# In Praise of the Politically Incorrect: the Bergamasca

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## The Seventeenth Century: Subtle Irony

What is a Bergamasca?[1] The *Grove* article defines it, first and foremost, as "a tune widely used for instrumental variations and contrapuntal fantasias in the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth."[2] In the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, on the other hand, it is initially described as "a dance, dance song, or popular poem from the district of Bergamo in Northern Italy,"[3] referring only later to late sixteenth-century compositions over a bass formula. In two papers concerning the cultural links and development of the Bergamasca, Judith Cohen discussed specific manifestations of the topic in art music, focusing mainly on works composed in the seventeenth century, where she convincingly detected subtle instances of musical irony. Looking at it as rooted in folk dance of the Bergamo area, Cohen describes its basic musical traits as follows: "Simplified, the melody consists of the following notes: dd-ee-dd-b/dd-cb-aa-g, while the bass corresponds to the most basic harmonic progression, I-IV-V-I, once repeated. Melody and bass, both in the major mode, are stated in 4/4 time, starting on the beat."[4] Indeed, most of the Bergamasca examples given in both dictionaries, and those presented by Cohen in her two papers, were composed in the seventeenth century, and almost all of them were based on the said tune. The *Grove* gives twenty-five references to seventeenth-century bergamascas and only four to ones from the sixteenth century, all after 1560. The article specifies that the earliest two—Gorzanis's "Saltarello dito il bergamasco" for lute (1564) and the two *villotte* by Filippo Azzaiolo (1569)—have no resemblance to the simplified musical pattern described above.

On the other hand, the Bergamasca, *as a general term accepted by convention*, appears much earlier. It is prevalent in documents, reports, poetry, and particularly in theater works of the sixteenth century. How does this universal concept relate to the musical Bergamasca as a tune specific to the seventeenth century?

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1 I am grateful to my colleagues: Anita Breckbill, Marina Ritzarev and Pamela Starr for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 Richard Hudson, et al., "Bergamasca," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 8 November 2015, http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.library.unl.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/02773

3 Lawrence H. Moe, "Bergamasca," *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel, 4th edn. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

4 Cohen, "The Bergamasca…," 397.

## Earlier Forms

Cohen traces the cultural roots of the term to "the comic figure of the *facchin bergamasco*—the Bergamascan porter, who migrated into the city in search of work," that city being Venice.[5] These porters, who came mainly from the town and surroundings of Bergamo, spoke a local and allegedly incomprehensible dialect of Italian, which became the subject of countless theatrical and poetical farces throughout the sixteenth century, seemingly since as early as 1518.[6]

Who really were these *facchini bergamaschi*? A curiously detailed description appears in Tomasso Garzoni's *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo.*[7] In the first edition (1585) of this encyclopedic work, which—like so many Renaissance scholarly writings—is a mixture of the historically informative and the venturesomely literary, almost five full pages are devoted to the *facchini*, more space than is granted to many other professions. Garzoni's wording is both sympathetic and depreciative: "mostly, at least, they are simple and good natured, [some are] coarse men, and [they all] were born in the Bergamo mountains."[8] He describes their trades, which seem to include porters, carriers, messengers, hard laborers, coal bearers, basket makers, and all kinds of servants. However, and unlike his other descriptions of various professions, Garzoni's essay about the *facchini* carries an unmistakable tone of irony. For example, the characteristics of the Bergamaschi are referred to as "being by nature simple and polite,"[9] and subsequently typified as "Bergamaschi with that coarse subtlety of theirs."[10] In benevolent spirits, Garzoni describes the *facchini*'s humble needs and happy demeanor: some soup and a piece of cheese make them happy and send them away singing and joking.[11] Their other pastimes are playing music, dancing, singing, acrobatics, trickery, etc., traits that would make them ideal candidates for the early Commedia dell'arte. He reports of the *facchini* being the target of mockery and ridicule because of their language, vocabulary, and accent. Still, the real meaning is stated openly: "it is virtually impossible to find more stupid people."[12] It is clear that Garzoni does not simply describe the *facchini*'s trade, but also mocks their simplicity. This is hardly surprising: the *Piazza* was published toward the end of a century, throughout which the figure of the Facchin Bergamasco crystallized

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5 Ibid.

