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**Invention and Imitation:
an overview of musical settings
of Classical poetry
and the rediscovery of Ancient music,
from the Middle Ages
to the Renaissance**

JORGE BERGUA CAVERO

IF THERE IS ONE ARTISTIC DISCIPLINE that has enjoyed a special position within the ample collection of cultural phenomena that we know as the classical tradition, this is without doubt music, at least as far as its actual practice is concerned. It would in fact be difficult to understand the history of European and American architecture or lyrical poetry, to cite just two examples, without taking into account the profound influence exercised by the respective Greek and Roman models for many centuries, especially from the fifteenth to the nineteenth.

However, the history of music is quite a different story for one very simple reason: during the fourth century musical notation was completely abandoned and therefore, the Western and Byzantine Middle Ages never inherited a significant corpus of ancient musical documents. Only from the end of the nineteenth century, with the discoveries of the Paeans of Delphi or the music papyri in Egypt, for example, did this corpus begin to take shape and today contains a modest but significant total of almost sixty documents¹. The majority of these are small papyrus fragments from Egypt along

1 The best edition and commented transcription is that of E. PÖHLMANN & M. L. WEST, *Documents of Ancient Greek Music. The extant melodies and fragments edited and transcribed with commentary*, Oxford, 2001 (which can now be complemented by S. HAGEL's meticu-

with a few engravings in stone (the Paeans of Delphi mentioned above or the Seikilos Epitaph) and the hymns of Mesomedes which will be discussed below. From a chronological point of view almost all the documents belong either to the Hellenistic era, or especially, to the imperial period up to the fourth century CE and in spite of the problems of edition and interpretation that these often very small fragments present, they do allow us to form a reasonably approximate idea of how Greek music of that time sounded.

Obviously there was also the long tradition of musical theory that had constituted a “scientific” discipline during the Middle Ages and was an integral part of the *quadrivium*, although to a great extent it was severed from actual practice. Ancient sources used by the Latin Middle Ages were particularly *De institutione musica* by Boethius, based on and partly summarising Greek sources and devoted to, above all, at least in the part of the work preserved, the mathematical dimension of music. Other less common sources included Macrobius, Martianus Capella and Cassiodorus².

During the fifteenth and sixteen centuries Italy, and subsequently the rest of Europe, witnessed the process of rediscovery, translation, edition and commentary of the surviving Greek documents concerned with music (Ptolemy, Aristides Quintilianus, Pseudo-Plutarch, etc.). This was a long process which, because of its complexity and its very nature, midway between the history of philology and historical musicology, has perhaps never received the attention it deserved³. But what we wish to stress at this point is that, in spite of being essentially theoretic and confined at first to books (and specifically to works often more of a philosophical than a musical nature), in the end, all this editing and translating activity affected musical praxis in many ways, above all, in ideas and collective expectations.

On the one hand, this intense scholarly activity afforded the opportunity of gradually deciphering the Greek notation and through this, the precise understanding of Greek scales and tonalities and the transcription of the hymns of Mesomedes to a modern system. It is well known that four of the annotated hymns and invocations of this court poet to both Hadrian and Antoninus, dedicated respectively to the Muse, to Calliope and Apollo, to the Sun and to Nemesis were preserved and continued to be copied in the Middle Ages even though the copiers did not understand the exact meaning of the notes. They have thus come down to us with their musical notation in vari-

lous study *Ancient Greek Music. A New Technical History*, Cambridge, 2010). A brief (illustrated) history of the discovery of these musical fragments can be found in A. BÉLIS, “La redécouverte de la musique antique du XVI^e au XIX^e siècle”, in C. LALOUÉ (ed.), *Archéologie et musique*. Actes du colloque des 9 et 10 février 2001, Paris, 2002, 8-17.

2 A good summary of the question can be found in C. V. PALISCA, *Humanism in Italian Renaissance musical thought*, New Haven, 1985, 35-43. For Boethius’ treatise, see the edition and translation by C. MEYER, *Boèce. Traité de la musique*, Turnhout, 2004.

3 The book of PALISCA cited in the foregoing note is, by far, the best study on the matter (especially chapters 3-7).

ous manuscripts from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries and even in some later copies because of their inclusion, apparently as an appendix, in a treatise on musical theory that continued to be copied until the invention of the printing-press⁴. On the other hand, among ancient Greek musicologists, the work of Alypius (III-IV CE) was extremely important, especially for the tables offering a description of the fifteen *tónoi* in the three genera, indispensable for deciphering conclusively the Greek notation. This Greek work did not begin to circulate among Italian music experts until 1579, thanks to the fundamental figure of Girolamo Mei (1519-1594), undoubtedly the most knowledgeable man on the subject of ancient music of his time⁵. Mei passed on part of these tables (he only included eight of the diatonic) to Vincenzo Galilei, father of the mathematician, who would publish them shortly afterwards in his widely disseminated *Dialogo della musica antica et della moderna* (Florence 1581, pages 92-94 with the songs of Mesomedes on page 97)⁶.

