the *parlar cantando* practice in all of its possible contexts.

The study of poetic delivery revealed that the expression *parlar cantando,* until now only identified with the seventeenth-century *stile recitativo (*or *rappresentativo),* surprisingly was found in *De li contrasti,* a fourteenth-century treatise by Gidino da Sommacampagna (1384), where it describes poetry recitation. The purpose of this inquiry is to place the *parlar cantando* practice in its original context and follow the stages of its evolution in Italian cultural history from the late-thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

This study also is based on close readings of primary sources. It draws evidence from more than 50 treatises on music and the poetic art, as well as literary sources and other documents from the period between 1300 and 1600. Following along the same lines, the gap between the fourteenth-century singing practice and the seventeenth-century style of recitation has to be bridged, focusing on documents that might provide at least parts of the missing links between these two periods. Special attention is given to similarities and differences between the principles of poetic recitation and those of performance practice in Trecento written music. Furthermore, and focusing on verse structure, this study adopts the analytical methods developed by philological research on Italian poetry. Originally associated with the study of poetry, these methods are applied here as a new foundation for the analysis of Trecento music.

The present book is divided into two main sections. The first, comprising chapters 1 through 5, addresses the history and theory subtending the practice of *parlar cantando* in Italy from the beginning of the Trecento until the end of the sixteenth century. The second section, in

"syllabism" and the relation to verse scansion in particular. Therefore, it must be said that there cannot be an unequivocal answer, but each case must be examined individually.] (P. G. Beltrami, *La metrica italiana,* pp. 64–65.)

chapters 6 through 8, focuses on the reflection of this practice in Trecento written music, examining diverse aspects of this repertoire.