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## SOLO LUTE PRACTICE IN ITALY BEFORE PETRUCCI

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The period between the era of the first documented lutenists who played in the polyphonic manner, and the era of the earliest extant solo lute music in manuscripts and prints is one of the most profoundly mysterious in the history of solo lute music. In the present state of research we lack documentation for the biographies of the late fifteenth-century lutenists who are reputed to have cultivated, or to have been confronted with, the new manner of lute playing, and there are few sources in musical notation that specifically indicate lute music, that is, music notated in tablature.<sup>1</sup> This is acutely the case regarding the state of solo lute playing in Italy during the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century, and more keenly felt than for any other country, since musicologists tend to regard Italy as the prime region for the formation of solo lute practice: the first printed lute music was published there by Ottaviano Petrucci between 1507 and 1511 and there are manuscript sources for the lute from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, composed or arranged in the polyphonic manner of lute playing, that originate from Italy.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Johannes Tinctoris's mention in his music treatise *De inventione et usu musicae* of a German lutenist 'Orbus' and a Burgundian lutenist 'Henricus' as the pre-eminent lutenists in the new lute playing style, gives the impression that this type of performance practice was a northern art, first cultivated and widely developed there; while Tinctoris singles out the Ferrarese virtuoso Pietrobono de Burzellis as the most eminent lutenist in the monophonic manner of lute playing, in ensemble, implying that this was the dominant performance practice in Italy during the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Was the polyphonic style of lute playing developed and widely cultivated in Italy during the last quarter of the fifteenth century, or was the new lute practice imported from the North somewhat prior to Petrucci's publication of his series of lute books?

Polyphonic lute playing involves the use of the fingers to pluck non-adjacent courses of the lute to produce two or more voices simultaneously. It is true that a sophisticated plectrum-plucking technique can produce polyphony, but only in a limited way; the voices need to be arranged on the adjacent strings otherwise the polyphonic voices can only be produced in arpeggio.<sup>4</sup> Pietrobono must have played polyphonic compositions in an ensemble with other instrumentalists, each player taking a voice part.<sup>5</sup> Whether his accompanist(s) played polyphonically or in a strumming style is not documented.

Italian lutenists could have been acquainted with or learned polyphonic lute playing from foreign lutenists who visited Italy, or from the Italian lutenists who visited the northern countries, especially Germany or Burgundy. For instance, Conrad Paumann, who is now identified as 'Orbus ille germanus' mentioned by Tinctoris, could have demonstrated his skill to the Italian lutenists when he visited the Mantuan court

in 1470. How much he was willing to show off his lute playing, however, is a matter for speculation, considering the report about his fear that the Mantuan instrumentalists would poison him out of jealousy and his reluctance in letting his technical skills and lute style be known to others.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest theoretical document describing solo lute practice and finger-plucking technique is Johannes Tinctoris's music treatise *De inventione et usu musicae*, written in Naples and published there in about 1480.<sup>7</sup> He does not, however, mention that in Italy polyphonic lute playing was already a well-established practice by the time he recorded it. Nor does he suggest that his information was the earliest reference to it.

The idea of professional lutenists consulting theoretical music treatises to learn new instrumental styles or playing techniques is one that should be tested by assembling the evidence for such a practice. If such transmission of musical ideas ever actually took place, some lutenists could conceivably have learned of the new polyphonic lute style and the finger-plucking technique from Tinctoris's *De inventione*, since extracts of the treatise were sent all over Europe.<sup>8</sup> Neapolitan lutenists, on the other hand, could have had an opportunity to learn the new lute style from Tinctoris himself, who came to the court of Naples about 1472.<sup>9</sup> One lutenist who can be associated with the polyphonic manner of lute playing at the court of Naples during the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century is one 'Maestro Baldassarre Todisco sonatore di liuto' who appears in an account book listing musicians working at the court between 1480 and 1490.<sup>10</sup> This lutenist may be the 'Balthasar Germanus' whom Paolo Cortesi, in his *De cardinalatu*, written about 1510, mentions as one of the virtuosi in the polyphonic manner of lute playing; Cortesi wrote that the new technique was 'first established by Balthasar and Johannes Maria, both surnamed Germanus'.<sup>11</sup> The prefix 'maestro' suggests Baldassarre Todisco's maturity in music and the high reputation he enjoyed at that date. Evidence for the possible cultivation of the new way of playing by Baldassarre Todisco in the 1480s in Naples is a woodcut depicting a wedding scene included in the Tuppo edition of Aesop's *Vita e fabulae*, published in Naples in 1485.<sup>12</sup> It shows a lutenist plucking the strings of a lute with his thumb and index finger. The lute player appears to have been an amateur, implying that the cultivation of the polyphonic technique of lute playing among professional lutenists in Naples took place earlier still.

