

Canterino and *improvvisatore*: oral poetry and performance

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Fifteenth-century Italy witnessed a distinctive chapter in the ancient and global history of oral poetry. Aspects of Renaissance Italian poetic performance are clearly linked with oral practices of all times and places: the conception of poetry as a multivalent and nearly universal form of human discourse, a tendency for poetic voice to culminate in song (often instrumentally accompanied), and the inseparability of oral poetry from the agonistic environment of performance.¹ The interrelated operations of memory and improvisation, too, played essential roles: music was never notated and always improvised, while the poetry was sometimes improvised but may have been conditioned by writing. The capacity of a well-trained memory to engage in both recall and combinatorial invention meant that while "improvisation" of text or music almost always involved some element of composition in performance, it was rarely *ex nihilo*, but involved the refashioning (*rifacimento*) of preexistent materials.

Oral poetry in fifteenth-century Italy thrived in a dynamic environment created largely by the advent of humanism. Broadly speaking, the pervasive figure of the urban *canterino* (or *cantimpanca*, *cantastorie*), though typically not himself the recipient of a humanist education, nevertheless benefited from an environment strongly shaped by the cultural forces of humanism, which promoted the virtues of an active life of civic engagement, and an attendant focus on oral discourse in the vernacular in conjunction with the newly exalted disciplines of rhetoric and poetry.² The *canterino* (and his audiences) also displayed an unprecedented level of literacy, manifested in surviving autograph manuscript collections, the growing sophistication of his borrowed materials, and recourse to vernacular memory treatises.

While the fifteenth-century *canterino* was the successful descendant of the *joculatore* (*histrione*, *buffone*) who had worked the public spaces and private *palazzi*

1 Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*.

2 *Canterino* is the term most often seen in contemporary documents to refer to a broad range of improvising singer/poets who performed in a variety of public and private venues, often with the accompaniment of a *lira da braccio*; see Haar, *Essays on Italian Poetry and Music*, 76–99.

of Italian cities for several centuries, the humanist improvisers of the late fifteenth-century courts and academies were a more rarified breed: a transformation of the civic type in the direct light of ancient models of *cantare in sulla lira*, exemplified by the mythological figures of Apollo, Amphion, and especially Orpheus. The poetry and practices of both types were strongly shaped by the dynamic cultural forces of late fifteenth-century Italy, including the advent of print culture, the spread of polyphonic practice (and musical literacy), intensification of the debate on language (*questione della lingua*), and the spread of humanism to the courts, academies, and universities throughout the peninsula.

The civic *canterino*

The natural habitats of the civic *canterino* were the republican city-states of central Italy. The humbler and more marginal ranks of oral poets (*cerretani*, *ciurmadori*, *ciarlatani*) had for several centuries traveled widely among Italian courts and cities, often combining verse and prose performance with other activities like juggling, acting, dancing, pulling teeth, and selling remedies (*histrioni*, *ioculatori*, *giullari*). By the fifteenth century, evidence in the form of letters, chronicles, surviving poetry, and communal records from cities like Florence, Siena, and Perugia suggests that the most successful *canterini* sustained professional lives by creating and singing poetry in designated public arenas (like Piazza San Martino in Florence), in the homes of wealthy citizens, and as employees of city governments (*araldo*).³ During the early decades of the century, the blind *canterino* Niccolò cieco d'Arezzo had been commissioned to compose and perform encomiastic (*capitolo*) and didactic (*canzone morale*) verse for two popes, an emperor, the Signoria of Venice, and the priors of Siena and Perugia.⁴ The Perugian communal contracts of 1432–33 describe him as *notabilissimus cantarinum et expertissimus in arte*, and as *citerista et cantore rimarum . . . ac multiplicium ystoriarum* ("a most remarkable and expert *canterino* . . . a lira-player and singer of poems . . . and a great many stories") both at the meals of the priors and in public.⁵ Magister Franciscus Florentinus was expected *cotidie cum sono cantu docens optima exempla antiquorum romanarum et aliorum multorum* ("daily with his singing teach the best examples of the ancient Romans and many others") and his 1483 contract adds that these *cantilenas Romanorum* are to be sung *de improviso* in Perugia's main piazza. In this context, the role of the *canterino* was not merely to entertain, but to instruct (*docens*) the priors on matters of morality and history and the Perugian public with regard to an

³ On the latter, see McGee, *The Ceremonial Musicians*, 69–104.

⁴ The poetry of Niccolò and other *canterini* is edited in Lanza, *Lirici toscani del Quattrocento*.

⁵ Rossi, "Memorie di musica civile in Perugia," 133–35.

appropriate civic ethos derived from the best ancient exemplars. Without fail, the medium for this was improvisatory singing to the accompaniment of a string instrument variously described as a *citera*/*quitarra* or *viola*, probably a bowed instrument like the *vielle*, or an early version of what was soon to become the oral poet's instrument of choice, the *lira da braccio*.

