

Petrarch in music at the beginning of the 16th century

by Rodobaldo Tibaldi

Sung settings of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* were certainly a constant feature of Italian musical life in the 15th century. Serafino Aquilano, the famous (indeed pre-eminently famous) poet and musician, had a professional training based on the practice and performance of canzoni and sonnets (but also the *Tronfi*) using his own melodies. Even Petrarch himself, who left almost nothing written about music, is remembered by Paolo Cortese as a performer of his own texts. Nothing of all this, however, has survived and the very few polyphonic compositions that have come down to us are seen rather as curiosities than anything else. After all, the great flowering of musical activity in 14th-century Italy has left us with just one setting of a Petrarch text: Jacopo da Bologna's madrigal *Non al suo amante più Diana piacque*. In actual fact this apparently anomalous situation corresponds to a performing-composing model of a monodic type that was typical of 15th-century Italian, which contemplated a single singing voice and one or more accompanying parts to be played on the lute, with a strong improvisational component (or, at the very least, the lack of any attempt to fix the composition on paper). An intermediate situation, attested in the 16th century, is that of having a store of 'neutral' compositions that were applicable to specific poetic schemes and hence adaptable to different texts belonging to the same poetic genre (as, for example, the sonnet).

In the early years of the 16th century, though the basic features of the voice-lute ideal did not substantially change, we witness a marked change of course, with the passage from a tradition based mostly on performance to a written tradition in which the compositional element becomes decisive. Although the reasons for this situation are surely varied and complex, we can detect a decisive factor in the desire expressed by certain courts to have specific musical settings for specific texts by Petrarch – hence not resorting to the customary adaptable (and hence purely abstract) schemes. A strong drive in this direction was given by the various initiatives of Isabella d'Este Gonzaga in Mantua, who explicitly called for a musical composition on a canzone by Petrarch (*Si è debile il filo a cui s'attiene*), and Lucrezia Borgia d'Este in Ferrara, thanks also to the presence at the Este court of Bartolomeo Tromboncino, the first great musician who applied his skills to the *Canzoniere* on a number of occasions.

That this interest in Petrarch's texts was not just a fashion of the moment, but on the contrary the beginning of a new attitude to poetry of elevated quality, is also promptly reflected in the recently created music printing business and in the projects of its 'inventor' Ottaviano Petrucci da Fossombrone. After

six volumes containing the best-established, traditional and 'fashionable' repertoire (generically referred to as *frottole*), from the Seventh Book (1507) onwards we find that the presence of Petrarch is increasingly a constant feature, in most cases coupled with the name of Tromboncino. Hence there are three texts in the Seventh Book, two in the Ninth (1509) and as many as twenty-one in the Eleventh (1514). Interestingly, Petrarch is also an aspect of the commercial rivalry that pitted Petrucci against Andrea Antico, the engraver-publisher from Istria, who attempted (with partial success) to deprive Petrucci of his music printing monopoly. As many as four new texts are included in his first book of 1510 (along with the republication of the three issued in the Seventh Book of *frottole*), two in his second (1513) and three in his third (1513). The intentions of the two publishers to include Petrarch settings would thus seem very similar; though this is only apparently so.

However, after the exceptional presence of four new compositions in the *Canzoni nove* of 1510 (with three by Tromboncino) and the occasional use of Petrarch settings in the two following books, significant mainly for the participation of a musician of the Roman environment like Carpentras (the three settings of the third book), Antico seems not to have displayed a particular interest in music with Petrarchan texts; or at the very least, he doesn't seem to have distinguished them from those of any other poet.

Petrucci's intentions, at least judging from the printed editions and their content, were very different, on the other hand. One could almost say that Petrarch's name was associated with a variety of solutions, almost as if it were being used to indicate different ways of renewing the secular repertory of the early 16th century. This is already evident in the last of the *frottola* collections. Though it is true that in the Eleventh Book there is a prevalence of the voice and lute style, there is no lack of instances of the polyvocal type (at least in an embryonic form), together with a widening of horizons that goes beyond that of merely satisfying a courtly function. Even more significant is Petrucci's next publication, the last he dedicated to the secular repertory and the first dedicated exclusively to one composer. Here Petrarch's name is proudly announced on the title-page, even though he is not the only poet represented in the collection. This is the *Musica [...] sopra le canzoni del Petrarca* by the Florentine Bernardo Pisano, a much discussed work that has generated a wide variety of interpretations. But whether or not it is a collection that anticipates the madrigal or an experiment spawned in Roman circles under Leo X, Pisano's collection is certainly a distinct turning point: one that moves towards a completely polyphonic, vocal conception, sustained by an elevated contrapuntal style that somehow originates in the motet. The inspiring principle is clear: texts of the highest quality call for the elevated style of sacred music.

In a certain way Pisano's venture remained an isolated example. Other

composers active in Rome in the years before the Sack of the city, like Sebastiano Festa, resorted to a style that had a more declamatory character, closest to that of the early madrigals by Verdelot, Costanzo Festa and Archadelt. It is also interesting to observe that Petrarch's influence during the early phase of the madrigal, at least from a quantitative point of view, was less important than in the previous period. Only with the generation of Willaert and Rore would the great poet return to playing a key role in one of the most splendid moments of the history of music in Italy.