There is a contemporary iconographical source that confirms the use of finger-plucking for performance in Italy about the time Tinctoris recorded it in *De inventione*.<sup>13</sup> One portion of Giovanni Bellini's painting for the altarpiece of San Giobbe, executed about 1480, includes a depiction of two lutenists.<sup>14</sup> One holds a plectrum, while another displays bare fingers. Since the right-hand thumb of the latter player is invisible, it might be argued that a plectrum is hidden behind the fingers. Comparing the right-hand position of the lutenist who holds the plectrum with his thumb and index finger, however, this seems unlikely because of the latter player's hand position: his index and middle fingers are stretched out and positioned on the strings, and his

little finger is appropriately stationed on the soundboard.<sup>15</sup> Pictorial examples of the depiction of finger-plucking technique on the lute become more numerous towards the very end of the fifteenth century, for example, Ambrogio de Predis' *Music-Making Angels*, Bernardino Pinturicchio's *Assumption*, and Lorenzo Costa's *Concert*.<sup>16</sup>

If polyphonic lute practice was current in Italy at least by the late 1470s, it may shed light on the interpretation of references concerning the manner of composition of vocal music. One such instance is the inscription attached to the unique copy of the carnival song 'Quant' è bella giovinezza', allegedly composed by Lorenzo de' Medici in 1489. The inscription reads: 'Song composed by the Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici, which he had done at this carnival for the Triumph of Bacchus [and Arianna], where they sang the following song. [It was] composed for the lute [and] was a beautiful thing.'<sup>17</sup> The inscription indicates the involvement of the lute for the composition of the carnival song. However, the interpretation of the phrase 'de composte de leuto' poses problems. Was each voice of the song composed separately on the lute and then notated in mensural notation? Or was the Superius composed with the text, while the Tenor and the Contratenor were first composed and then arranged for the lute to be played polyphonically? Or were all the voices of the song composed in chordal manner on the solo lute? The second and third cases require the lute part to be played polyphonically, two voices for the second and the three voices for the third. The chordal character of the song means there would not have been much difficulty in composing and playing all three voices on the lute.

The lute as an important tool for composing vocal music is documented in the sixteenth century, lending credence to the idea that Lorenzo also composed his carnival song 'Quant' è bella giovinezza' on the lute. It is known that Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina composed sections of one of his Masses, the Kyrie and Gloria, voice by voice on the lute and then notated the voices in mensural notation.<sup>18</sup> Palestrina may have used the lute to hear the simultaneous sound of the voices. When he played the Mass sections on the lute to the agent of Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga, it is conceivable that he played them polyphonically. Otherwise it is hard to interpret the agent's report that Palestrina's playing was 'a marvellous thing'.<sup>19</sup> Palestrina's practice of composing a lute version and then transcribing it for voices is testified in an earlier case: one of the frottole by Bartolomeo Tromboncino, first made in a lute-song version and then converted into a four-voice vocal setting.<sup>20</sup> If we consider these two later sources as a clue to the compositional process of 'Quant' è bella giovinezza' by Lorenzo de' Medici, the phrase 'de composte de leuto' could well mean that Lorenzo first composed the song on the lute in a chordal manner and then arranged it for a vocal ensemble.<sup>21</sup>

Great caution is needed in interpreting the lack of references to the cultivation of solo lute practice, and the lack of music specifically composed in the polyphonic style as positive evidence for the underdevelopment and peripheral position of solo lute practice at the time that Tinctoris was writing his *De inventione*. Yet the concept of the lute as a

dominant instrument in Italy, and of Italy as the most important centre for the development of solo lute music should be re-assessed, if we consider Tinctoris's remark that 'while some play every sort of composition most delightfully on the lute, in Italy and Spain the viola without a bow [*viola sine arcu*] is more often used.'<sup>22</sup> Tinctoris states that the plucked *viola* had been invented by Spanish instrument-makers, his testimony corroborated by the depiction of this instrument in Spanish paintings that began to appear from the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Although the scarcity of extant references to the plucked *viola* in Italy in the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century does not offer us evidence either to support or to reject Tinctoris's statement, the association between the lute and the plucked *viola* seems to have been close, to judge from the similarities in playing techniques, tuning system and fretting scheme, performance practices, plucking techniques, and notational system.<sup>24</sup> The cultivation of fingertip technique on the plucked *viola* appeared almost at the same time, and the tablature systems created for these instruments in Italy (Italian lute tablature for lute and Neapolitan tablature for the plucked *viola*) share similar notational features.