During the fourteenth century, *canterini* had been active in most northern Italian courts and cities, and their pattern of ad hoc employment and itinerancy continued in the fifteenth century. The court of Ferrara, and to a lesser extent those of Mantua, Milan, and Bologna, showed a preference for the *canterino*'s art, whose stock and trade, the *cantare* – a long narrative poem in ottava rima on heroic subjects drawn from ancient and medieval epic traditions – was readily accommodated to the neo-feudal posturing of ruling families like the Este. Blind *canterini* turn up with some frequency during the late fifteenth century. During 1468–78, Giovanni “orbo” da Parma served the Este court, where he performed *cose maravigliose de improvviso* (“marvelous improvised things”), and was also described as a *maestro de’ soneti*.⁶ Francesco cieco da Ferrara (ca. 1460–1506) received payments from the Este to *canta in gesta* (“sing of great deeds”), but also from the courts of Bologna and Mantua, where the composition of his successful chivalric epic *Mambriano* (Ferrara, 1509) was closely followed by Isabella d’Este and Gianfrancesco Gonzaga during the early 1490s.⁷

Beginning with de facto Medici rule in the 1430s, several factors combined to make Florence fertile ground for *canterino* culture: a strong mercantile and political ethos of active public life, a vital tradition of vernacular poetry rooted in the legacy of the *tre corone* (Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio), and a thriving culture of civic humanism favorable to the practice of vernacular eloquence. For most of the century the Perugian priors had looked to Tuscany for its *canterini*; the majority of those came from Florence, where by the 1470s the priors were recruiting exclusively, for in that city “there are many qualified men who are expert in this practice.”⁸

By 1435 Niccolò had moved to Florence. With the assistance of Michele del Giogante, a local accountant, poet, and impresario for the public performance of vernacular poetry in the city, Niccolò enjoyed commissions of sonnets from private citizens and contacts with the recently repatriated Medici family, quickly becoming a star performer at the primary venue for public performance in the city, Piazza San Martino. A surviving account, transmitted by the

6 Ugolini, *I cantari d'argomento classico*, 18–19.

7 Everson, “Francesco Cieco da Ferrara.”

8 Rossi, “Memorie di musica civile in Perugia,” 141: “Et audientes quod in civitate florentie prout per literas cuiusdem dicte civitatis acceperunt sunt multi et ydonei homines et ad dictum exercitium intelligentes.”

Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Pontano in his dialogue *De fortitudine*, captures Niccolò at a moment in the late 1430s when he was performing *sacras historias* in ottava rima for the churchmen who had filled the city after the relocation here of both the papal entourage of Eugene IV and the Council of Florence: "Good lord! What audiences have flocked to hear Niccolò cieco; on feast days, from the bench he sang sacred stories and the histories of ancient things, in Etruscan rhymes [i.e., ottava rima]. Here there were learned men, here a great many Florentines, all running to hear him perform."⁹

The very same performers who galvanized large, mixed audiences at San Martino were also favored in elite domestic settings, particularly those associated with the Medici, who were both patrons and practitioners of the *canterino*'s art. A letter addressed by Michele del Giongante to Piero de' Medici in 1454 recalls a dinner at the house of Lionardo Bartolini to honor Francesco Sforza's accession to the Milanese duchy in 1450, and a performance by a young protégé of Michele named Simone di Grazia for whom Michele sought patronage:

[This] young boy [is] one of us Florentines, about 16 or 17 years old. And this boy, whom I already put to singing improvisations on the bench at San Martino, of fine intellect and imagination, really gifted by nature with this skill ... you already heard sing in Lionardo Bartolini's house, at a splendid dinner he gave for you, where I brought him, and he sang a few stanzas; you must remember it. I think you were also acquainted with his work when he brought with him a very pleasing little book I made for him, and he had sung a good part of the material written in it at San Martino, including a little work maestro Niccolò cieco performed as a motet at San Martino, which made hundreds of people there weep in sympathy ...¹⁰

Clearly a young professional like Simone pursued strategies that distinguished him from the *ciurmadori* (*ciarlatani*) who occupied the lower rungs of *canterino* practice: he must cultivate wealthy patrons, possess an aptitude (*fachultà*) for improvisatory singing (*cantare inproviso*) rooted in talent (*ingegno*) and invention (*fantasia*), and undergo training in order to sing publicly *in panca* at San Martino. This passage also reveals the mixed orality of the practice; Michele had prepared a "little book" (*quadernuccio*) containing material directly related to what Simone sang in San Martino, which might refer either to finished works like the "motet" or, as *cantare inproviso* suggests, collections of material that formed that basis of improvised verse. That Niccolò performed a "little work" (*operetta*) also confirms that short, lyric works like the sonnet, and not only longer *cantari* and *capitoli*, were part of the *canterino*'s repertory.