6 Vito Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte*, in five volumes (Florence: W.F. Prizer, 1957), Vol. I, 158-59, quoted in Cohen (2002, 399).

7 Tommaso Garzoni, "De' Fachini, o Bastagi in Genere, & in specie de Brentadori, e Carbonari, Carriolari, & Cestarvoli," in *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni def mondo* (Venice: Gio. Battista Somasco, 1585). This book was so popular that it was translated almost immediately after its publication into French, Spanish, and German, and it clearly influenced cultural perceptions—in Italy and beyond—of the social phenomena it describes. It seems that almost every year, at least until 1665, a new Italian edition, or at least a reprint, was published. The editions are not identical: until his death, in 1589, it seems that Garzoni added annotations to his original work. The earliest edition I could consult is the second, from 1586, where the essay on the *facchini* appears on pp. 811–15).

8 "che la piu parte almeno sono assi semplici, & di buona natura, che huomini grossolani, & natti nelle motangne del Bergamasco," Garzoni, "De' Fachini…," 811.

9 "essendo per natura semplice et cortese," Garzoni, "De' Fachini…," 813.

10 "Bergamaschi col quella loro grossolana sottilezza," ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 "gente piu tonda quasi non si ritrova…," Garzoni, "De' Fachini…," 814.

into the paradigmatic model of "the Simpleton," a prototype ubiquitous in cultural history. Cohen quotes from an annotation that appears to have been added only in Garzoni's third edition (1587).[13] The full annotation reads: "The traits of the *fachino*, according to Fracastoro, are four. Coarse speech, foul clothes, uncivilized doing, and a lout's behavior."[14] This is a description of an entire social group, mostly, it seems, born in Bergamo and its environs, who, reputedly, are coarse, stupid, and rough menial workers. Then, as if a magic wand has been waved, they become a source of artistic inspiration and—apparently—the forerunners of the Commedia dell'arte, since a connection is drawn between the *facchini Bergamaschi* of Venice and the Venetian Commedia dell'arte's Arlecchino and Brighella—the respectively first and second *Zanni*, both believed to have their origins in Bergamo. How did this transformation happen?

## The Roots of a Reputation: Some Geography and History

Lombardy, where the city of Bergamo is located, lies at the center of northern Italy, extending from the southern Alps and scarred by deep valleys and rivers that run north-to-south into the fertile valley of the Po River. For many decades, the area served as a battleground between two major forces: the Republic of Venice in the east and the Duchy of Milan in the west. As usually happens in most politically disputed areas, Bergamo and its environs suffered from the outcomes of these battles, which did not stop with the conquest of the city and its annexation to the Republic of Venice in 1428. The city was located in an inhospitable mountainous region and, further, became a peripheral, disputed border area between the two main powers. Over the next 130 years, this dispute developed into the decades-long Italian Wars (1494–1559), in which all of northern Italy—including such larger cities as Padua and Brescia as well as the poorer Lombardian towns and villages of the northern valleys—became a military corridor. The area was ravaged by not only Italian Condottieri, hired by Milan, Ferrara, and Naples, but also by their French, Swiss, German, and Spanish allies and their own mercenaries, who left their

13 The edition of Garzoni's *Piazza* that I was able to consult, after the 1586 version, is from 1592. The page number, however, is identical to the one referenced by Cohen, who used the 1587 edition, which may imply, since Garzoni died in 1589, that the 1592 book is just a reprint of an earlier edition.

14 "Le proprietà del fachino [sic], secondo il detto del Fracastoro, son quattro. parlar grosso, vestire sporco, operatione incivile & attione da ruffiano." Tommaso Garzoni, "De' Fachini, o Bastagi in Genere, & in specie de Brentadori, e Carbonari, Carriolari, & Cestarvoli," in *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni def mondo* (Venice: Gio. Battista Somasco, 1587), 802. Garzoni's explanation that this comment is "according to Fracastoro" is telling. The reference is given, but the writer is not completely convinced of its truth given his own impressions of the *facchini*, which were probably more positive. Unfortunately, I could not find this quote in the writings of Girolamo Fracastoro (whose collected works were published posthumously in 1555). If indeed he wrote this phrase, it must have happened before his death in 1553, that is, more than thirty years before the first publication of Garzoni's *Piazza.* The years that passed in between these two dates included the years when the Bubonic plague raged in Venice (1570s), when the *facchini* provided much needed assistance in carrying the sick to the Lazzaretto Vecchio quarantine hospital, and burying the dead (see below). Garzoni's 1580s ironic rather than completely depreciative perception of the *facchini Bergamaschi* may have been influenced by his gratitude.

marks of pillage along with mainly unwanted pregnancies, engraved in the popular memory, its genes, and its literature.