In other words, the real understanding of the authentic Greek music that experts or musicians could have had was limited to these songs of Mesomedes, and to the clearly didactic instrumental exercises (commonly called “Anonymi Bellermann” after their first modern editor and published in 1841) passed on through the Byzantine Middle Ages, forming part of an equally anonymous collection of technical treatises about music⁷. Despite these severe limitations interest in ancient music did not lessen in the least. On the contrary, in the spheres of humanistic learning of the sixteenth century, the imaginative, ideal and utopian dimension of Greek music was the principal source of inspiration; explicitly “if genuine ancient music had been preserved in large quantities this would have been more of an obstacle than an aid to the humanistic-oriented musician⁸”.

By and large, musical practice in the Western world did not rely on the imitation of ancient models, a widespread phenomenon which would have a critical effect on European culture from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, particularly in those countries where classical academicism was more intensive –as in France, or in another sense, Italy. And since we are talking of imitation, it would be helpful to distinguish,

4 Cf. PÖHLMANN & WEST, *Documents*, nos. 24-28 with commentaries on manuscript transmission (and reproductions of various codices).

5 In Letter 1 to Galilei, dated 1572 (ed. in C.V. PALISCA, *Girolamo Mei. Letters on Ancient and Modern Music to Vincenzo Galilei and Giovanni Bardi*, Rome, 2nd ed., 1977, 118-122), Mei presents an almost complete list of ancient musicological writings, mostly Greek, that are preserved today.

6 Cf. in general PALISCA, *Humanism*, 35-50. For the works by Mei on Alypius see also PALISCA, *Girolamo Mei*, 59-63.

7 Modern edition of the exercises in PÖHLMANN & WEST, *Documents*, nos. 32-37. A Latin translation of the technical treatises commissioned by F. Gafori at the end of the fifteenth century was not printed.

8 J. HAAR, “Humanismus” (1996), in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, 20 vol., Kassel, 1994-2007, col. 441.

albeit in a somewhat elemental way, between the medieval *use* of ancient culture and the type of imitation common from the sixteenth century, which included texts or narrative motives, dramatic structures, buildings, statuary, all of which were considered exemplary, canonical, and definitive. Indeed, a Medievalist like Régine Pernoud is absolutely correct to stress that the Western Middle Ages made good use of almost all the ancient legacy at their disposal, doing so in an essentially creative spirit, a spirit of invention, even of outdoing (as inferred by Bernard de Chartres's famous words "we are dwarves on the shoulders of giants"), while adapting it to their new needs, whether literary or architectural, speculative or practical⁹.

If one element characterises the way medieval authors understood and used ancient sources, this was above all their capacity for bringing an actual sense, understandable and current –though partly, in tension– to the moral and aesthetic values of the medieval frame of reference. This explains, among other things, their strong preference for certain works: *The Alexander Romance* or *Apollonius, King of Tyre*, today considered to be of scant literary worth, neither perfect nor exemplary, but ideally suited for developing new, unconstricted and unreserved narratives (or examples of visual arts), in a permanent state of textual fluidity; works almost always anonymous and always filled with rich symbolism for the cultures through which they passed (from Persia and Ethiopia to every corner of Western Europe). The ancient classics were endowed with *auctoritas* but this did not prevent them from being freely manipulated.

If we now observe the music of these centuries, we can see that composers drew widely on classical Latin texts, especially Virgil, Horace, Lucan and Statius, putting them to music with new melodies in a process that had to be essentially free and creative, far removed from any archaeological spirit; this activity which may well date back to the Carolingian era was especially intense in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and has passed on to us some two hundred manuscript testimonies, some of which can be transcribed onto the modern stave¹⁰. Even musical theory was used in a much freer manner. The terminology and the names of the Greek scales were adopted but applied to new realities. The theory of universal harmony was adopted while develop-

9 Cf. R. PERNOUD, *Para acabar con la Edad Media*, Spanish translation, Palma, 1998, 17-38 (original French: *Pour en finir avec le Moyen Âge*, Paris, 1977; English translation, *Those Terrible Middle Ages: Debunking the Myths*, San Francisco, 2000). For a general consideration on the problem of imitation in European culture, cf. G. GEBAUER & CH. WULF, *Mimesis: Culture-Art-Society*, English translation, Berkeley, 1995 (the original German is from 1992).

