

Melodies of *La Serenissima*: Creation, Distribution and Social Contexts of Renaissance Venetian Music

by ALEXIS WARD

The Italian Renaissance ushered in an era of political, economic, social, and cultural prosperity across the country. The Most Serene Republic of Venice was no exception: widespread appreciation for the seven liberal virtues. The city gained worldwide renown in its musical sphere for its spiritual and secular works, including the simple frottola and the more poetic madrigal. One of these virtues, music, played a significant role in the upkeep of Venice's reputation. This reputation, or "myth of Venice," was paramount to the republic's standing as a regional power. Music boosted the city's printing and publishing markets throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, promoted nationalism and humanism, impressed visitors, embellished festivals, and enforced alliances with foreign powers and individuals. While some exceptions existed in cultural appropriation and sharp social commentary, Venetian music generally succeeded in upholding the republic's normative ideal.

Keywords: Renaissance Venice, Renaissance music, printing and publishing, myth of Venice, frottola, madrigal

Maintaining the Myth

The Venetian Republic was nothing short of an economic powerhouse during the Renaissance. Conveniently centered between the Levant and northern Europe, it quickly became a stalwart of trade as expensive goods passed through it from both sides. Seeing immense success as a commercial middleman, particularly in the silk and spice markets, Venice maintained a significant and steady income. On top of necessary political and naval expenditures, the state put this wealth towards improving the city's image. Venetians strove to uphold a reputation of political, cultural, and socioeconomic supremacy to woo foreigners and earn respect from allies and enemies alike.

This reputation, known as the "myth of Venice," was first defined by humanist Pier Paolo Vergerio as "the belief that the economic success and political stability of the city were due not only to its extraordinary geographical advantages and the upright character of its people but also to its excellent institutions," (Kraye 117). Humanistic expenditures on the arts bolstered an outward appearance of social prowess. As the state's wealth grew and the integration of a liberal arts education gained traction, the republic could comfortably divest into cultural spheres that were less crucial to its survival. Music was a vital tool in the upkeep of the normative ideal, helping to embellish Venice's image and maintain its reputation as *La Serenissima*.

Music Printing and Publishing

Music was physically recorded and distributed by Venetian printing presses. While not initially as crucial as matters of government or trade, the printing and publishing markets surged in popularity with the appreciation of liberal arts, making Venice the printing epicenter of 16th-century Europe. After beloved humanist Aldus Manutius founded the Aldine Press in 1494, presses published texts in the lightweight and portable octavo format, with eight pages printed on each side of a single sheet. This format allowed knowledge to be quickly produced, published, and distributed throughout Venice, resulting in a need for more printing presses. By the end of the fifteenth century, the republic had nearly two hundred separate presses. However, this success took time; as many presses produced the same texts, they were locked in a stalemate of bitter competition, leading to considerable thefts and piracy (Labalme and White 432). The overproduction of the same translated Latin texts by different presses even caused a brief crash in the market in 1473. After this temporary stumble, printers recognized the need for variety in their publications. Thus, works were printed and published in more niche areas to avoid competition and lessen the risk of piracy (Bernstein 16-17).

One such area was music printing. Music printers usually depicted three types of musical works: monophonic (a single, unaccompanied line of music, typically found in sacred Gregorian chants), polyphonic (multiple lines of music, generally used in choral pieces), and demonstrative music theory pieces, which gave instructions on complex composition and harmonic techniques. While written text was added to pieces

upon completion, the two critical aspects of sheet music were the staff, which indicated the piece's clef, key, time signature, and notes. Usually, these were drawn by hand before movable type became mainstream. This method, which became one of the most common in Italian printing, used mirrored characters, each carved separately into metal pieces. When a printer wished to add notations, he would press each character individually onto the page with ink to form lines of text. This strategy was not exclusive to Venice; it was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-1400s. However, in 1501, Fossombrone native Ottaviano Petrucci would popularize the multiple-impression system in music printing with the publication of *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton A*, one of the first significant collections of printed music ever made (Arkenberg).