In conclusion, polyphonic solo lute practice in Italy must have been current by the 1470s, in view of Johannes Tinctoris's testimony regarding this practice and the iconographic evidence for finger-plucking technique. Yet the development of solo lute practice in Italy during the last quarter of the fifteenth century is a complicated question because of the apparent predominance of the monophonic lute ensemble style and because of the rise in popularity of the plucked *viola*, both of which had close relations to, and influence on, the lutenists who first cultivated the new lute practice. Moreover, the supremacy of the northern lutenists in the development of the polyphonic manner of lute playing and the transmission of this practice from northern to southern Europe during the late 1470s and early 1480s still need to be clarified, if indeed this was the story.

## Notes

- 1 A pioneering work on the subject is Peter Danner, 'Before Petrucci: The Lute in the Fifteenth Century', *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 5 (1972), pp. 4–17, which inspired the title and subject of this essay.
- 2 The earliest known example of lute tablature is the so-called Königstein Songbook (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. qu. 719 fasc. 4), dating from between 1470 and 1473 and originating in southern Germany. I exclude this source from the current discussion, since the pieces notated in German lute tablature are monophonic. On the manuscript, see Paul Sappeler, ed., *Das Königsteiner Liederbuch*, Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters, 29 (Munich, 1970). On the tablature, see Hans Tischler, 'The Earliest Lute Tablature?', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 27 (1974), pp. 100–3; and David Fallows, '15th-Century Tablatures for Plucked Instruments: A Summary, a Revision and a Suggestion', *The Lute Society Journal* xix

(1977), pp. 8–10. Photographs of the source are included in *Frühe Lautentabulaturen im Faksimile*, ed. Crawford Young, Martin Kirbauer (Winterthur: Amadeus, 2003), pp. 191–9.

- 3 For the relevant passages, see Karl Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris (1445–1511) und sein unbekannter Traktat 'De inventione et usu musicae'*, (Tutzing, second edition, 1961), p. 45; and Anthony Baines, 'Fifteenth-Century Instruments in Tinctoris's *De inventione et usu musicae*', *The Galpin Society Journal* 3 (1950), p. 24. For the identification of 'Orbus ille germanus' as Conrad Paumann, see Hiroyuki Minamino, 'Conrad Paumann and the Evolution of Solo Lute Practice in the Fifteenth Century', *Journal of Musicological Research* 6 (1986), pp. 291–310, and idem, 'Who was Henricus?', *The Lute* xlvii (2006).
- 4 Even if the notes are arranged on adjacent strings, the notes are produced in an arpeggio, in a quick succession.
- 5 I am preparing a study on Pietrobono's lute style.
- 6 Nor is there any concrete evidence that Paumann was a direct agent for the spreading of polyphonic lute practice to other Italian courts such as Ferrara where, according to a Mantuan agent's report, Paumann was going when he left Mantua in June 1470. If Paumann indeed visited Ferrara in this occasion, a meeting between Paumann and Pietrobono could have taken place, for a record of payment to Pietrobono in 1470 indicates the latter's presence at the court. For the documents, see William F. Prizer, 'The Frottola and the Unwritten Tradition', *Studi musicali* 15 (1986), p. 13, n. 36 (reproduction and translation); and Lewis Lockwood, 'Pietrobono and the Instrumental Tradition at Ferrara in the Fifteenth Century', *Rivista italiana di musicologia* 10 (1975), p. 123. Whether Paumann accepted Galeazzo Maria Sforza's invitation and went to Milan is unknown. The assumption of the transmission of polyphonic lute practice by Paumann to southern Italy is likewise based on some ambiguous references to the presence of one blind musician in Naples. The claim that Paumann visited the Neapolitan court in 1470 comes from Ferdinando Ferrante I's letter of 21 July 1475 to Ludovico Gonzaga concerning the inducement of 'that blind German musician ("quello musico ceco tudisco") who was here before'; for the document, see Antonio Bertolotti, *Musici alla corte dei Gonzaga in Mantova dal secolo XV al XVIII* (Bologna, 1969), p. 9 (reproduction); and Prizer, 'The Frottola and the Unwritten Tradition', p. 13 (translation). If Ferrante tried to recruit Paumann, he must have had been unaware of Paumann's death two and a half years earlier. The intelligence network Ferrante installed to monitor the cultural and political movements of northern Italian courts was undoubtedly able to gather the latest information on musicians; for diplomacy in fifteenth-century Italy, see Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (New York, 1988); and for Naples in particular, see Jerry H. Bentley, *Politics and Culture in Renaissance Naples* (Princeton, 1987). In fact, the musical exchanges between Naples and northern Italian courts, especially Ferrara, were strong and fertile during the 1470s. For instance, Joanne Oriolo was a Neapolitan agent at Mantua in 1470; see Allan W. Atlas, *Music at the Aragonese Court of Naples* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 61. Eleonora d'Aragona became the consort of Ercole d'Este in 1473, and the Ferrarese retinue bringing the bride from Naples included Pietrobono; see Nino Pirrotta, *Music and Culture in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p.