10 The part better studied and edited up till now is that which corresponds to Horace (nearly fifty melodies), for which cf. above all S. WÄLLI, *Melodien aus mittelalterlichen Horaz-Handschriften: Edition und Interpretation der Quellen*. Monumenta Monodica Medii Aevi, Subsidia, 3, Kassel, 2002. On a more general plane (and directed more towards written culture rather than musicology), the most recent and recommendable is J. M. ZIOLKOWSKI, *Nota bene. Reading Classics and Writing Melodies in the Early Middle Ages*, Turnhout, 2007.

ing it, clearly, in a Christian sense that was more sophisticated in certain aspects. The question of number acquired an essential practical importance in the music-lyric relation¹¹; and something that for the Greeks was purely theoretical, perfect octaves, fifths and fourths were put into practice, thus leading to the greatest revolution in the history of Western music: the creation of polyphony.

With the advent of the Renaissance the tendency to see in antiquity a model to imitate, perfect, unchangeable and eternal, intensified. There are many possible reasons for this phenomenon but if we consider a mediological explanation we can then concur with M. McLuhan: the printing press, by emphasising distant visuality as the predominant way of approaching the classics, in detriment to orality, gave a new dimension to the model's exemplary, ideal character ("ideal" coming from *idée*, or the visible aspect of something). The appearance during the sixteenth century of the classical precepts phenomenon that would have deep consequences –certainly not all positive– on modern literature and the arts was not fortuitous¹².

As far as music is concerned, it is true that although there were no ancient musical works to imitate directly as such, imitation did happen in spite of everything, taking place on different levels or aspects that can be summarised as follows. On a general level, the choice of the classic Latin texts and to a lesser degree the Greek (translated to modern languages), to compose musical works of very different styles and dimensions constituted in itself a novelty at the end of the fifteenth century, at least as far as the preceding two or three centuries are concerned. Let it suffice to remember one significant fact: during the sixteenth century some twenty musical versions were written of the final monologue of Dido, *Dulces exuviae* (*Aeneid* IV, 651 ff.), many by prominent composers such as Josquin Deprez, Marbriano de Orto, Adrian Willaert, Alonso Mudarra, Jacques Arcadelt or Orlando di Lasso¹³.

On a more specific level we find the imitation or musical translation of the ancient rhythm and metrics in the so-called German Humanist Ode of Petrus Tritonius, Luwig Senfl, Paul Hofhaimer and others –always composed on the original Latin texts– and in the French *musique mesurée* that sprang from the *Académie de Poésie*

11 As brilliantly argued by J. STEVENS in his fundamental *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama*, Cambridge, 1986, especially chapter 1.

12 Cf. in this interpretative approach M. McLUHAN's classic study, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, 1962, or more recent ones with a more solid and coherent historical perspective, such as R. DEBRAY (among others his *Manifestes médiologiques*, Paris, 1994).

13 Cf. among others, H. OSTHOFF, "Vergils Aeneid in der Musik von Josquin des Prez bis Orlando di Lasso", *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 11, 2 (1954), 85-102; and A. B. SKEI, "Dulces exuviae: Renaissance Settings of Dido's Last Words", *The Music Review* 37, 2 (1976), 77-91. For a wider and complete vision of this phenomenon including the Medieval episodes, please consult my book, *La música de los clásicos. Versiones de la poesía antigua, de la Edad Media al Renacimiento tardío*, Valencia, 2012.

et Musique, founded by Baïf in 1570 (under the aegis of Charles IX). In this last case a conventional prosodic system created from ancient prosody was applied to French texts¹⁴. It is expedient to remember in this sense that the Greek and Latin poetry that has reached us is, up to a certain point, a score where the rhythm is included in the words; in a way both the musicians mentioned and many more who, like Orlando de Lasso, on occasions fostered this tendency, confined themselves merely to extracting the latent rhythm from the poetry.