9 *De fortitudine* (Naples, 1490), bk. 2.

10 Flamini, *La lirica toscana*, 600–601, 241–42; Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*, 47–48.

Perhaps the most detailed and candid description of a *canterino* performance was that recorded in 1459 by the young Galeazzo Maria Sforza at a dinner in his honor hosted by Cosimo de' Medici. The performer was Antonio di Guido (1418–86), who had begun his career at San Martino in 1437 and soon became the most famous *canterino* of his time:

After dinner, I retired to a room with all the other guests. I heard a maestro Antonio sing, accompanying himself on the “citarra” [vielle/lira da braccio]. I think if your Excellency does not know him you must at least have heard him spoken of. He began from the first deeds carried out by your Excellency, and continued until the last ones . . . Not only that, but he went on to commend me, and he narrated everything with such dignity and style that the greatest poet or orator in the world, presented with such a task, would perhaps not have earned such praise for performing it . . . from now on I will be singing his praises, for indeed, his performance was such that everyone showed their wonder and admiration, and especially those who were most learned: in his use of simile I don't believe even Lucan or Dante ever did anything more beautiful, and he combined so many ancient stories, the names of innumerable ancient Romans, fables, poets, and the names of all the muses . . . I must say that man made a very great impression.¹¹

Antonio's performance was calculated not only to flatter the young Milanese duke, but to flaunt the Florence–Milan alliance before the assembled guests, which included the heads of Italy's most powerful ruling families. An equally significant aspect of this account is Antonio's evident capacity to recall and “combine” (*mescolare*) a prodigious array of stories and names, for it reveals that he possessed a well-trained memory.

The *canterino* and the “arte della memoria”

Michele del Gigante recorded in one of his autograph anthologies “the principle of learning the art of memory, which was revealed to me by Maestro Niccolò cieco of Florence in December, 1435, when he came here.”¹² Niccolò's treatise is one of four that can be directly linked to Florentine *canterini*; these were among dozens circulating in the city that had been variously translated or adapted from the ancient Roman rhetorical tradition to feed a growing demand for instruction in public speaking.

The “memorial archive,” discussed earlier in this volume by Anna Maria Busse Berger with respect to composition (see Ch. 10), was perhaps even more readily applied to the *canterino*'s practice, since in the classical oratorical tradition

11 Ed. in Orvieto, *Pulci medievale*, 181.

12 Kent, “Michele del Gigante's House of Memory,” 121.

memory was a strategic preparation for *pronuntiatio*, or performance. The technique transmitted in these treatises thus served something more creative than storage and rote recall; Mary Carruthers has described this memory as "the matrix of reminiscing cogitation, shuffling and collating 'things' stored in a random access memory scheme, or set of schemes, a memory architecture and a library built up during one's lifetime with the express intention that it be used inventively."¹³ Niccolò's treatise concludes with a promise that brings to mind Galeazzo's description of Antonio's combinatorial facility with "stories" and "names": "these eight figures of artificial memory constitute every method and manner of being able to remember every name of a man or woman or other animal or other memorable thing ... numbers, events, prose, allegories in sermons, the speeches of ambassadors, readings, each and every thing."¹⁴

There is no reason to assume that the *canterino*'s mnemonic skills with regard to texts did not extend to music as well. Though the long epic poems, like the ninety-four *cantari* (some 3,700 stanzas of ottava rima!) of Cristoforo l'Altissimo's *Il primo libro de' reali* sung at San Martino from June 1514 to July 1515, certainly relied on melodic formulas, even these must have varied during the performance, and at times veered between the poles of recitation and more fully-formed melody.¹⁵ Some idea of the range of music available in the memorial archive of an oral poet is suggested by the Florentine "cantasi come" practice; it was common to copy devotional poetry (laude) with rubrics indicating the song to which the poem might be sung, and the musical sources ranged widely from formulas for *rispetti* (strambotti) to the polyphonic genres of French *chanson*, carnival song, and madrigal.¹⁶

The humanist *improvisatore*

Whereas the older vernacular practice of the *canterino* was conducted by professional singer-poets of modest, usually mercantile, origin and education, the new breed of improvisatory singers that emerged during the late fifteenth century typically were well-educated humanists who pursued their singing as they did their humanist scholarship, as an adjunct to such paid professions as notaries, diplomats, orators, and priests. The shift in perspective is illustrated in a letter written by the young Michele Verino, son of the famous humanist Ugolino Verino, while he was studying at the University of Florence. Michele was recalling a performance by the aging Antonio di Guido he had heard in San Martino sometime in the 1480s:

13 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*. 14 Kent, "Michele del Gigante's House of Memory," 124.

