

Petrarch and his time

by Francesco Facchin

Petrarch's relationship to music is multifarious and intricate, appearing always on the borderline between involving the art of sounds within a complex, all-encompassing cultural vision and circumscribing it to the more limited area – and hence the narrower 'cultural' implications – of the pleasures associated with the *otia*. Nonetheless, his rapport with music must have been a strong one if in his last will and testament (where one is expected to leave one's possessions to valued friends, in the hope that they shall thereby continue to live) the poet gives Tomaso Bambasio, his friend from Ferrara, his *leutum bonum*, thereby implying, perhaps, that he possessed – and 'used' – others.

On the one hand, in his *De Cantu*, the chapter of the *De remediis utriusque fortunae* devoted to music, Petrarch traces a general outline of his musical knowledge in accordance with a sedimented tradition that assigned to music an aura of mythical omnipotence and a capacity to influence the soul. On the other, in the *Bucolicum carmen* the two protagonists, the shepherds *Tyrrhenus* and *Gallus*, discuss the two aspects of the musical art: while *Tyrrhenus*-Petrarch defends poetry's independence from music and describes the *canzone* as a natural extension of language, *Gallus*-Vitry, a master in the technique of playing instruments, described the virtues of the sound of the *cithara*, the plucked instrument of classical Antiquity.

This duality of approaches to the art of music and its themes is also reflected in Petrarch's friendships, a point that can perhaps also be attributed either to a normal oscillation between different levels and manners of enjoying music or to his esteem for different professional figures. Alongside the important friendships in Paris and Avignon we also find those for the most distinguished performers of his day. To the former category belong Philippe de Vitry, the great theorist, musician and poet, to whom we now attribute the initiation of that vast musical and cultural movement of the 14th century today identified by the term he himself coined of "Ars Nova", and his close friend Louis Sanctus de Beeringen, the *Socrates* of letters to whom he dedicated the collection of the *Familiari* and a singer at the chapel of Cardinal Giovanni Colonna. Both were worthy representatives of the most erudite written polyphony and (especially in Vitry's case) the most elevated speculations in music theory. Alongside them, however, we also find musicians known to us for being cited in various contemporary sources as performers of great talent and renown. Thus we find Confortino, mentioned on various occasions in the rubrics in the margin of the so-called *codice degli abbozzi* (Vatican Library, Vat. Lat. 3196) or in the parchments bound to ms. Casanatense 924; and also

Floriano (Floriano da Rimini), the recipient of two epistles and Petrarch's guest on various occasions. From his letters we learn also of his familiarity with teachers: in responding to his friend Benintendi dei Ravagni, chancellor of the Venetian Republic, he mentions two professors, father and son, whom he praises roundly, also pointing out that the son was actually better than the father (*Fam.* XIX, 2).

Another document that would appear to attest a familiarity with even the more specifically technical, and not only philosophical-literary, aspects of music is MS *Ashb. 1051* of the Laurenziana, a collection of musical treatises that scholars are inclined to identify as a product of the poet's circle. This hypothesis is supported by the presence on the last sheet of a short treatise in the form of a lesson by Louis Sanctus de Beeringen, placed there presumably on the express wishes of whoever commissioned the manuscript.

His attention to the world of sounds is surely a strong one. Again his letters offer evidence of his relationship with both the entire "musical landscape" and certain popular customs. With Francesco Nelli (*Fam.* XIII, 8) he wistfully recollects the "songs, sounds and harmonies of strings and lutes" heard in Avignon. Writing to the bishop of Viterbo Nicolò di Paolo dei Vetuli he extends an invitation to the tranquillity of Valchiusa to escape the city with its "clamour, cries, trumpet blasts and noise of arms" (*Fam.* XVI, 6). And finally, to Francesco il Vecchio da Carrara he makes a polite appeal: to "put a stop to the custom prevailing in Padua of disturbing corteges and funeral ceremonies with noisy and unseemly laments" on the part of various women (*Sen.* XIV, 1).

The Petrarchan documents also tell us of his more direct interactions with music: i.e. as the author of poetic texts, and in particular madrigals. Although from his own day the only surviving polyphonic setting of a madrigal is Jacopo da Bologna's *Non al suo amante più Diana piacque*, it is documented that he wrote other texts for musicians and artists of diverse extraction. Francesco di Vannozzo's invitation-sonnet *Poi ch'a l'ardita penna la mandiedi* is addressed to Petrarch asking him to compose for Confortino (as he had done on other occasions) some lines "in the fine, polished style" so that they could acquire a "dressing". And in the letter to Giovanni Boccaccio (*Sen.* V, 2) he deplores, with some irritation, the presence of so many "postulants" of verses that "do the rounds of the courts [...] bringing nothing of their own, but winning a reputation from the verses of others [...]".

When considering the polyphonic settings of Petrarch's poetry, we must also include the various quotations found in the contemporary production. They range from just the first line of Bartolino da Padova's ballata *Amor che nel pensier mio viv'e regna* (literally *Rvf* 140) to the more extensive reference in Andrea Stefani's madrigal: here the first tercet beginning with the line *Morte m'a sciol'Amor d'ogni tuo legge* repeats in its entirety the *congedo* of

the canzone *Amor se vuoi ch'i torni al giogo antico* (Rvf 270). The diffusion of Petrarch's lyrical poetry among the contemporary musicians also made itself felt through the adoption of similar structural formulas and (in the case of the madrigals) of other more specific citations: 'rhyme-words' or parodistic texts like that constructed on the sonnet *Passa la nave mia colma d'oblio* (Rvf 189), which inspired Franco Sacchetti's madrigal *Nel mezzo già del mar la navicella* set by Nicolò da Perugia. Also important are the lauda 'disguises' of both *Non al suo amante* and Sacchetti's madrigal.

If, then, we look to Petrarch's later reputation, we find two interesting precedents in the epistle *Ad Italiam: Salve, cara deo tellus sanctissima, salve* (Trento, Museo Provinciale d'Arte, cod. 87, fols. 160v-161r), set polyphonically by Ludovico de Arimino, and in the more famous *Vergine bella che di sol vestita* (Rvf 366), the first setting in a tradition that was destined to be greatly enriched in the lauda repertories of the Veneto in the 15th and 16th centuries. The song to the Virgin was given a polyphonic setting by Guillaume Du Fay, presumably (as suggested by Margaret Bent) the result of a commission from the Paduan chapter in 1424 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's death.

Petrarch's musical fortune was then to be definitively consecrated during the 16th century through the huge production of madrigal compositions, starting with the very first collection, published in 1520: the *Musica [...] sopra le canzoni del Petrarca* di Bernardo Pisano, the pioneering example of the new musical genre. All the texts used belong to the 366 *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* and, though about eighty failed to be set musically, more than 1,500 madrigals were produced, composed for the most part between 1540 and 1590 and published in over 200 printed editions.