A further and somewhat more intricate aspect of Renaissance musical imitation has to do with the attempts to “restore” the chromatic and enharmonic genera. Aware that Greek writers constantly mentioned the three musical genera (diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic), some scholars and musicians, whose knowledge to boot was purely theoretical, were determined to restore the use of these outlandish scales to the diatonic system. The leading champion in this field was Nicola Vicentino (1511-1576) with his treatise *L’antica musica ridotta a la moderna prattica* (Rome, 1555) and an instrument of his own invention, the famous *arcicembalo* with octaves divided into thirty one parts. His goal was to demonstrate that it was possible to write music according to the three genera of Greek music¹⁵. Vicentino had to have been aware that the Greek sources almost always talked of enharmonic music as being superior to all others¹⁶, yet the enharmonic genus proved to be too difficult even for the most educated ears of the sixteenth century and so Vicentino and some of his followers (Rore, Le Jeune, Lasso) turned their attention towards the chromatic in order to create a modern music capable of broadening the emotional register so far attained. However, with only a purely abstract idea of what the chromatic genus was for the Greeks, these composers could do little more than resort to chromaticism in the modern sense of the word (the occasional expressive use of alterations or notes outside the scale in question); except that

14 The German humanist ode may be consulted in the detailed study by É. WEBER, *La musique mesurée à l’antique en Allemagne (Musique et Théâtre dans les Pays Rhénans)*, 1), 2 vol., Paris, 1974, although more succinct and better organised information will be found in E. LOWINSKY, “Humanism in the Music of the Renaissance”, in *Edward E. Lowinsky: Music in the Culture of the Renaissance and Other Essays*, ed. B. J. Blackburn, Chicago, 1989, vol. 1, 154-218. For information on Baïf’s Académie and the French *musique mesurée*, cf. especially F. A. YATES, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, London, 1947 (reprinted 1988), and the numerous articles on the subject in D. P. WALKER, *Music, Spirit and Language in the Renaissance*, London, 1985. The bibliography of humanism in music is extensive: we cite only M.-Th. BOUQUET-BOYER & P. BONNIFET (ed.), *Claude Le Jeune et son temps en France et dans les États de Savoie, 1530-1600*, Bern, 1996; P. BONNIFET, *Structures sonores de l’Humanisme en France*, Paris, 2005.

15 Vicentino’s treatise can be seen in facsimile edition, Kassel 1959; in English translation: *Ancient Music Adapted to Modern Practice*, trans. M. Rika, ed. C. V. Palisca, New Haven, 1996.

16 One example of many is Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Music*, 1143E-1145A.

sometimes these frankly innovative experiments were leading music to the threshold of atonality¹⁷.

In this appraisal we should also include the dreams of formally restoring the classical theatre which would culminate in the creation of musical drama, in other words, the primitive opera that emerged in the courts of Florence and Mantua (and especially the creation of the recitative style)¹⁸. If we overlook, for the moment, certain isolated experiments –in particular the performance in 1585 of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* translated into Italian, at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza with the choral parts set to music by Andrea Gabrieli¹⁹– it is clear that one of the greatest achievements of Humanism was that of contributing to the birth of the genre of opera, especially thanks to the activities and writings of the members of the Florence Camerata (the seminal work in this sense being, for its diffusion, V. Galilei's aforesaid *Dialogo della musica antica e moderna*)²⁰. Nevertheless, we should not allow ourselves to be deceived by external similarities: in this process leaps of considerable imagination were made, above all by assuming that classical drama works were sung in their entirety. Consequently opera became a genre sung from start to finish and further more, the recitative or *stile rappresentativo*, the great creation intended to permit *recitar cantando* is quite clearly a modern invention and, one can only suppose, bears little or no resemblance to the ancient recitative (*parakatalogé* in Greek). In other words, we are now moving on the plane of pure imaginative invention rather than that of faithful imitation of an ancient model.

But in some way it can be said that the most important and long-lasting influence of Humanism on music was vague and indirect because it was based on the utopian idea of restoring a supposedly lost unity between music and text, although with an implicit predomination of the latter. This is not the place to expound at length on medieval music and the way it conceives this relationship, magnificently researched some years ago by John Stevens in a fundamental work²¹. The importance lies in the fact that during the sixteenth century this intense aesthetic and moral utopia, based above all on a frankly idealised vision of ancient music and poetry (and especially in the declarations in regard to authors such as Plato) will not only be expressed in specific material aspects

17 Claude Le Jeune's experiments with chromaticism may be found in I. HIS, *Claude Le Jeune (v. 1530-1600). Un compositeur entre Renaissance et Baroque*, Arles, 2000, especially 296-299.

18 From the abundant bibliography on the subject we would recommend the studies by H. MAYER BROWN, "How Opera began: An Introduction to Iacopo Peri's *Euridice* (1600)", in E. COCHRANE (ed.), *The Late Italian Renaissance, 1525-1630*, London, 1970, 401-443, and that of N. PIRROTTA (with E. POVOLEDO), *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, Cambridge, 1982.