The method was not a Venetian invention nor an Italian one, as past printers had used it in their publications before the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, it was evident that Petrucci had honed this method—and, in turn, movable type—quite skillfully, showing great accuracy in his works. His publications, which consisted entirely of polyphonic music, garnered widespread praise for the elegance of his small font and precision of mensural (rhythmic) notation. He was so skilled that the intricate Greek type font he used was said to be “as good, if not better, than any written with a pen” by Aldus Manutius himself (Arkenberg). As the name suggested, Petrucci's process placed multiple separate impressions on the page. The first printed the music's staff in red ink, and then the page was pressed two to three more times, placing the notes, text, and other notations on the page in black ink. Together, the individual prints formed a complete piece of music.

The process was flawed, as only a few pages could be produced each day due to the immense length of each separate run through the printing press, with the complex formation, blending, and drying of each page's material (Bernstein 21). Thus, supply could not meet demand, and the technique lost its luster. However, the method would sharpen into the revolutionary single-impression process over two decades later, allowing the creation of sheet music by printing each page only once. Despite developing in England, the practice quickly spread throughout Europe and made its way to Venice. Presses could print works much cheaper and faster, causing a boom in publication volume. This was crucial to the Venetian printing sphere, as it displayed a shift from an artistic market to a commercial one (22). For instance, the printing firm of Girolamo Scotto—arguably the largest Venetian printing house—would publish around twenty

musical pieces annually by 1550, nearly quadrupling the total output of all other Venetian music printers (161). Clearly, music had a significant share in the market's success: in Renaissance Venice, printed music was both a cultural and economic staple.

Cultural and Spiritual Embellishment

The music of Venice, along with the city's other liberal arts, furthered cultural enrichment, entertainment, and embellishment to the republic's cultured and prosperous facade. As music was considered a humanistic virtue, the republic “had decided that good singers, and therefore good music, were important to its public image. Music had become part of Venice's program of propaganda,” states Dr. Julie E. Cumming, a music professor at McGill University (341). Hence, regardless of expense, the state was more than willing to support its musical sphere. The heads of St. Mark's spent nearly 12,000 ducats annually, and a large portion of the sum went towards the church's music. Not only did the church possess two organs, but they were played by the best organists in Venice (Chambers and Pullan 191). There was also the coveted position of the *maestro di cappella*, or choirmaster, who trained and conducted ensembles in spiritual performances. The *camerlengo* gave these musicians generous salaries, so many sought after these positions.

Motifs of Political Unity

Music's relevance stretched beyond appreciation of culture, becoming quite prominent in political affairs. Natives and foreigners alike admired Venice for its unique mixed government, which combined aristocratic, monarchical, and democratic elements. The doge, representing the government's monarchical aspects, served a lifelong term. So when a new doge was elected after a previous one's death or resignation, the occasion never failed to be momentous. Venice celebrated these elections with exquisite processions, festivals, and spiritual rituals.

Music was vital to these celebrations, as composers crafted inaugural motets in each doge's honor as they were elected. While this was likely a way to gain favor with their new ruler and prove their musical abilities, the tradition served a larger societal purpose. Ducal motets were auditory symbols of Venice, explicitly crafted with the political structure in mind. American philosopher Michael Walzer best articulated this idea, claiming that “the union of men can only be symbolized; it has no palpable shape or substance. The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen,

symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (194). In these motets, Walzer’s supposed “union of men” was evident. Composers, striving to emulate this belief, filled their pieces with elegant polyphonic harmonies. They believed each voice part, working in tandem to create beautiful music, was a metaphor for civic concord. “This perfect agreement and harmony is produced by the proportionate blending of unlike tones, so also is a state made harmonious by agreement among dissimilar elements, brought about by a fair and reasonable blending together of the upper, middle, and lower classes, just as if they were musical tones,” wrote Roman statesman Cicero in his dialogue *de Republica* (Cumming 326). Each line was different, meant to be sung or played by various individuals with various instruments, voice parts, or cultural backgrounds. This way, Venetians could pay heartfelt tribute to their republic’s governmental success through the unity of music.

George of Trebizond, a Byzantine philosopher who worked as a translator for Plato and a scribe in Venice, also expressed great admiration of the republic in a dedication letter to one of his patrons.¹ To him, it was impossible for a city’s liberty to “be stable nor permanent unless it [bore] a resemblance to three . . . praiseworthy types of city,” he stated in said panegyric (129). Trebizond also praised Venice for its peaceful citizens. “There are no factions, no sedition, no trace of dissension,” he marveled (p. 132). Again, this was evident in Venetian music: choirs and orchestras consisted of unique individuals, many coming from different backgrounds or social ranks. In singing, these differences—or, in the words of Trebizond, “factions”—ceased to exist. Performance allowed for brief bouts of peace, a virtue Venice strived to achieve, especially after a devastating defeat at Agnadello in 1509, which had utterly eradicated their once-strong Christian faith (Labalme and White xxxi).