15 Degl'Innocenti, *I "Realì" dell'Altissimo*. 16 Wilson, *Singing Poetry in Renaissance Florence*.

Concerning oratorical delivery, how esteemed is the witness of Demosthenes, to whom is attributed all the power of oratory. Once I heard Antonio singing the wars of Orlando in Piazza San Martino, and he sang with such eloquence that you seemed to be hearing Petrarch himself, and you would have believed yourself to be in the midst of the battle, not merely hearing a description of it. Later I read one of his own poems, so rough that he seemed like another person. Clearly, therefore, such works are best when delivered with eloquence, for this kind of practice benefits greatly from the diligent and judicious use of not only voice, but bodily gesture as well.¹⁷

Although Michele was clearly transported by Antonio's performance, his disciplined response was filtered through the lens of his *studia humanitatis*, especially his recent studies of Quintilian and Cicero. Antonio's improvised performance of a Carolingian epic in ottava rima (the "wars of Orlando") was for him a model demonstration of oratorical eloquence (in the vernacular, as signaled by his comparison with the exemplary vernacular poet Petrarch), including his appropriate use of *vox et gestus* (voice and gesture). Antonio's written poetry, on the other hand, is here subject to a different set of stylistic criteria, and fails to meet the young humanist's literary standards. Antonio was treated to a similar humanist makeover by Angelo Poliziano, who upon Antonio's death in 1486 eulogized the old *canterino* in a Latin epigram that likened him to Orpheus.

Solo singing and the *studia humanitatis*

The recasting of solo singing to the lira da braccio as a humanist enterprise unfolded during the second half of the century in multiple centers, but especially where an older *canterino* practice coexisted with the flowering of humanist courts, academies, and universities: Milan, Ferrara, Mantua, Florence, Naples, and, through importation from these centers, Rome. One clear line of influence was through the *studia humanitatis*, as delineated in the pedagogical treatises of humanist scholar-teachers like Pier Paolo Vergerio (d. 1444), Vittorino da Feltre (d. 1446), and Guarino Veronese (d. 1460).¹⁸ Vittorino trained his students to be sensitive to the aural qualities of written texts (especially poetic texts), and to "see ancient literature on the page as the script for an oral performance, one that required a trained memory and enunciation."¹⁹ Singing verse to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument was promoted not only as a way to develop proper diction and an aid in the memorization of texts, but as a form of recreation, one with clear ancient

17 Verde, *Lo studio fiorentino*, 3/2:689.

18 Kallendorf, ed., *Humanist Educational Treatises*; Gallo, *Music in the Castle*, ch. 3.

19 Grafton, "The Humanist as Reader," 197.

precedent. As Guarino observed to his student Leonello d'Este in 1434, "what about Homer telling us that after the sweat of battle, [Achilles] took up his cithara and relaxed with song?"²⁰ Lodovico Carboni, orator of the Este court and teacher of rhetoric at the University of Ferrara, recalled that Guarino had taught all his students to compose Latin verses with musical accompaniment, by which means accompanied song became widely diffused in the university circles of the city. Michele Verino and his fellow students in Florence also embraced the practice; his surviving letters describe pleasant evenings spent among his fellow students singing verses *ad lyram*, or solitary moments of recreation spent singing *ad cytharam carmen extemporale* (extemporized songs to the cithara).²¹

The study of ancient texts fostered by the humanist curriculum led to even more expanded claims for the role of sung lyric poetry. Horace had famously declared that poetry *ad lyram* could guarantee the immortality of its authors and subjects, and Ficino's studies of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy led him to claims for the profound psychological and therapeutic benefits of music, especially the "Orphic singing to the lyre" he promoted in his immediate circles. The nearly magical power of music attributed to its exemplary ancient practitioners – principally Apollo, Amphion, Orpheus, Arion, and the biblical figure of David – were usually glossed by humanists as standing for the civilizing effect of rhetorically elevated discourse. It is small wonder, then, that many humanist-educated princes and prelates embraced the practice, both as patrons and, in some cases, as performers. According to the Florentine improviser Raffaele Brandolini, "Pope Pius II took such delight in metrical poetry accompanied by the lyre that he preferred this kind of enjoyment to all others. And not only did he enjoy hearing the lyre, but he was also not reluctant to play it very sweetly on occasion."²²

The *improvisatori* in Medici circles

The particular vitality of humanist *cantare ad lyram* in Florence was nurtured by the sympathetic patronage of the Medici and the city's precocious humanism and widespread engagement with poetry, and it can be measured by the great number of individuals who practiced it (see Table 16.1).²³ Ficino's distinctive casting of this practice within a framework of medicine, theology, and

20 *Epistolario di Guarino*, 2:275; cited in Gallo, *Music in the Castle*, 73.