19 Cf. the account (including musical edition) in L. SCHRADER, *La représentation d'Edipo Tiranno au Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza 1585)*, Paris, 1960.

20 Cf. C. V. PALISCA, *The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations*, New Haven, 1989.

21 STEVENS, *Words and Music*, especially in chapter 1 on the songs of the troubadours.

such as the precise writing of the texts below the pentagrams but also in the progressive triumph of certain tendencies of composition and style: curbing melismata in favour of a syllabic style; favouring homorhythmic texture over counterpoint; paying attention to the natural accents of words and their syntactic disposition when creating musical phrasing. This was all designed to give the content of the text clarity and intelligibility, safeguarded by a new way of conceiving its relation to the melody and harmony. To quote Galilei, the text is “la cosa importantissima et principale dell’arte musicale”.

But it was not merely a question of making the text clearly audible; it was a much more ambitious and complex matter of eagerness to achieve a relationship based on homologies or real structural congruencies between the verbal significance and the music, not just in analogies or shared traits. Undeniably, in the course of the sixteenth century musical descriptivism or word painting was frequently used where it could be said that the music tagged along with the text, “colouring” the word content here and there as it appeared in the textual discourse. A good example of this, of an extraordinary musical quality, could be one of the first Renaissance pieces to use a classical Latin text, the motet *Fama malum* by Josquin Desprez (on *Aeneid* IV, 174-177)²². Throughout the sixteenth century as it evolved resolutely towards accompanied monophony to the detriment of imitative polyphony –and not only in the theatre– secular vocal music gradually abandoned this somewhat simplistic way of understanding the Aristotelian *mimesis*, to attain, at certain moments and in certain works, a new balance between both elements which would be of capital importance in the subsequent development of Western music²³.

Furthermore, it must never be forgotten that this dream of restoring a lost unity had a deeply moral and political horizon to the extent that, following the teachings of Plato and the Pythagorean tradition, it was firmly convinced of good music’s great potential for the society that produced it. Thus, in the foundational letters patent of their *Académie de Poésie et Musique* (1570), the poet Jean-Antoine de Baïf and the musician Thibault de Courville declared explicitly that:

il importe grandement pour les moeurs des Citoyens d’une ville que la musique courante et usitée au Pays soit retenue sous certaines loix, dautant que la plupart des esprits des hommes se conforment et comportent selon qu’elle est; de façon que où la Musique est desordonnée, la volontiers les moeurs sont depravez, et où elle est bien ordonnée, la sont les hommes bien moriginez²⁴.

22 See detailed analysis and fragment of the score in BERGUA, *La música de los clásicos*, 98-100.

23 The best overall treatment of this debate will be found in LOWINSKY, *Humanism*.

24 Quoted in D. P. WALKER, “The aims of Baïf’s académie de poésie et de musique”, *Journal of Renaissance and Baroque Music* 1 (1946), 91-100 (quotation on p. 92-93), also included in Walker’s already cited *Music, Spirit*. Cf. also YATES, *The French Academies*, especially chapters 2 y 3.

In this sense, it may be stated that the influence of Humanism goes beyond the creation of specific genres or forms such as the humanist ode or the opera, finally affecting all serious or art music and the spiritual expectations that surround its creation and appreciation. However, this did happen in a spirit of great independence, a sense of freedom from insuperable models that palpably spread over and enriched music throughout the modern era. Based as it was on a pure historical fortuity (abandoning the notation at the end of Antiquity), this freedom prevented music from falling prey to precepts, to the sterile imitation of a model. Western music would not have its true classics until Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven (appropriately called “Viennese classicism”).

But with such generic influences (those pertaining to the relation text-music and the social utopia of an “ordered” music) we move into a frankly nebulous field and furthermore, begin to move out of the chronological framework that we have set for this succinct overview. We believe that from this brief account, of necessity confined to what we consider the key moments and genres of this history, a general conclusion can be drawn: by the very nature of the ancient musical documentation available, the artistic discipline of music has occupied an extraordinarily singular position within the wide framework of European classical tradition. Whether speaking of the medieval episodes with free musical recreation by some authors of Latin poetry or of the many and very varied Renaissance episodes—especially those developed in Italy, France and Germany—we find that European classical music has essentially evolved free from ancient models. Hence, the scholar must use conceptual instruments (relating to influence, models and imitation) that would operate in a very different way to that of research in other areas on the classical tradition, especially that relating to literature. It adds an undoubted difficulty to this type of study, but at the same time endows it, or so we believe, with additional interest.

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