

*Un Petrarchino cantato*

Francesco Petrarca was born on July 30, 1304, in Arezzo, the eldest son of a notary who had been exiled from his native city of Florence in 1301. In 1312 the family moved to Avignon, the seat of the exiled papacy. Francesco received his early education in nearby Carpentras and then studied law at the universities of Montpellier and Bologna. He lived for a while on his inheritance but was eventually forced to devise other ways of supporting himself. In 1330 he entered the service of the Colonna family of Rome as a private chaplain, and from then on lived essentially as an independent scholar and poet, protected by various patrons and making his residence in turn in Vaucluse (near Avignon), Milan, Venice, Pavia, and Padua.

Although he wrote many thousands of pages of verse and prose in Latin, Petrarch gained greatest fame for his cycle of lyric poems called the *Canzoniere* or *Rime sparse*, scattered rhymes. He composed the 366 poems—mainly sonnets, canzoni, and sestinas—of the *Canzoniere* over many years, from the early 1330s until the mid-1350s or so, compiling them into a cycle by about 1359 and continuing to work on a definitive version in the last years of his life, until his death in 1374. The motivating event of the cycle took place, according to Petrarch, “in my youth, in the year of our Lord 1327, on the sixth day of April, in the church of St. Clare in Avignon, at matins.” It was Good Friday or the anniversary of Christ’s crucifixion.

It was the day the sun’s rays had turned pale  
with pity for the suffering of his Maker  
when I was caught (and I put up no fight),  
my lady, for your lovely eyes had bound me.

It seemed no time to be on guard against  
Love’s blows; therefore, I went my way  
secure and fearless—so, all my misfortunes  
began in midst of universal woe.

Love found me all disarmed and saw the way  
was clear to reach my heart down through the eyes,  
which have become the halls and doors of tears.

It seems to me it did him little honor  
to wound me with his arrow in my state

and to you, armed, show his bow at all.

*Canzoniere* 3, trans. Mark Musa

Surrounded by congregants mourning the death of the incarnate Lord, Petrarch beheld a lovely young woman, Laura, and was instantly struck down by love at once carnal and spiritual. His love for Laura would obsess, torment, and inspire him until her death from the plague in 1348 and beyond, for the rest of Petrarch's life, shaping his work and the very meaning of his existence.

Or so Petrarch tells us. It is not entirely certain that Laura actually existed, although on the whole the evidence suggests that she did. But the subject of the *Rime sparse* is not really Laura, but Petrarch: his psychology, his memories, his acute self-awareness and probing self-analysis, his transmutation of experience into verse, his poetic virtuosity. The sequence of poems constructs a narrative fiction, a "conceit of temporal process" (in the words of Roland Greene in his book *Post-Petrarchism*). The sequence appears to narrate a trajectory through time, a curve of emotional history departing from the poet's *innamoramento* and pointing towards his release from desire and union with God upon his longed-for death, with Laura's death the pivotal event dividing the *Canzoniere* into two sections traditionally labelled *in vita* and *in morte*. The temporal fiction derives principally from Petrarch's obsessive reconstruction of *then* and *now*: poem after poem looks back from the *now* of the poet's current emotional state to the *then* of prior experience, with both *now* and *then* slipping backwards and forwards in time as the whole gradually advances towards the *now* of "shame...and repentance, and the clear knowledge that whatever pleases in the world is a brief dream," which is described by the first poem and finds its culminating expression in the last.

Though he certainly expected his verse to be read aloud, Petrarch did not intend it to be sung. There is one notable setting by his contemporary Jacopo da Bologna and one other by Guillaume Du Fay from the 1420s, but for many years musicians turned to Petrarch only very occasionally; perhaps his poetry seemed too complex and too serious to be successfully conveyed in music, which was bound to exert competing claims upon a listener's attention. Towards the end of the 1400s a number of composers, notably Italians working in the circle of Isabella d'Este in

Mantua, began to set Petrarch's verse in a style known as the *frottola*, relatively simple and inexpressive music designed primarily as a vehicle for reciting text in song. Today's program includes two of these late fifteenth-century *frottole*, *Chiare fresche et dolce acque* and *O bella man*. Both come from a book printed by Ottaviano Petrucci, who issued eleven volumes of *frottole* between 1504 and 1514; the last volume contains a large number of Petrarch settings.