It was only natural for folks from these poor, war-stricken areas of Lombardy to migrate in search of employment and sources of income. A 1553 report to the Senate of Venice, the capital of the republic, describes the large dimensions of these migratory waves. It reads that 90,000 Lombardian men left their homes in search of work. Different regions of Lombardy usually sent their men to designated locations: from the Seriana Valley to Naples, from the Gandino Valley to Rome, and so on. Venice, the capital of the Republic, was the city targeted by the men from the Brembana Valley, which ends near the city of Bergamo.[15] The Bergamasco men's exodus to the great city in search of employment and income was, as is characteristic of many immigration lodestones, very much needed, but also unwelcome.

In the recent memory of Venice's affluent citizens, Lombardy was marked not only as the barren backwater of the rich Republic's cosmopolitan capital, but also as a dangerous region of constant wars and pillage, whose inhabitants' newly-acquired loyalty was not to be taken for granted. The rural newcomers' coarse manners, strange dialects, and relative lack of education did not endear them to the proud Venetians. These "foreign workers," whose appearance and behavior were clearly different from those of the Venetian humanistic elite, did all kind of menial jobs, and particularly occupations of *facchini*—porters, a privilege won by a kind of political agreement that reserved such positions for men from Bergamo. These *facchini* worked at the Venetian ports, carrying merchandise and produce from ship to shore and vice-versa.[16] Condescending attitudes toward the *Bergamasche*, which included social rejection, were expressed also through a natural psycho-cultural phenomenon: jokes and parodies. Even the clear political loyalty that the *facchini* displayed, celebrating a Venetian victory over Milan in 1512,[17] did not suffice to spoil the pleasure of the prejudiced mockery of the *facchini bergamaschi*: "Bergamasche" thus became a generic name for peasants and the peasant culture. This nomenclature expanded to include all that "peasantry" meant, as the annotation duly added to Garzoni's description of the profession states: "parlar grosso, vestire sporco, operatione incivile & attione da ruffiano."

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15 Alessandra Mignatti, *La maschera e il viaggio: sull'origine dello Zanni* (Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 2007), 189-90. This massive migration can be traced back to as early as 1490 (See Mignatti, *La maschera…*, 28.)

16 Being "carriers," the Bergamasche were also those in charge of burying the bodies of those who died in the plague. The Lazzaretto Vecchio Project website (© 2014) presents photographs of reports and graffiti drawn by the *facchini* on the walls of the hospital that served as a quarantine center during the Bubonic plague of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (http://www.lazzarettonuovo.com/visita-lisola/, accessed 20 November 2015). A few years earlier, the *National Geographic News* reported the discovery of mass graves of plague victims found during excavations on the island, quoting Benedetti's report (sixteenth century): "Workers collected the dead and threw them in the graves all day without a break." http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/08/070829-venice-plague.html 29 August, 2007, accessed 20 November 2015.

17 Mignatti, *La Maschera…*, 192

## *Facchini* Dialects in Poetry and Theater

Many humanistic comedies in Latin (fifteenth century) and Italian (early sixteenth century) included comic figures of servants, *facchini*, and peasants. The presence of "dumb servants" in comedies, of course, is not an invention of the Italian Renaissance; such figures appear in the Roman comedies of Plautus, which were a main source of inspiration to Renaissance comedies. Parody of rural and foreign dialects as spoken by servants was juxtaposed with the urban Venetian of the *enamorati* who, as a rule, belonged to the higher echelons of society. After all, before political correctness deprived us of such simple pleasures, mocking rural (and foreign) dialects of the less educated used to be quite a common source of jocular glee. Orlando di Lasso's hugely popular musical joke is an excellent example. Probably composed when he traveled through northern Italy during the 1550s, a period that coincided with the last decade of the Italian Wars, "Matona mia cara" is a parody of a love song, allegedly sung by a German soldier to an Italian woman, in a bizarre patois of bad Italian and French, all pronounced with a heavy German accent. This linguistic amalgam, applied to a content that implies both cultural inadequacy and a considerably intense libido, is presented in the sophisticated context of a polyphonic composition, disclosing the quite common entertainment of the educated: mocking the uneducated.

