

Polyphonic Competition 2004 *Dedicated to Petrarch*

The 52nd International Polyphonic Competition “Guido d’Arezzo” is dedicated to Petrarch, to celebrate the seventh centenary of his birth. Though the reasons may seem to be obvious to all, it is not appropriate to spell them out clearly: the gesture is a tribute not only to a great poet from Arezzo, but also to the father of poetry for music. We are dealing, therefore, with poetry that creates a foundation for some of the highest pinnacles of musical aesthetics, precisely thanks to the felicitous marriage with classical polyphony – in other words, with that very polyphony that has always been the main focus of the Arezzo competition (in turn constituting a point of reference for other international choral competitions). More specifically, Petrarch’s lyrical poetry concerns a type of polyphony that found expression in the madrigal genre, underwent development as a result of its close involvement with poetry, successfully interpreted a variety of evocations and images and, finally, placed itself at the service of the “*oratione*” (as Monteverdi put it). As a musical genre that still today constitutes one of the highest interpretative tasks of choral practice, the madrigal is also the natural object for decisive and selective judgement, especially at the Arezzo competition. As is well known, the Fondazione Guido d’Arezzo continues to play a strong role in the proposal and dissemination of historical polyphony – also through critical editions, authentic texts and performance practice. It does so at the Competition, in the periodical publications of the Centro Studi Guidoniani (particularly through the musicological journal *Polifonie. Storia e teoria della corallità*), in the conferences and international seminars (and relative publication of Proceedings), in the Advanced School for Choir Conductors and at the master classes held by teachers of European fame.

Hence the decision to assign, as obligatory pieces of the competition, madrigals with texts by Petrarch set by composers chosen from among the greatest representatives of the 16th-century madrigal (Arcadelt, Palestrina and Marenzio). Hence also the decision to collect in a slim presentation volume for the general programme a series of short papers by various colleagues on aspects connected to the Petrarchan lyric. Hence, finally, the decision to make the traditional round table focus on the theme Petrarch and polyphony, with three introductory papers illustrating emblematic aspects of the relationship between music and poetry in Petrarch, associated with the texts *Non al suo amante più Diana piacque* (F. A. Gallo), *Vergine bella, che di sol vestita* (G. Cattin) and *Mai non vo’ più cantar com’io soleva* (F. Luisi).

As one sees, this presentation adopts a distinctive approach. First, it carefully avoids reflections of a stylistic nature; second, it decides not to dwell on the phenomenon of “madrigalisms”; and finally, it keeps at arm’s length all disquisitions on compositional technique. Instead it aims to prompt reflection on cultural aspects connected with Petrarchism in music (as superbly exemplified in the 16th century) and to encourage reflection on the overall phenomenology of a literary custom that was certainly poetic, but also primarily linguistic. For a long time Petrarch’s poetry stimulated a search for elegance embedded in language that thoroughly penetrated the social tissue of the cultured classes. His was a model that combined emotional sensation with expressive realism, universalizing the poetic image. And for these reasons, the behaviour of the musician towards the text – summarized, a little awkwardly and superficially, in the concept of musical madrigalism – is nothing but the consequence of a ‘neuronic’ transmission that obeys the conceptual concatenation initiated in the poetry and the climactic heights that constitute its sinews and rhythmic pulsation.

The notes that follow, prepared for the general programme of the 52th International Competition, merely constitute the start of discussion. They aim to offer an international audience some preliminary reflections concerning the numerous issues prompted by the poetry of Petrarch in a period ranging from the 14th to the 16th centuries and their formidable impact on Italian culture (in particular) and European culture (in general). These same themes will be discussed further and expanded by their respective authors in a forthcoming issue of *Polifonie*, duly enriched (as customary) with musical examples relating to the specific polyphonic settings analyzed.

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