21 Verde, *Lo studio fiorentino*, 3/2:672–700.

22 Brandolini, *On Music and Poetry*, 19.

23 Table 16.1 is a provisional list of *improvisatori* whose careers began in the fifteenth century and for whom there is evidence of sustained activity. Other evidence (for example, Vasari's biographies of Bramante, Verrocchio, Sodoma, *et al.*) suggests that improvisatory singing to the lira or lute was a widely cultivated avocation.

Table 16.1 *Provisional list of humanist improvvisatori, ca. 1450-1518*

	Milan	Mantua	Ferrara	Naples	Rome	Other
I. Florentine						
<i>A. Ficino and his correspondents</i>						
Marsilio Ficino (1433-99)						
Sebastiano d'Antonio Foresi (1424-88)					ca. 1469-77	
Cherubino di Bartolo Quarquagli						
Antonio d'Agostino da S. Miniato (ca. 1433-?)						
Girolamo Benivieni (1453-1542)						Pisa, 1479
(see below)						
Baccio Ugolini (d. 1494) (see below)						
<i>B. Lorenzo's circle</i>						
Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-92)						
Baccio Ugolini (d. 1494)		1459, 1480		1488-93	1473	
Girolamo Benivieni (1453-1542)						
Angelo Poliziano (1454-94)		1480				
<i>Il compare della viola</i> [= <i>lo Spagnuolo?</i>]						
<i>il Cardiere della viola</i>						
Filippo Lapaccini (ca. 1450-ca. 1512)		1482-, 1491-1512				1474
Bernardo Bellincioni (1452-92)	1485					
Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici (1472-1503)						

	Milan	Mantua	Ferrara	Naples	Rome	Other
<i>C. Other Florentine improvisatori</i>						
Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)	1482- date unknown				1493	Venice
Jacopo Corsi (d. 1493)						
Aurelio Brandolini (1454-97)				1466-80 date unknown	1480-89, 1497 1489, 1494-	Hungary, 1489; Verona Urbino
Bernardo Accolti, <i>L'Unico Aretino</i> (1458-1536)	date unknown	date unknown		1466- 1493	1491-93, 1495-1517 1513-17 1501-5	Venice Perugia, 1535
Raffaele Brandolini (1465-1517)						
Atalante Migliorotti (1466-1532)	1482/3					
Francesco Cei (1471-1505)						
II. Non-Florentine						
Pietrobono de Burzellis (ca. 1417-97)	1456	1482-84/6	1441-	1473	1471	Hungary, 1487-ca. 1489
Benedetto Gareth, <i>Il Cariteo</i> (ca. 1450-1515)					1468-1515	1501-3
Pamfilo Sasso (1455-1527)						
Serafino Ciminelli "Aquilano" (1466-1500)	1490, 1495-97	1494-95, 1497		1478, 1493-94	1484, 1491-93, 1499-1500	Urbino, 1494, 1498-99; Venice; Genoa
Andrea Cossa [Coscia] (fl. ca. 1490-1520)	1491, 1518			?		

Neoplatonic cosmology was set forth as early as 1457.²⁴ In Ficino's thought, the sense of hearing is a direct channel for the kindling of divine frenzy within the soul, which occurs when the proper music, an "image of divine harmony," awakens within the soul its memory of a celestial harmony in which "our soul took part before it was imprisoned in our bodies." But not any music would do; some strive to "imitate the celestial music by harmony of voice and the sounds of various instruments [*vocum numeris variorumque sonis instrumentorum*], and these we call superficial and vulgar." Ficino here seems to be referring to some kind of measured music (*vocum numeris*), perhaps polyphonic song, which he would have had occasion to hear in Florence by this time. But those who "imitate the divine and heavenly harmony with deeper and sounder judgment render a sense of its inner reason and knowledge into verse, feet, and numbers," that is, into poetry intimately wedded to the "solemn music" of solo song accompanied by the *lira da braccio*.

Thereafter, Ficino's references to orphic singing with the lyre surface often in philosophical letters to his large network of patrons, friends, and students.²⁵ Ficino's mode is unflinchingly platonizing and can give the impression of a highly rarified activity, as when he describes how "on occasion I have heard our dear Lorenzo de' Medici, moved by divine frenzy, sing similar prayers to the lyre." But Ficino's music-making was also a serious activity rooted in a broadly shared Florentine cultural practice. Among his music-making correspondents and *familiars*, Antonio da San Miniato had been a *canterino* in his younger days, and Cherubino Quarquagli, Baccio Ugolini, and Bernardo Accolti were among the most famous improvisatory singers of secular strambotti and sonnets.²⁶ Ficino's musical soulmate appears to have been Sebastiano Foresi, a notary and accomplished musician who built lyres and played them well, and with whom Ficino spent many happy hours playing and singing.