Live Performance

By the end of the fifteenth century, the doge participated in sixteen processions yearly, consisting of solemn events, Christian holidays, and other traditions (Fenlon 604). Venetians held these processions to simulate prosperity and cultural wisdom, particularly to foreigners. Many vocalists and instrumentalists would adorn these events with live performances of vespers and other religious pieces. While the service itself was essential to the religious Venetians, music was one of its main draws: “Hence a great crowd of young men and women flock to these services, not to hear the divine office, but rather

to listen to the music and the singing,” wrote Felix Faber, a pilgrim of Ulm, of his experience at a Venetian mass (Chambers and Pullan 198).

Musical performances were also typical in Venetian theatre. Between scenes were often interludes of song, dance, and buffoonery known as *intermezzi* (Labalme and White 487), in which vocal and instrumental performers would sing and play alongside actors. In some shows, these interludes would contain poetry, beautifying many acts, such as those at traditional Carnival celebrations (527). Although theatrical productions were enjoyed and drew great crowds, the *intermezzi* were usually appreciated more than the main acts they supported (505).

More importantly, live performance played a role in creating and safeguarding global alliances. An example of this occurred during Venice’s conquest of the territories of the Borgia clan, a family of Spanish nobles. Although the expansion proved beneficial for the republic’s martial and geographical strength, the Venetians feared that they would lose the support of Pope Julius II because of it. To keep him on their side, the Venetians invited His Holiness to a lavish dinner hosted by Cardinal Domenico Grimani. Servants presented food while paid musicians played harps, cymbals, and stringed instruments (Labalme and White 170). Additionally, “a musical accompaniment was provided by Iebia and two companions, who played two large viols, to the great pleasure and appreciation of all,” reported one of Grimani’s servants, Raynero di Fideli (Chambers and Pullan 172). With the Pope pleased, Venice could maintain their union and good religious character.

Social Commentary in the Frottola

Apart from spiritual occasions, Venice was famous for myriad secular music genres. First came the 15th-century frottola, originating from the medieval Latin word *frocta*, or “the tying together of proverbs or of bizarre thoughts,” as defined by Ermanno Gizzarelli (8). The frottola was composed to be sung by four voices—soprano, alto, tenor, and bass—and consisted of short, repetitive verses and refrains. Because of its lyrical material and ease of singing, the frottola became one of the most popular genres in Venice. Many told stories of love, requited or otherwise, in a primarily Petrarchan structure (8-9). While he was most known for his motets, Franco-Flemish composer Josquin des Prez was also a pioneer of the frottola.

In some cases, the genre’s subject matter

could be completely nonsensical. Des Prez's 1505 piece *El grillo*, for example, tells of a talented singing cricket:

El grillo è buon cantore	The cricket is a good singer
Che tiene longo verso	Who can hold a long verse
Dalle, beve, grillo, canta!	Come on, cricket, drink up and sing!

On the surface, the piece appears buoyant and lighthearted. But some scholars, like Grantley McDonald, believe *El grillo* parodies the era's humanistic endeavors. Many images embedded throughout the song reference Italian Renaissance poems about cicadas, a frequent subject in many poems of the time. McDonald compares this piece to Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates tells the myth that cicadas were once living men who praised the Greek Muses. However, because the men spent all day singing their praises, they became so enveloped in their devotion that they forgot to eat or drink, causing them to die without fanfare—the men did not even notice that they had perished. The Muses were grateful; to thank the men for their dedication, they transformed them into cicadas to continue singing without needing earthly sustenance (44). *El grillo*'s cricket can “hold a long verse” with little to drink, which, according to McDonald, is des Prez's joking suggestion that a humanist or two had already undergone this transformation (45). This is also supported by the fact that the singer must sustain the word *verso* the longest in the song, held for a minimum of eight beats in a cut-time signature (in which there are two beats per measure, and the half note gets one beat) with a fermata on the word's last note (indicating that a musician must hold it indefinitely until cut off by a director).

