UC Irvine
UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title
Fabricated Laughter: Wit and Humor in Renaissance Music

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/44x7p2js

Journal
Discoveries: South-Central Renaissance Conference News and Notes, 18(1)

ISSN
1097-3494

Author
Minamino, Hiroyuki

Publication Date
2001-04-01

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

ISSN: 1097-3494



DISCOVERIES

South-Central Renaissance Conference News and Notes

Volume 18, Number 1 Spring 2001



In This Issue...

Fabricated Laughter: Wit and Humor in Renaissance Music
by Hiroyuki Minamino
1

Jesuit Patronage of the Spiritual Madrigal
by Katherine Powers
3

From Ambarvalia to Harvest Home and Beyond: Herrick's Veiled Christianization of Tibullus in "The Hock-Cart"
by Robert D. Keller
5

From the Editor; SCRC News
8

Book Review: The Cambridge Companion to Galileo
Rev. by Renzo Baldasso
9

Fabricated Laughter: Wit and Humor in Renaissance Music

Hiroyuki Minamino

"What goes on four feet, on two feet and three, but the more feet it goes on the weaker it be?" The Sphinx asked this riddle to whoever passed before her. Those who failed to answer were throttled. It was Oedipus, King of Thebes, in his quest for truth, who gave the correct answer: Man. The anecdote we are concerned with here is a musical riddle.[1] As the Sphinx's riddle involves one who poses the riddle and one who answers it, this musical riddle involves one who acts as if he were a sphinx and one who equals the intelligence of Oedipus. The story goes like this:

Louis XII, the French King, had formerly been pleased by some song. So he asked his singers if there was anyone who could compose a song in several voices in which he could also take some part. The singers wondered at this demand, because they all well knew that the King was entirely ignorant of music and had a very inadequate voice. After hesitating a while, the chief of the singers replied that he would compose a song in which the King would be given a place. The following day, he produced a song that was composed in four voices. The top two voices were composed in canon, taken from a single theme, and were to be sung by two boys who would sing very lightly and delicately. The composer was to sing the bass, supporting the King at the octave at regular intervals on the alternate tone of the half tempus. The composer had given the King the tenor, a part that would be suitable for the royal voice. It consisted of one note. The King laughed merrily at the trick and gladly dismissed the composer with a present and with the desired favor.

This amusing story appears in the book entitled *Dodecachordon* by a Swiss humanist and monk, Heinrich Glarean.[2] The *Dodecachordon* is a stuffy music treatise on the theory of twelve modes. But at the end of the book the tone is changed as if Glarean were waiting for the moment. He relates several anecdotes in a chapter where he discusses the technical skills of composers. He admits that he is fond of wit and humor in music that are invented for the sake of pleasure. He defends this kind of jesting only when it is treated with "dignity and selected for a favorable moment." What is amusing about Glarean's anecdote of Louis XII's singing lesson? There are two clues to solve the mystery: the social behavior of Renaissance courtiers and the internal structure of the song.

The underlying theme of Glarean's story is the literary idealization of courtly behavior. Louis XII's request should be understood within the context of this social attitude. Baldassare Castiglione theorized the courtly behavior that had been developed for quite some time and made popular through the publication of his book *Il cortegiano, The Book of the Courtier*. According to Castiglione, music was an absolute essential for the ideal courtier, without which he would not be considered perfect. Music lessons for the courtier comprised three main fields: general appreciation, skill in sight singing, and proficiency in playing various instruments. The minimum requirement for a courtier was a readiness to listen to and to criticize music. A higher level of musical achievement was sight singing and playing musical instruments.

If the courtier could not fulfill these requirements, it was a disgrace. Thomas Morley, an English composer and theorist, made one such person confess his inability in music. In his music treatise *A plaine and*

easie introduction to practicall musicke, published in London in 1597, Morley had this well educated but musically illiterate man tell the most embarrassing moment of his life: "But supper being ended, and music books, according to the custom, being brought to the table, the mistress of the house presented me with a part earnestly requesting me to sing. But when, after many excuses, I protested unfeignedly that I could not, every one began to wonder; yea, some whispered to others demanding how I was brought up."[3] We may wonder to what extent Morley's motive of including this anecdote was based on the necessity of promoting the idea of musical illiteracy as socially unacceptable, the social attitude that may have consequently affected the sale of his treatise that teaches rudiments of music theory. But the importance of music education, particularly to the upper echelon of the society, cannot be ignored.