Orlando's work is just a (late) tip of the iceberg: many poems and songs followed a similar vein. Peter Jordan describes a "literary form popular among the educated classes," called *satira contro il villano* (satire [against] of the peasant), satirical poems written by Academia poets using peasant dialects.[18] Jordan cites one such satirical poem—"La nencia de Barberino"—written by Lorenzo de Medici ("il Magnifico"). This poem, probably composed in 1468, displays a parodying mixture of simplistic rhyming and pseudo "peasant" vocabulary and imagery. Its first stanza is presented here: the content is simple (uncharacteristic of erudite Renaissance poems, which are rich in metaphors and poetic similes). The translation, unfortunately, does not do justice to the satirical use of pseudo-dialect vocabulary and style:

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|---|---|
| Ardo d'amore, e conviemme cantare | I burn of love, and it suits me to sing |
| per una dama che me strugge el cuore, | For a lady that pierced my heart, |
| ch'ogni otta ch'i' la sento ricordare, | That whenever I feel it recall, |
| el cor me brilla e par ch'egli esca fuore. | My heart sparkles and seems to burst out. |
| Ella non truova de bellezze pare, | Her beauty cannot find equal, |
| cogli occhi gitta fiaccole d'amore; | With eyes like torches of love; |
| i' sono stato in città e 'n castella | I stay in the city and in castles |
| e mai ne vidi ignuna tanto bella.[19] | And have not seen anyone so beautiful. |

18 Peter Jordan, *The Venetian Origins of the Commedia dell'Arte* (London: Routledge, 2014), 25.
19 The text is copied from a website of Lorenzo de' Medici's poetry: http://ilmagnifico.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/ilmagnifico_la_nencia_da_barberino.html, accessed 29 November 2015. The poems on the website give as reference: *Lorenzo De' Medici—Opere*, a cura di Tiziano Zanato (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1992).

Among many other examples, Pandolfi presents a no less ridiculous poem by Antonio Salvazo, composed in 1512 in Venice. Written in an almost incomprehensible mixture of Italian dialect, generously sparkled with pidgin-Latin and some Slavic words, it describes an encounter between "a slave and a *facchino*," joyously mocking foreign speech and rural Italian dialect.[20]

The role of the rural simpleton soon weaved its way into urban street comedy scenes, which were both influenced by and contributed to quattrocento humanist comedies. Examples abound in humanist comedies such as Ugolino Pisani's *Repetitio Magistri Zanini Coqui* (1435), a Latin farce satirizing academic traditions by presenting an academic laurel coronation ceremony of the cook Zanini, or his *Philogenia and Epiphebus* (1437/8).[21] The name of the "stupid peasant" figure in the *Philogenia* is "Gobius," while the ignorant, pretentious cook in the *Repetitio* is "Zanini." Viti explains the name as a dialect derivative of the "normal form" "Gianinus," a first reference—albeit in an early humanist comedy in Latin—to "*Zanni*," which in fact is one of the parodic references of various rural Lombard dialects, developed into the servant figures of the Commedia dell'arte, and later associated with the topos of "the Fool."[22] Viti discusses Pisani's attentive choice of parodic names that evoke various cities, and of vocabulary, contrasting long, convoluted "academic" phrases with very short, simplistic ones, and macaronic language, thus alluding, albeit in a Latin text, to "different" speech styles of various Italian locales.[23]

The sixteenth century introduced comedies into Italian. Quoting Domenico Merlini's *Saggio di ricerca sulla satira contro il villano* (1894), Winifred Smith says that the various kinds of rustic plays containing satire of the peasant—*frottole, contrasti*, etc.—were uncaringly called "vilaneschi," "alla bergamasca" and "alla facchinesca," that is, in "rural," "Bergamo's" and "facchini's" styles. These simple little pieces, often called "raggionimento" or "dialogo" often were recited at banquets throughout central and northern Italy: Florence, Brescia, Ferrara, Modena, Mantua, Padua, and, of course, Venice, probably with some of their jokes improvised. The Venetian poet Anton Francesco Grazzini ("il Lasca"; 1503–84), in his *Tutti i trionfo carri mascherate o Canti*, indirectly describes such a short presentation, part of which is printed below, where the