389 n. 53. Diomedea Carafa, the count of Maddaloni, wrote on behalf of Ferrante to Ercole about Pietrobono's visit to Naples in 1476; John D. Moores, 'New Light on Diomedea Carafa and His "Perfect Loyalty" to Ferrante of Aragon', *Italian Studies* 26 (1971), p. 19, Doc. 3. Moreover, Ferrante appears to have understood in 1475 that this German musician had been in employment at the Mantuan court ('in nostril servicij'), while back in 1470 Ferrante was certainly aware of the necessary procedure in order to recruit Paumann, for which the only channel for the negotiation to obtain permission from Duke of Bavaria was through the Gonzagas. Yet there is no mention of Ludovico's intermediation in Ferrante's letter of 1475, although one may argue that Ferrante assumed that was understood.

- 7 For the date of the compilation of the treatise, see Ronald Woodley, 'The Printing and Scope of Tinctoris's Fragmentary Treatise *De inventione et usu musicae*', *Early Music History* 5 (1985), pp. 241–45.
- 8 It is uncertain whether these extracts contained the chapter where Tinctoris mentions the new lute practice.
- 9 For Tinctoris' arrival in Naples, see Ronald Woodley, 'Iohannes Tinctoris: A Review of the Documentary Biographical Evidence', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34 (1981), pp. 231–2. The documentation for the cultivation of the lute at the court of Naples before Tinctoris's *De inventione* was compiled is limited to a few references, and none of them can specifically be connected to solo lute practice; an employment of a Pere Puig 'luytador' in 1437, the presence of a Giovanni da Gaeta who was an organ builder and lute maker in 1471–6, a visit of Pierobono in 1473, an invitation to this Ferrarese virtuoso in 1476, and Serafino dall'Aquila learning to play the lute from a Guillelmus Guarnerius sometime between 1478 and 1479.
- 10 See Isabel Pope and Masakata Kanazawa, *The Musical Manuscript Montecassino 871: A Neapolitan Repertory of Sacred and Secular Music of the Late Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1978), p. 69, n. 3, the document taken from Erasmo Pèrcopo; *Barzellette napoletane del Quattrocento* (Naples, 1893) [this work was unavailable and not consulted for this study]; and Atlas, *Music at the Aragonese Court of Naples*, p. 10. Atlas, *ibid.*, p. xii, discusses the destruction of 'cedole della tesoreria aragonese'. That Tinctoris did not mention Baldassarre Todisco in the *De inventione* might indicate either that Baldassarre Todisco's cultivation of the polyphonic manner of lute playing postdated the compilation of *De inventione* or that Baldassarre came to the Neapolitan court after the compilation of the treatise.
- 11 Pirrotta, *Music and Culture in Italy*, pp. 96–112.
- 12 Reproduced in Gene Brucker, Giovanni and Lusanna: *Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), p. 81.
- 13 One early pictorial example of the finger-plucking technique on the lute can be found in a series of fourteenth-century Italian drawings that depict Lady Music tuning a lute by plucking the strings with her right-hand fingers. It may be significant that Lady Music is