In the Renaissance, one or another subject of music was taught in universities, ecclesiastical institutions, courts, music schools, and academies, as well as by private teachers. The object of learning music and the subjects offered at these institutions differed. The student's social status and his future occupation determined the kind of education he was to receive. The university curriculum focused on the learning of the theory of music. The princely courts and the choir schools belonging to the major churches educated the professional composers and singers of polyphonic music. The master-apprenticeship system provided the would-be professional instrumentalists the training that mainly concerned the practical side of music making. The amateurs learned music from private teachers with whom they drew up contracts, to whom they paid handsome fees, and whom they summoned to their residences.

It was dilettanti who supported the extravagant growth of Renaissance music. Music was patronized by aristocrats and the Church as well as by the rising middle class who, because of their financial strength, could imitate the social behavior of the higher classes. The amateurs who wished to learn music and musical instruments should have had ample means, financially and intellectually, to pursue this pastime, for they had to consider the expense of tuition for the lessons and the costs of music books, musical instruments, and their maintenance. It was fashionable to cultivate music and to acquire the ability to participate in music making, especially singing and playing instruments such as the lute and viol.

Was Louis XII musically illiterate or tone deaf, as Glarean's anecdote implies? Considering the music education for courtiers, this seems unlikely. In fact, the King is known to have been a patron of art, music, and literature. Born the son of Charles of Orléans, a great poet of the 15th century, Louis must have been well educated in the humanistic learning that certainly included some kind of music education.

If Glarean's story is a mockery of the behavior of the would-be-ideal gentleman, the music composed for Louis XII could have been any song. But the heart of the joke is the solitary note. Without this compositional wit, the story lacks its punch line. Indeed, the song is a compositional tour de

*(See **Minamino: Laughter**, page 10)*

DISCOVERIES

SCRC News and Notes

Editor
Phoebe S. Spinrad
1620 E. Broad Street #309
Columbus, OH 43203
Phone: 614-258-5433



Review Editor
Christopher Baker
Dept. of Lang., Lit. and Philosophy
Armstrong Atlantic State University
Savannah, GA 31419-1977

Discoveries is published twice yearly, sponsored by SCRC and The Ohio State University. Articles, notes, and reviews are invited in any area of Renaissance studies; poems, parodies, and cartoons are also welcome. Send all submissions except book reviews to the editor. Responses to articles or letters in *Discoveries* should also be sent to the editor. Send reviews and books for review to the review editor.

Maximum length for submissions is eight double-spaced pages, exclusive of footnotes, although an occasional longer piece will be considered at the editor's discretion. Endnotes and works cited should not exceed two pages, and illustrations must be adaptable to line or grayscale reproduction and accompanied by the appropriate permissions. Send manuscripts by mail in hard copy, and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for replies. For further information, call the editor, or e-mail her at <pspinrad@worldnet.att.net>.

Discoveries is indexed in the *MLA Annual Bibliography*, the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, and the *Music Index*.

Copyright © 2001 by South-Central Renaissance Conference. Requests for permission to reproduce material published in *Discoveries*, as well as responses to articles, should be addressed to the Editor. ISSN: 1097-3494

Minamino: Laughter (from page 2)

force. It is ingenious for its economic use of notes. The upper two voices sing the same melody in canon. The main theme is made up of few notes. The bass consists of two notes, the tonic and dominant, for the whole song. The King's part consists of one note that is to be held from the beginning to the end. The composer thus has used less than ten notes to compose a song for four voices.[4]

It is tempting to assume that Glarean or someone noticed the ingenuity of composition, particularly the handling of the tenor. Since the advent of polyphonic music, the tenor (called cantus firmus) was taken from the Gregorian chant, popular melody, or a part of polyphonic composition. The borrowed melody was usually prolonged, hence the name "tenor" (to hold). The tenor part Louis XII was assigned consisted of one note, the cantus firmus reduced to minimum.

The melody is also short, consisting of six notes. This melodic structure does not quite fit the courtly chansons of the late 15th century, but has an air of unsophisticated vulgarity. Indeed, the melody may have been taken from a popular street tune.

The lyrics of the song also have a rustic flavor. Like the music, the lyrics are short. "Guillaume se va chaufer / Aupres de la cheminee / A ung petit de charbon / Qui ne fait point de fumee." ("Guillaume is going to warm himself by the hearth with a little piece of coal that gives off no smoke.")[5] It will surprise no one if the lyrics have a double meaning. The "warm little thing" ("un petit [morceau] de charbon") reminds us of a willing young lady. The rustic nature of the lyrics suggests this song to be a courtly chanson of street songs of the time. If Louis XII did take his royal part, he may have been able to reach the warm little thing with one penetrating thrust.