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20 "Contrasto fra Schiavone e Facchino: A Liza fusina a-ccaso mi retrovai: / echo abrazarsi un schiavo e un fachino,/ basarse insieme con dolce destine,/ de bever infra lhor parlono assai,/ —Chachosto I brati netaustu mai/ ochiospiti malvasia gospodina/ poi diavamo sta dobro i maitino/ due chacho millaro si de mai./ —O de! que sarà quest ho compagnoo?/ a-ne no t'intendi, audigi, s-ti no vegni/ chen no pagà un grosa de malvaxia./ —Bogme brati duze odde mi lagnoo/ vorem mi bif. –Dobro-Intro San Luxia./ li parvina hourasi. —No me tegni la ma che-t fo pur segni/ da bif, s-tu vo vegni miegi qua deter/ ch'i to zanzum mi fa schopissa el veter." In Vito Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte*, Vol. 1 (Florence: W.F. Prizer, 1957), 95-96.

21 Grund gives this date, but Viti dates it earlier, in 1432/3, and the *Repetitio* in 1435. In any case, these two comedies are from the 1430s: a very early date, given that the first Venetian conquest of Bergamo was in 1428. Gary Robert Grund, trans. and ed. *Humanist Comedies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), viii; Paolo Viti, ed. *Due Commedie Umanistiche Pavesi: Ianus Sacerdos; Repetitio Magistri Zanini Coqui* (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1982), 88 and 106, n. 26.

22 Viti, *Due Commedia…*, 90-98.

23 Ibid., 103-106.

*Zanni* are related to the Bergamaschi and are opposed to the old, Venetian Pantalone, who is called, maybe with an ironic wink toward the Florentine court, “il Magnifico.”[24]

**Canto di Zanni e di Magnifichi**
Facendo il Bergamasco, e’l Veneziano,
N’andiamo in ogni parte,
E’l recitar commedie è la nostr’ arte.
Noi, ch’oggi per Firenze attorno andiamo,
Come vedete, Messer Benedetti,
E Zanni tutti siamo
Recitatori eccellenti, e perfetti:
(…)
Mentre, che noi facciamo oggi la mostra,
Noi siam disposti di parer Toscani;
Ma nella stanza nostra
Sarem poi Bergamaschi, e Veneziani. [25]

**The song of the *Zanni* and the *Magnifichi***
Playing the Bergamascan and the Venetian,
We wander through every region,
And reciting comedies is our art,
We, who today are heading toward Florence,
As you can see, Mr. Benedetti,
We are all *Zanni*
Excellent, perfect reciters [actors].
(…)
While we perform our show today
We are willing to look [as if we are] from Tuscany;
But within our own quarters
We are Bergamascans and Venetians.

The later development of the *facchino Bergamasco* into the two *Zanni* figures of Arlecchino and Brighella may owe itself to the “stupid slave” and “clever slave” prototypes in Plautus’s Roman comedies from the third century BCE, and even to Menander’s comic “slaves” and “cooks” in his Greek comedies, dated to the fourth century BCE. Their evolution into the Italian humanist comedy, however, incorporated traits of the contemporary *facchini*, thus importing into the erudite fifteenth-century’s dramatic writing their marked rural idiosyncrasies, accents, dialects, and manners of Venetian servants.

Comedies involving Bergamasco servants and soldiers were omnipresent during the first decades of the sixteenth century, that is, *before* the first appearances of the Commedia dell’arte. These characters, as a rule, spoke in dialects and/or in a macaronic language. Richard Andrews devotes a whole section of his book to the multilingual comedies of the second quarter of the cinquecento, in which the Bergamasque dialect plays a major part. In particular, he mentions the comedies of Andrea Calmo (1510–71), whose works display a mixture of Venetian, Bergamasque, Pavano, Greghesco (Venetian spoken by a Greek!), Slavonian, German, and Saracen.[26] However, theater did something

24 It is a well known fact that the first nomenclature of the Commedia dell’arte’s Pantalone was “il Magnifico,” representing the rich elite of Venetian society. My comment concerning a possible connection to Florence’s Medici family is just an assumption, which might deserve further study.