The musical legacy of Ficino's writings can hardly be overestimated, for he bequeathed to a large, influential circle of humanist scholars an exalted conception and practice of sung poetry as a divine and almost magical aural experience. The many contemporary images of enraptured classical figures playing a *lira da braccio*, such as Raphael's Apollo in his *Parnassus*, owe something to this legacy, and Ficino's validation of the philosophical content of the Tuscan poetic tradition directly influenced the work of Angelo Poliziano and

24 Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 1:14–20. On Ficino and music, see also James Hankins's contribution to this volume, Ch. 13.

25 For Ficino's *catalogus familiarum*, in which he groups his friends according to these three categories, see his *Opera Omnia*, 1:936–37. On the complex matter of just what sort of "academy" these groups constituted at any time, see Hankins, "Humanist Academies."

26 Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica*, 788–800.

Lorenzo de' Medici, two of the most eloquent and ardent apologists for the exalted status of vernacular poetry.²⁷ The *improvisatori* associated with vernacular poetry in Florence overlapped to some extent with Ficino's circle, but they constituted a looser, more worldly group united by the figure of Lorenzo, whose patronage most of them sought at some point.²⁸

Lorenzo's documented involvement with *cantare in sulla lira all'improvviso* dates back to 1466, when Giuliano "Catellaccio" identified himself as Lorenzo's teacher on the viola (lira da braccio).²⁹ Lorenzo was rarely without access to a lira da braccio, especially during his country retreats, and fellow *improvisatori* were often in his company throughout his life. An otherwise unnamed *compare della viola* was a part of Lorenzo's circles in the 1470s, and was the dedicatee in one redaction of Lorenzo's early *Uccellagione de starne*, a popularizing poem in forty-five stanzas of ottava rima, in effect a short *cantare*. Lorenzo's immersion in the performative *letteratura canterina*, both the longer forms of ottava rima and capitolo in terza rima as well as the shorter lyric forms of the sonnet, *canzone a ballo*, and barzelletta, laid the foundation for the later transformation of vernacular poetry by poets within Lorenzo's circle. Chief among these was Angelo Poliziano, whose vernacular poetry, particularly his *Stanze per la giostra* in ottava rima (1478) and many of his shorter poems (*Rime*), display a stylistic eclecticism in which Tuscan popular language is interwoven with erudite classical allusion, Neoplatonic thought, and a lexicon derived from Petrarch, Dante, and the poets of the *dolce stil novo*. Tuscan poetry, in other words, was transformed by humanist erudition without losing its traditional *cantabilità*.

There is slender evidence that Poliziano was himself a performer (Giovio reports that he died in a fit of passion for a noble youth induced by singing to the cithara), but he certainly knew the practice at first hand. In 1490 he wrote to Lorenzo regarding his patron's eldest son: "I heard our Piero sing *improvviso* the other night, when he came to assail me at home with all of these improvisers," among whom must have been the *il Cardiere della viola* who reportedly sang almost every evening in Piero's home after dinner.³⁰ Poliziano's most

27 Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence*, ch. 9, and more recently, Storey, "The Philosopher, the Poet, and the Fragment," 604–6.

28 Villosi, "Panoramica sui poeti performativi." A poem by Antonio Cammelli datable to the late 1480s lists what might be construed as a Laurentian brigata of *poeti performativi*: Lorenzo, his son Piero, Poliziano, Girolamo Benivieni, Baccio Ugolini, Filippo Lapaccini, Matteo Franco, and Bernardo Bellincioni; *ibid.*, 16.

29 D'Accone, "Lorenzo the Magnificent and Music," 276–78.

30 *Ibid.*, 279 n. 54. Orvieto's argument that Poliziano was the mysterious "compare della viola" mentioned in documents beginning in the 1470s is not widely accepted; see his "Angelo Poliziano *Compare della brigata laurenziana*." On Poliziano's engagement with music, see Lovato, "Appunti sulle preferenze musicali di Angelo Poliziano."

famous monument to the art of the *improvvisatore* is his pastoral play *Orfeo*, written and performed at the Mantuan court around 1480 and featuring in its title role the most celebrated improvisatory singer of the day, Baccio Ugolini. Baccio was a priest and diplomat who traveled often and widely on behalf of Lorenzo, and his learning and charisma, combined with his consummate skills as a poet, singer, and lira player, made him welcome in courtly circles from Mantua to Naples. No one showed greater regard for Baccio's artistry than Poliziano, who created a role that featured Baccio playing his lyre and singing a classicizing sapphic ode in praise of the Gonzaga court. When a new production of *Orfeo* was attempted a decade later, the singing role was considered sufficiently demanding for the Gonzaga to actively (and unsuccessfully) recruit Atalante Migliorotti, a great Florentine *improvvisatore* of the next generation whom none other than Leonardo da Vinci had reportedly trained in the art.