There is usually one who makes jokes and one who is a target of the joke. The inventors of jokes must find the victims of their jokes to make fools of them. Was Louis XII such a fool? This seems unlikely. But there must have been some reasons for choosing this king.[6] A clue is Josquin des Prez's chanson.

Josquin composed a French chanson, "Adieu mes amours." The lyrics begin with a lament on the lovers' farewell, a common theme of all times. Then comes a twist. The sentiment changes when the lover worries about his future. "Adieu mes amours, a Dieu vous commend. / Adieu je vous dis jusques au printemps. / Je suis en souci de quoi je vivrai; / La raison pourquoi je le vous dirai. / Je n'ai point d'argent; vivrai je du vent / Si l'argent du Roi ne vient plus souvent?"[7]

Who was this stingy king? Josquin's use of French as the language of the song implies that this king lived in a French-speaking country; otherwise, the composer's complaint could not reach the accused. There were only the French kings such as Louis XI, Charles VIII, and Louis XII to match the description. And it may well be the last one, for there is another story about Louis XII's miserliness.

Glarean tells us that Louis XII had promised Josquin some benefice. When the promises remained unfulfilled, Josquin thereupon composed with majesty and elegance a motet on the Psalm "Memor est verbi tui servo tuo." (Oh, think of thy servant, as concerning thy word.) When the motet was brought to the singers and examined with strict justice, everyone admired it. The King, filled with shame, did not dare to defer the promise any longer, and discharged the favor that he had promised. Then Josquin, having experienced the liberality of a ruler, immediately composed, as an act of gratitude, a motet on another Psalm, "Bonitatem fecisti cum servo tuo Domine." (Oh, Lord, thou has dealt graciously with thy servant.)

This is certainly a fabrication. After all, this was the age when the unfulfilled or delayed promise of benefice was a common practice. In some cases, the rulers used the system of benefice to advance their political moves, no matter whether it benefited the recipient or not. More importantly, two different composers may have been involved in composing these two motets. In fact, Glarean noticed the difference in quality. He judged the "Memor est" to be much better composed than the "Bonitatem." Josquin scholars agree that the "Memor est" is certainly by Josquin, while they consider the "Bonitatem" to have been composed by the French composer Carpentras, who was at one time employed at the court of Louis XII.

The underlying theme in Glarean's anecdotes is Louis XII's treatment of his subjects with regard to their financial matters. Was he such a stingy king? In fact, he was. The King, although reared in riches, spent as little as possible on himself and his court, and fattened no favorites. Some courtiers and satirists made fun of his economies, but he took their humor in good spirit. "Among their ribaldries," he said, "they may sometimes tell us useful truths. Let them amuse themselves, provided they respect the honor of women. I had rather make courtiers laugh by my stinginess than make people weep by my extravagance."[8] Louis XII made it clear that the invention of anecdotes such as the one Glarean told was perfectly permissible.

The chief of the singers at the court of Louis XII replied to the King's impudent request for a part with the stingy use of notes. In this witty little song, he hinted at not only the King's own stinginess and musical illiteracy, but also the ingenuity of his own musical talent. Who was this chief of the singers? Or who could be the best candidate to be chosen as such a witty, talented composer? The way Glarean introduces the composer of the song is ambiguous. Before he relates the anecdote, Glarean comments on his motive for including anecdotes about compositional humor. He says that "some relate such stories about Josquin des Prez, and it is of such kind which we are now going to tell." Some

modern scholars leaped to the conclusion that Josquin must be the composer in question, probably encouraged by the comment made by the early 17th-century French theorist Marin Marsenne, who in his music treatise *Harmonie universelle* repeated the story and named Josquin as the composer of the song.

Whoever fabricated the anecdote about Louis XII's musical request could find good reasons to choose Josquin as the contemporary Oedipus. In fact, Josquin was praised for his ingenious compositional techniques. Martin Luther once said that Josquin is a unique master of the notes, which must express what he desires, while other composers must do what the notes dictate. This is precisely the point why this song is so ingenious: the economic use of notes with the standard compositional techniques of the time such as canon, ostinato, and cantus firmus.