Petrucci's very first publication, the *Odhecaton* of 1501, is a landmark achievement in the early history of music printing, a tour-de-force of technical accomplishment. The year 1501 also saw the publication of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* edited by the Venetian Pietro Bembo. The coincidence of these two events set the stage for the sixteenth-century development of the madrigal. Bembo's edition of 1501 was the first of more than 160 printed over the next century; a pocket-sized book of the *Canzoniere*, a *petrarchino* or little Petrarch, became an essential possession for anyone with cultural aspirations (or pretensions). The vogue for Petrarch spread quickly in the musical world, inspiring an enormous number of compositions setting his poetry, and the new technology of printing enabled the dissemination of the repertoire all over the continent.

Bembo did more than simply put Petrarch back in the public eye. In the course of editing the poems he developed a theory of the relationships in verse between sound, rhythm, and meaning. In his *Prose della volgar lingua* (Book II, 1525) Bembo argued that the meaning of poetry derived at least in part from its sonic qualities. He defined words as either *grave* (serious, austere) or *piacevole* (pleasant) based on the sound of their constituent vowels and consonants and showed how a poem acquired significance through its *suono* (sound, including rhyme), *numero* (number, rhythm, or accent) and *variazione* (the calculated counterpoint of *gravità* and *piacevolezza*). Sound and rhythm are, of course, the basic materials of measured music and it was surely not lost on musicians that the sonic quality of verse could only be fully realized in performance.

Our program, entitled "A *petrarchino* in song," should really bear an even more diminutive title, for in no way is it a complete presentation of the *Rime sparse*, nor even a particularly representative sample. It offers a very small and rather haphazard selection of Petrarch set to music from the late fifteenth to the late sixteenth centuries—scattered fragments from a huge

repertoire of possible choices. Such a tiny selection of poems obviously cannot do justice to the scope and complexity of the entire cycle, any more than a tiny selection of madrigals can accurately convey the immense richness of the Italian repertoire. But the program follows the temporal logic of the *Canzoniere*, from its opening address to “You who hear in scattered rhymes...” (you who *hear*, note, not *read*), through a variety of emotional states experienced by the poet while Laura still lived, and into the second section of hundred or so lyrics that follow her death, which is announced in no. 264; it includes a political polemic and lament, *Italia mia*, revealing other sides of Petrarch, the statesman and patriot; and it concludes with the last stanza and *congedo* of Cipriano de Rore’s complete setting of the famous canzone *Vergine bella*, the final poem of the *Canzoniere*, in which Petrarch commends his soul to the care of the Blessed Virgin.

Along the way you will hear some of the most expressive, beautifully crafted, and emotionally powerful music of the sixteenth century, from the gravity and dignity of Verdelot, Rampollini, Willaert, Arcadelt, and Rore to the hair-raising virtuosity of Marenzio and Wert. A musical setting of a poem as rich, layered, and superbly crafted as a Petrarchan sonnet does, it must be admitted, run the risk of obscuring the poem itself as it is declaimed polyphonically by four or five singers. At the same time, music can add meanings to those already present in the verse, and music perhaps surpasses poetry in its mysterious power to engender emotion in its listeners. As Leonardo da Vinci wrote, “although poetry reaches the seat of judgment through the sense of hearing, like music, it cannot describe musical harmony, because the poet is not able to say different things at the same time” and so “in the representation of invisible things, [the poet] remains behind the musician.”

I would not like to suggest that Petrarch remains behind Giaches Wert, but consider Wert’s *Mia benigna fortuna*, setting the first two stanzas of a double sestina, a virtuoso poetic form in which the same six rhyme-words are used to end the six lines of each stanza, their order systematically rearranged from stanza to stanza. According to Robert Durling, “In Petrarch’s sestinas the recurrence of the six rhyme-words express the soul’s obsession with its inability to transcend time. The rhyme-words recur cyclically but with changing meanings, and the form reflects the nature of the mutable world, governed by cycles in which all things change but recur: *omnia*

*mutantur, nihil interit (Metamorphoses 15.165)*” Wert’s madrigal *Mia benigna fortuna* is a tour de force, an extraordinarily compact work whose ambiguous tonality and protracted ending defeats every attempt on the part of the listener to make predictive guesses about where the music is headed. The most sophisticated style is employed to portray a suffering so intense that it “defeats every style”: in the end, all we can do is listen to every moment, experiencing it to the utmost. A more Petrarchan piece of music has perhaps never been written.

—Scott Metcalfe