The *improvvisatori* in the Italian courts

As the information in Table 16.1 suggests, the activities of *improvvisatori* became increasingly peripatetic during the last third of the century. Florentines continued to outnumber singer-poets from other parts of Italy, but with the decline of Florence after the Medici expulsion in 1494, their careers, along with those of some extraordinary non-Florentines, shifted towards the new centers of humanist scholarship, the courts. Their skills as poets and performers made them natural participants in the vital literary cultures of the court-sponsored academies and gatherings (Bernardo Accolti and Benedetto Gareth, for example, were cast as interlocutors in Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* and Pontano's *Aegidius*, respectively), and their literary orientation often reflected the particular brands of humanism practiced at a given court.

Ferrara

At Ferrara, the enduring ambition of the Este family to portray itself as descendants of French nobility nurtured a fascination with chivalric epic that culminated in the great epic poems of Boiardo (*Orlando innamorato*, 1483) and Ariosto (*Orlando furioso*, 1516). These were cast in the ottava rima that had long been a staple of *canterini*, and while there is naturally more evidence for the polyphonic settings of Ariosto after 1516, both poems were sung by *improvvisatori* at court and in the piazza.³¹

31 Haar, "Arie per cantar stanze ariosteché," 33–34; Salzberg, "In the Mouths of Charlatans," esp. 646–50.

Naples

Thanks to the enlightened patronage of the Aragonese kings, Naples supported one of the most fertile humanist environments on the peninsula until its political collapse in the 1490s. The leading Neapolitan humanist, Giovanni Pontano (1429–1503), fostered in its court, university, and academic circles a particularly enthusiastic cultivation of Latin and vernacular poetry that attracted many of the leading *improvvisatori* of the day. The two Brandolini brothers, Aurelio and Raffaele, were born in Florence but reared and educated in Naples; they became famous *improvvisatori* as well as reputable humanist scholars. The court was strongly influenced by Florentine literary models, but particularly in the realm of vernacular poetry rejected Florentine eclecticism in favor of the emerging *petrarchismo* eventually to be codified in Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525). The central figure of the Neapolitan court in this regard was Benedetto Gareth (Il Cariteo), a Catalan-born poet-singer who spent his entire career in service to the Aragonese kings.³² He famously sang Virgil's poems at the request of Ferdinand II (ca. 1495–96), and his Petrarchan verse and manner of performing it were a significant influence, notably upon another Neapolitan, Andrea Coscia (or Cossa), who in turn exercised a decisive influence upon the most famous exponent of sung Petrarchan verse, Serafino Aquilano.

Rome

Since at least the 1480s, *improvvisatori* had been drawn to the rich patronage environment of the Roman Curia, and after the French invasion of Italy in 1494, the intellectual center of humanism shifted decisively from Florence and Naples to Rome. Both Brandolini brothers left Naples for Rome, Aurelio in 1480, Raffaele in 1495, and entered successfully into the Latinate literary circles of the city's many curial institutions and households. The classicizing Latinity of the Roman environment is reflected in Raffaele Brandolini's treatise *De musica et poetica*, dedicated to Leo X in 1513, but drafted much earlier at the same patron's request when he was Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici. Brandolini mounted an elaborate defense of improvisatory performance of Latin verse as an essential humanist activity. It is from his account of his older brother Aurelio's career as a performer that we learn the most about the elite character and context of the practice he was advocating:

32 Kennedy, *The Site of Petrarchism*, 54–73.

He sang so often, so familiarly, and in so many different ways in the presence of the Pope himself [Sixtus IV, 1471–84], that every day in his private study he would expound in varied song the merits of the pontiffs at some times, serious questions of philosophy at others, or often sacred histories. He recited at many renowned banquets of both cardinals and bishops, and the most honorable assemblies of very learned men.³³

In his treatise, Brandolini focused on the banquet as a primary venue for poetic performance in order to address what he perceived as an insufficiently revived aspect of ancient cultural life, the private social setting of the *symposium*, or *convivium*.³⁴ In fact, elaborate banquets had for some time been the occasion for the extempore singing of Latin verse, but the practice became especially fashionable in Leonine Rome.³⁵

Vernacular verse was hardly ignored in Roman circles, however. The academy maintained by Paolo Cortesi (1465–1510) from the early 1490s until 1503 sponsored discussions and performances of vernacular poetry, in which the singer-lutenist Serafino Ciminelli Aquilano was a central figure. In Cortesi's *De cardinalatu libri tres* (1510), a guide to how cardinals should conduct themselves as "senators" of the church, he mentions *cantare ad lyram* among the kinds of music appropriate for performance after meals, and singles out a group of singers for special praise: Cariteo for his performances of Virgil in Naples, Serafino for the "controlled conjunction of word and song" in his strambotti, and three Florentines – Baccio Ugolini, Jacopo Corsi, and Bernardo Accolti – who had given him particular pleasure through their "singing *ex tempore* on the lyre in the vernacular tongue."³⁶