The complaint of the underpaid musician was a consistent motif in the anecdotes concerning Josquin. Glarean tells another one: At one time, Josquin sought a favor from some important personage and that man, a procrastinator, said over and over in mutilated French, "Laise faire moy," that is, "Leave it to me." After having heard this many times, Josquin composed a very elegant Mass based on the solmization syllables, la, sol, fa, re, and mi. The syllables sound like the procrastinator's words, "Laise faire moy" or "Lascia fare a me." The syllable recur throughout the Mass sections, as if to mock the procrastinator's persistent but empty words.[9] It was perhaps the pun that promoted the invention of the story.

If Josquin was the chief of the singers who mocked the King, Glarean's anecdote is more amusing, because it is antithetical to Josquin's known character, that is, Josquin as an artist who did not compromise his compositional habit even if it did not please his employer. Duke Ercole I d'Este of Ferrara wanted to hire Josquin for his chapel. So he sent an agent to France to recruit the composer. The agent, however, recommended that the Duke hire Heinrich Isaac instead, despite his own admission that Josquin "composes better."[10] He argued that Isaac was more good-natured and companionable and would compose new works more often. The agent was concerned about the rumor that Josquin composed when he wanted to, not when one wanted him to. Moreover, Josquin was asking 200 ducats in salary while Isaac would come for 120. The Duke hired Josquin.

This incident about recruiting Josquin for the court of the d'Estes in Ferrara occurred in 1502, just at the time when Josquin was most likely serving at the French court.[11] So the compositional mastery and place and time of employment all fit well in hypothesizing that Josquin was indeed the ingenious chief of the singers who beat hollow the stingy King, and that Josquin composed the song for the love of challenge. Does this identification finally settle the question of whether Glarean's anecdote is or is not a fabrication? To try to answer this question, we must now turn to Giotto's "circle" and Michelangelo's "nose."

Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, tells a story about Giotto's "circle."[12] As Vasari tells it, Pope Benedict IX heard about Giotto's reputation and intended to hire him. The Pope sent his emissary to find out what kind of man Giotto was and what his work was like. At Giotto's workshop, the courtier asked the painter to draw something for him so that he could show it to the Pope to judge. Having acceded good-naturedly to this insulting request, Giotto drew a perfect circle in a single stroke without moving his arm and without using a compass. The Pope's emissary, however, felt ridiculed by this because to him the drawing seemed to be nothing. But when he presented Giotto's drawing to the Pope along with his disapproval of the artist, the Pope scorned the messenger with these words: "You are more simple than Giotto's circle."

Paul Barolsky points out that "[t]he word 'tondo' or 'circle' suggests a person who is slow or dim of wit, but is also, antithetically, a symbol of perfection."[13] The Pope's emissary took Giotto's circle at face value, seeing it as a nullity and failing to appreciate the subtlety it represented. He is represented as an ignoramus who cannot see the true value of a simple circle. The anecdote, then, is also about the artist's triumph over an ignorant patron. Vasari consistently uses this motif in his *Lives* and gives its climax in the story of Michelangelo's "nose": When Piero Soderini, the head of the Florentine Republic, saw the statue of David that Michelangelo was working on, he commented to the sculptor that David's nose was too thick. To this criticism, Michelangelo climbed on his scaffold with a chisel and some of the marble dust in his hand. He then tapped lightly with the chisel and let the dust fall little by little, without altering anything. Then he looked down at Soderini and said, "Now look at it." To this Soderini replied, "Oh, that's much better. Now you've really brought it to life."[14]

The artist as hero is the main motif in Vasari's *Lives*.[15] He invented stories to promote this idea, and the time was ripe. The economic growth in Italy had made the surge of the Renaissance possible. The newly rich spent their money on luxurious items, and painters, musicians, and other artisans were in high demand. But although their financial situation may have improved, their social status did not. Therefore, some artists tried to improve attitudes toward themselves.

In the Sphinx's riddle, Oedipus sees man's life reduced to simple mathematical numbers. In Glarean's musical riddle, Josquin des Prez solves with one simple note Louis XII's demand to make a seemingly impossible request possible. Whoever invented the Sphinx's riddle knew the answer before he thought out the question. Whoever invented Glarean's riddle created the anecdote after he heard the song. These stories about the Sphinx, Oedipus, Louis XII, Josquin des Prez,

Giotto, and Michelangelo amuse us, make us laugh, puzzle us, or make us ponder. They may not tell us the true characters of the persons involved or what actually happened. But riddles and anecdotes may sometimes tell us much more about the world in which they were written than real stories can. The world of wit and humor adds the perspective of the world upside down, or inside out, or just a simple circle or a single note.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this essay was read at the annual meeting of the College Music Society, Pacific Southern Chapter, in March 2000. The title and, accordingly, the theme of this essay are influenced by Paul Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 1978). I am also indebted to Frederick Noad, April Perkins, and Blair Sullivan for their comments.