Des Prez may have also used *El grillo* to mock the rise of Venetian prostitution, as many erotic images and motifs lie within the piece. Specifically, the call-and-response of *dalle-dalle, beve-beve, grillo-grillo*, etc., between the higher and lower voice parts can be seen as a depiction of intercourse, especially as the term *dalle* roughly translates to “come on!” or “give it to me!” (50), which could imply both a sexually demanding back-and-forth between the cricket and his mistress and a critique of ambivalence towards prostitution.

The act was greatly frowned upon in Venice, as it clashed with the fervent religious values of the state, which affirmed its status under the sacred protection

of St. Mark; at the same time, the government allotted female prostitutes their own district of brothels near the Rialto (Labalme & White 321). Some even contributed to the cultural scene themselves, as upper-level prostitutes known as courtesans were well-respected in their state in part due to their musical and artistic abilities. With these ideas in mind, there is a possibility that des Prez wrote the piece to poke fun at the state's hypocrisy in this regard.

At the same time, Venetians revered humanists for their incessant devotion to Venetian culture, whether they had served in the state or made lasting contributions to the liberal arts. However, some believed their artistic passion came off as hypocritical and pretentious. Des Prez wrote this frottola irregularly to depict the humanist's ego, as it splits up words over different phrases, constantly thwarting the listener's expectations of rhyme schemes. “It could be that the faulty line lengths and awkward elisions of *El grillo* are intended to suggest a humanistic improviser, his head full of classical allusions, perhaps distracted by the object of his desire or by a whimsical grillo of imagination, and thus rendered unable to count his syllables properly,” McDonald surmises (52).

That being said, it is also possible that even songs as frivolous as this one were made to illustrate the republic's normative ideal. In the piece's latter half, the reason for the cricket's passion is revealed:

Ma non fa come gli altri uccelli	He isn't like the other birds
Come li han cantato un poco	Once they have sung a little
Van de fatto in altro loco	They go elsewhere
Sempre el grillo sta pur saldo	The cricket always stays firm
Quando la maggior el caldo	When it is very hot out
Alhor canta sol per amore	He sings for the love of it.

In the context of the myth of Venice, the cricket appears to be a symbol of cultural appreciation, a notion the city held close as it flourished as a center of liberal arts. This work seems to prove that despite music's subject matter, Venice could produce pleasing melodies. While others “go elsewhere” after singing, the cricket remains firm, continuing out of passion. This seems to suggest a mastery of the musical arts compared to other states, conveying a further meaning despite its lyrical content suggesting otherwise.

The Madrigal

As the Renaissance progressed, so did Venetian secular music in both lyrical and musical content as the era of the madrigal arrived. Unlike the lighthearted verse of the frottole, the lyrical content of the madrigal held no repetition and often delved into darker, more serious themes.

Perhaps the most well-known composer of madrigals was Claudio Monteverdi. Before rising to fame, the Cremona native served as a court musician in Mantua, where he was favored by the duke and would build his reputation as a talented composer. His big break would come at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the current maestro di cappella of San Marco, Don Giulio Cesare Martinengo, would fall ill and pass away in 1613. The musicians, or cappella, of San Marco were lost and overlooked, stranded without proper musical guidance. A month after the maestro's death, Monteverdi arrived in Venice, where he auditioned for the position and was hired immediately by the heads of the church (Stevens 83-85). In his new post, he would salvage the neglected cappella, taking on the group's management, recruitment, and training aspects. As the new maestro, he was also responsible for avoiding excessive rests and contrapuntal complications while conducting and maintaining the madrigal's core (83). This was a significant contrast from the erratic pauses and stutters of pieces such as *El grillo*. The verse transformed into more emotional, meaningful poetry. One of Monteverdi's most influential pieces, *Non più guerra, pietate* (English translation: "No more war, pity"), was published in his 1604 book of madrigals. Its lyrics likened heartbreak to violent combat, further displaying a topical shift of secular style, as well as the influence of the state's hardships on the genre (in this case, its lyrics appear to allude to the constant wars that plagued sixteenth-century Italy):

A che v'armate contr'un cor
Why do you take arms against a heart
Chè già preso, e vi si rende?
Already captured and suffering?
Ancidete i rubelli, ancidete
Kill the rebels, kill those
Chi s'arma e si difende
Who arm and defend themselves,
Non chi, vinto, v'adora.
Not the one who is conquered and worships you.