Serafino figured prominently in the writings of two other academy members. Vincenzo Calmeta (1460–1508) was the singer's close friend and first biographer, and Angelo Colocci (1484–1549) saw Serafino's poetry into print in 1503 prefaced with an *Apologia delle rime di Serafino Aquilano*.³⁷

33 Brandolini, *On Music and Poetry*, 111. On Aurelio, see Gallo, *Music in the Castle*, 74–97. Brandolini was familiar with a wide circle of improvisatory singer/poets, among whom he names Baccio Ugolini, Serafino Aquilano, Pietrobono (whose praises Brandolini literally sang at Naples in 1473; see Gallo, 90–97), Jacopo Sannazaro, and Benedetto Gareth at Naples, Bernardo Accolti, Angelo Poliziano, Antonio Maturazzo, Marco Probo Mariano of Sulmona, and Giles of Viterbo.

34 See the essay by Anthony Cummings on "Music and Feasts" in this volume, Ch. 19.

35 Falletti, "Le feste per Eleonora d'Aragona"; Pirrotta, "Music and Cultural Tendencies," in his *Music and Culture in Italy*, 89–90.

36 Pirrotta, "Music and Cultural Tendencies," 96–112.

37 Bologna, ed., "Collettanee" in *morte di Serafino Aquilano*, 72–80. See D'Amico, *Renaissance Humanism*, 102–7 on Cortesi's academy, and Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance*, 92–105 on Calmeta and Colocci in relation to Serafino.

The reasons these two humanist scholars devoted unprecedented attention to a contemporary vernacular poet emerge in their writings: Serafino's strambotti and manner of performing them enthralled mixed audiences and spawned numerous imitators by virtue of his capacity to "express the passions of love in verse," and he was the exemplary figure in their arguments on behalf of a *lingua cortigiana*, a universal Italian vernacular that moved beyond regional Tuscan to include refinements from the best courtly language. For Colocci in particular, this *lingua comune* ideally drew on the best of supra-regional court usage to become the language of elevated social discourse of the courts, one that Castiglione promoted in *Il cortegiano* and that the well-traveled Serafino was positioned to exemplify. Serafino also emerges here as the first *improvisatore* to elicit comments directed at the musical aspects of his performances. For Cortesi there was "nothing sweeter than the manner of his modes [of singing]." Calmeta claimed that Serafino brought to Rome a "smooth" (*stesa e piana*) and "refined" way of singing, based on the "musical form" of Andrea Coscia's singing to the lute, and Colocci praised his ability to unlock the emotions of his listeners through a rare conjoining of words and music. Serafino's melodies (*aeri*) were widely admired and occasionally transcribed, perhaps not unlike the popular *arie* for which the Venetian poet Leonardo Giustinian (a figure not otherwise associated with improvisation) was famous earlier in the century. Certainly the broader history of the strambotto at this time suggests a musical practice in transition from oral and improvised to written and fixed form.³⁸

Serafino makes a fitting conclusion to a discussion of fifteenth-century *improvisatori*, not just because he died in 1500, but because he is a Janus-faced figure at a critical juncture. As a professional and somewhat vagrant and multifaceted performer of modest education and social standing, there is much of the traditional *canterino* about him, but unlike most of his fifteenth-century predecessors, he moved in the fluid world of the humanist courts where new cultural forces came to bear on the performance practice of the oral poet. The traditional improvisatory art came into closer contact with polyphonic practice, as for example in the Florentine academies of the early sixteenth century, where Atalante Migliorotti and Bernardo Accolti rubbed shoulders with early madrigal composers.³⁹ The amorous and subjective modes of Petrarchan poetry favored more intimate performance venues and the

38 La Face Bianconi and Rossi, *Le rime di Serafino Aquilano in musica*, 6–7; Wilson, "Poliziano and the Language of Lament."

39 Cummings, *The Maecenas and the Madrigalist*, ch. 2.

presence of women as listeners and patrons. And far from eclipsing oral practice, the advent of print brought a new array of mixed oralities.⁴⁰ The continuing vitality of *canterino* culture in centers like Venice and the role of the humanist *improvvisatori* in the forging of new rhetorically driven genres like madrigal and monody are sixteenth-century stories with fifteenth-century roots.

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40 Burke, "Oral Culture and Print Culture"; Richardson, *Manuscript Culture*, 226–58; Salzberg, "In the Mouths of Charlatans."

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