- depicted in the act of tuning, symbolising cosmic harmony. Does this mean that polyphonic lute playing was known or invented in the fourteenth-century Italy? The lutenists' desire to play polyphonic compositions on the solo lute must have fostered the creation of the new lute style using finger-plucking technique. The drawings are reproduced and discussed in Howard Mayer Brown, 'St. Augustin, Lady Music, and the Gittern in Fourteenth-Century Italy', *Musica disciplina* 38 (1984), pp. 25–65. Lute technique in Italy in the fourteenth century is discussed in my 'The Lute's Lament: an Introduction to the Trecento Lute' (in preparation).
- 14 Reproduced in Jacob Burckhardt, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 96, plate 76. Burckhardt dates the painting c.1480–5, while Georg Kinsky, *Album musical* (Paris, 1930), plate 69, no. 3, dates it c.1478.
  - 15 It still offers an awkward right-hand posture to pluck the strings.
  - 16 Reproduced in Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Central Italian and North Italian Schools* (London, 1968), vol. 3, plate 1405, also see vol. 1, p. 108; Valentine Denis, 'La representation des instruments de musique dans les arts figurés du XVe siècle en Flandre et en Italie', *Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome* 21 (1940–41), figure 14; and Frank Harrison and Joan Rimmer, *European Musical Instruments* (London, 1964), plate 8, respectively.
  - 17 Walter H. Rubsamen, 'The Music for "Quant' è bella giovinezza" and Other Carnival Songs by Lorenzo de' Medici', in *Art, Science, and History in the Renaissance*, edited by Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, Maryland, 1967), p. 171; the translation is taken from William F. Prizer, 'Lutenists at the Court of Mantua in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries', *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 13 (1980), p. 24. The song is transcribed in Rubsamen, 'The Music for "Quant' è bella giovinezza"', pp. 181–2, and in Joseph J. Galluci, ed., *Florentine Festival Music 1480–1520* (Madison, Wis., 1981), pp. 6–7.
  - 18 See Oliver Strunk, 'Guglielmo Gonzaga and Palestrina's Missa Dominicalis', *The Musical Quarterly* 33 (1947), pp. 231–32; and Hiroyuki Minamino, 'Sixteenth-Century Lute Treatises with Emphasis on Process and Techniques of Intabulation' (Ph.D. diss., The University of Chicago, 1988), pp. 38–39.
  - 19 Martin Luther reports an anecdote that a priest played the Kyrie and the Gloria on the lute in the absence of an organ, perhaps its use without any approval from the authority. It is cited in Thomas Andrew Warburton, Jr., 'Fridolin Sicher's Tablature: A Guide to Keyboard Performance of Vocal Music' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1969), p. 77; and translated in English in Timothy J. MacGee, 'Instruments and the Faenza Codex', *Early Music* 14 (1986), p. 486.
  - 20 For the document, see Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal* (Princeton, 1971), vol. 1, p. 48; and Bonnie J. Blackburn, Edward E. Lowinsky and Clement A. Miller, eds., *A Correspondence of Renaissance Musicians* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 869–70.



- 21 It is hard to interpret from the inscription whether the song was sung with lute accompaniment. The performance practice of singing to the lute had been known in Florence three decades before the composition of 'Quant' è bella giovinezza' in 1489: the famous Florentine organist Antonio Squarcialupi is reported to have sung to the lute in 1459; see Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, vol. 1, p. 10. See also Timothy J. McGee and Sylvia Mittler, 'Information on Instruments in Florentine Carnival Songs', *Early Music* 10 (1982), pp. 453, 460-61, on lute accompaniment.
- 22 See Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris*, p. 45; and Baines, 'Fifteenth-Century Instruments', p. 24.
- 23 Weinmann, *Johannes Tinctoris*, p. 42; and Baines, 'Fifteenth-Century Instruments', p. 22. For the depiction of the plucked 'viola', see Ian Woodfield, *The Early History and the Viol* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 38-60.
- 24 See Hiroyuki Minamino, 'The Viola da Mano in Renaissance Italy: A Synopsis', *Lute Society of America Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1999), pp. 6-9; idem., 'Johannes Tinctoris on the Invention of the Spanish Plucked Viola', in *Music Observed: Studies in Memory of William C. Holmes* (Harmonie Park Press, 2004), pp. 321-332; and idem., 'The Spanish Plucked Viola in Renaissance Italy, 1480-1530', *Early Music* 32, no. 2 (2004), pp. 177-192. On the tablatures for the plucked viola, see idem., 'Valencian Vihuela de Mano Tablature', *Lute Society of America Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1998), pp. 4-6; and idem., 'Neapolitan (Viola da Mano) Tablature', *Lute Society of America Quarterly* 34, nos. 3 (1999), pp. 8-18.