Through these harsh, yet yearning lyrics, as well as countless others written during this period, artists like Monteverdi were provided an outlet to voice their dreams of peace and unity among the violence and uncertainty of war.

Appropriation of Paduan Sounds

The music of Venice was a considerable factor in the Renaissance's cultural significance, although its renown was not purely Venetian. Instead, many of their ideas were taken directly from Paduan culture. Venice initially lacked expertise in the field, as there were no polyphonic conductors with ties to the city, nor was there any evidence of a culture of polyphonic music (Cumming 333). Meanwhile, northern Italy, including Padua, flourished due to a surplus of skilled composers, music theorists, and printed publications. Padua was part of the *terraferma*, territories beyond the Adriatic Sea taken over by the Venetians, who appropriated them. This appropriation would not stop at the *terraferma*, either; eventually, it would slowly infiltrate Paduan musical culture. Ciconia, a leading composer of the century who wrote motets praising Padua, would be employed by Venice, causing him to dedicate them to *La Serenissima* instead.

The republic then used its bishoprics to better control its new possessions, which forced Paduan conductors to work for Venice, writing songs for their colonizers rather than their culture. Even after the republic hired its own composers and eventually found its footing as a center of musical innovation, it continued to use the composers of the subject cities (Cumming 335). The exploitation of other composers clearly went against the myth of Venice and showed the less-than-ideal social reality of the city. Although Venetian musicians eventually earned their distinction in the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries through individuals like *des Prez* and Monteverdi, they were not afraid to use other talents to their advantage in upholding Venice's image as the cultural heart of the world.

Conclusion

Music played a pivotal role in sustaining the myth of Venice. Not only did it reflect the city's cultural prestige, but it was also an economic asset as the printing industry was first taking off. It symbolized the political and social unity of the Venetian republic, with its cohesive harmonies personifying the city's political and social unity. Additionally, the music of this era was incorporated into the minds of the Venetians as they lived through the Renaissance, from the frottole's light critiques of creatives to the madrigal's expressions of pain and grief. In some respects, it can be argued that its music has allowed Venice to transcend the "myth" of social progress; undoubtedly, it has established itself as the birthplace of some of the most impactful and familiar melodies that still unite people, singers and otherwise, to this today.

Bibliography

- Arkenberg, R. (2002, October 1). Music in the Renaissance: Essay: The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Heilbrunn timeline of art history. The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/renm/hd_renm.htm.
- Bernstein, Jane A., *Music Printing in Renaissance Venice: The Scotto Press (1539-1572)* (New York, 1998; online edn, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195102314.001.0001>.
- Bernstein, Jane A., *Print Culture and Music in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (New York, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195141085.001.0001>.
- Chambers, D., & Pullan, B.S. (Eds.) (1992). *Venice: A documentary history, 1450-1630*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Cumming, J. E. (1992). Music for the Doge in Early Renaissance Venice. *Speculum*, 67(2), 324–364. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2864375>
- Fenlon, I. (1993). Music, Liturgy and Identity in Renaissance Venice. *Revista de Musicología*, 16(1), 603–606. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20795917>
- Gizzarelli, E. (1936). The Frottola. *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society*, 1, 8–10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/829248>
- Kraye, J. (ed.) (1997). *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, Cambridge University Press.
- Labalme, P.H., & Sanguineti White, L. (Eds.) (2008). *Venice, città eccellentissima: Selections from the Renaissance diaries of Marin Sanudo*. Linda L. Carroll (Transl.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Monteverdi, C., & Stevens, D. (1980). *The letters of Claudio Monteverdi transl. and introd. by Denis Stevens*. Faber & Faber.
- McDonald, G. (2009). Josquin's Musical Cricket: El grillo as Humanist Parody. *Acta Musicologica*, 81(1), 39–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793371>.
- Stevens, D. (2001). *Monteverdi in Venice*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Stevens, D. ed. (1995). *The Letters of Claudio Monteverdi*. Revised Edition. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press
- Walzer, M. (1967). "On the role of symbolism in political thought." *Political Science Quarterly* 82(2), 191-204.