[2] Heinrich Glarean, *Dodekachordon* (Basel, 1547), 468. See Clement A. Miller, *Dodecachordon [by] Heinrich Glarean: Translation, Transcription, and Commentary*, Musicological Studies and Documents, 6 (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1965), 2:284. In this essay, I have paraphrased and arranged each of Glarean's stories on the basis of Miller's English translations.

[3] R. Alec Harman, ed., *Thomas Morley, A Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music*, with a foreword by Thurston Dart (New York: Norton, 1935), 9.

[4] For a modern edition, see Arnold Geering and Hans Trümpy, eds., *Das Liederbuch des Johannes Heer von Glarus*, Schweizerische Musikdenkmäler (Basel: Berenreiter-Verlag , 1967), 5:92.

[5] It is not known whether the composer of the song also wrote the lyrics. Glarean does not provide any lyrics in the treatise.

[6] There are some ambiguities as to whether it was Louis XII (reigned 1498-1515) who commissioned the song. Glarean named him and attached this inscription: "Lutuichi Regis Franciae jocosa cantico." The compiler of another source for this song, however, specifically indicated that the song was written for Louis XI (reigned 1461-1483): "Carmen gallicum Ludovici XI Regis Francorum." The *Dodecachordon* was published in 1547 but written a few decades earlier.

[7] For a modern edition, see A. Smijers, et al., eds. *Werken van Josquin des Prez: Wereldijke Werken* (Amsterdam: G. Alsbach, 1925-1969), no. 35; and Helen Hewitt, ed., *Harmonice musices Odhecaton A* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1942), 249-51.

[8] Will Durant, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin 1300-1564: The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 6:95.

[9] On the Mass, see James Haar, "Some Remarks on the 'Missa La sol fa re mi," in *Josquin des Prez: Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976), 564-88.

[10] Lewis Lockwood, "Josquin at Ferrara: New Documents and Letters," in *Josquin des Prez: Proceedings*, 103-37.

[11] For Josquin's biography, see Helmuth Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1962-65).

[12] Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, tr. Gaston du C. de Vere (London: Everyman, 1996). The story is also translated in George Bull, *Giorgio Vasari: Lives of Artists* (London: Penguin, 1987), 1:64-65.

[13] Barolsky, *Why Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), 11.

[14] Bull, 1:338-90.

[15] On the artist as hero, see Barolsky, *Michelangelo's Nose: A Myth and Its Maker* (University Park, PA, 1990).

Keller: Herrick *(from page 7)*

we see in lines 23–25. This tercet is the first of five, and each serves to set off the major divisions of the poem as well as to function either as an ironic reversal or as a memorandum of duty. Also, the three lines (perhaps) refer to the Trinity and as such are embedded structural allusions to Herrick's deeper purpose.

The third section exhorts the workers to go to their generous lord's hearth (26) and gorge themselves on the plentiful meat and sweets; and lines 32–34, the second tercet, are in fact the dessert references; so we have a kind of estate poem and Land of Cockayne here. (There is a "blazing hearth" in Tibullus as well.) Metaphorically, of course, the Lord offers plenty; but it is nourishment of an intangible nature.

Section four begins with an amusing tercet (35–37) which states that, if the wine runs out, drink beer! The celebrants are urged to imbibe freely, to toast their lord's health (38), the maids (41), and the farm implements. "Drink, frolic boys, till all be blithe" (43) might be interpretable as a *carpe diem* were it not for the previous line, "To the rough sickle and crook'd scythe," which, with its allusion to the tools of the Grim Reaper, may be taken as a *memento mori*. Thus, there is a more sober, buried reference here to the wine and blessing of Holy Communion; and the final tercet (44–46) reminds the participants that all must be fed, that is, given the opportunity to join the Body of Christ. The poem begins to turn quiet and to urge introspection and responsibility.

In the final section, the narrator continues to remind the revelers (and the reader) that the seasonal cycle continues, that one must return to work, and that the part (or life) is brief. One must return to the harrow (50); but this is another signaling word, a reference to Christ's harrowing of Hell after his physical death on the cross. Lines 51–52, "And, you must know, your lord's word's true, / Feed him ye must, whose food fills you," allude to the reciprocal relationship between the peasants and their lord; but one must also believe the Word. Also, God demands contrition as a condition