25 Anton Francesco Grazzini, *Tutti I trionfi, carri, mascherate o canti carnascialeschi andati per Firenze dal tempo del Magnifico Lorenzo de’ Medici fino all’anno 1559* (Florenze: ex museo florentino, 1559), 658-60. Smith provides a partial (slightly different) translation of a larger portion: Winifred Smith, *The Commedia Dell’Arte* (1912, 1964, reprint New York: Columbia University Press, 1980; also issued online), 44-45.

26 Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance* Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 144-54; see in particular p. 149.

to these dialects. Peter Jordan speaks about "stage Bergamasco"—the mixture of Italian and an imaginary language that *sounds like* Bergamasco—to balance comprehensibility and parody.[27] Bernardo Dovizi, better known as Cardinal Bibbiena, wrote the comedy *La Calandria* (or *Calandra*) in 1513, where a peasant speaks in a kind of Bergamasco dialect. Later, the comedies of Angelo Beolco (1502–42), known as "Il Ruzzante [or Ruzante]," gained great fame. His *La Moschetta* (composed between 1527 and 1531) a bitter satire on the life of peasants during the Italian Wars, written in a mixture of Paduan and Lombard dialects, is still performed quite frequently.

## Why Bergamo?

The exclusive reference to Bergamo as the source of the "simpleton" figures has puzzled more than a few scholars. After all, Venice's inhabitants included slaves and servants from a variety of places. Fifteenth-century comedies mock prototypes of rural peasants—from Bergamo, Padua, and other places—as much as other prototypes, such as the "negromante" (wizard) and the "tedesco" (German) figures. The reference to Bergamo, however, seems to have materialized as a particular favorite for descriptions of simplicity and even stupidity, with no apparent objective reason, leaving ample room for speculation.[28] Peter Jordan explains the Venetian choice of Bergamo as the provenance of the *Zanni* through reference to the geography of the place: "The towns from which they traditionally hail—Venice in the case of the Magnifico, and Bergamo for the Zanni—were at opposite ends of Venice's mainland territory, the so-called Terraferma, and hence two contrasting parts of the same whole."[29] Christopher Carlsmith mentions three reasons, the first two more convincing than the third. The first reason he gives is the poor socioeconomic status of the region. The peripheral town of Bergamo, just on the western border of the Republic of Venice, from which the menial workers arrived in Venice, provided the extreme model necessary for the prototype.[30] The second reason is that the Bergamasco dialect is, indeed, very unclear and difficult to understand, and thus an excellent target of mockery.[31] His third and last reason is that the provenance of the Commedia dell'arte's characters, which is Bergamo, influenced this perception. This last reason is less sound. Types and characters in the theater, particularly in satirical presentations, are based on some kind of cultural reality, and not just from nowhere. So, the fact that both Arlecchino and Brighella are "from Bergamo" means that Bergamo already had a reputation of being the home of simpletons.

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27 Peter Jordan, *The Venetian Origins of the Commedia dell'Arte* (London: Routledge, 2014), 33-34.

28 Carlsmith devotes a whole book to proving that the education in Bergamo was, in fact, of a high level, and that its inhabitants were offered a wealth of varied educational opportunities. Christopher Carlsmith, *A Renaissance Education: Schooling in Bergamo and the Venetian Republic, 1500-1650* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

29 Jordan, *The Venetian Origins…*, 29.

30 Carlsmith, *A Renaissance Education…*, 3, 6. See also p. 63.

31 Ibid., p. 3.

## The Bergamasca Dance: Historical Fact or Cultural Perception?

It would be fascinating to get to know and study the music that the *facchini bergamasche* actually sang, played, and danced to, but there is no evidence of such music except for the very fact that they did sing, play, and dance. Common sense suggests that the *facchini* simply sang, danced, and played whatever music was popular at that time and place—probably a mixture of *frottole* and *saltarelli*. However, all the documents are art interpretations and scholarly assumptions, all later than mid-sixteenth century.

The Bergamasca was defined above as being rooted in folk dance. However, while there is plenty of evidence of other Medieval and Renaissance folk dances, such as the Estampie, the Saltarello, the Passemezzo, or the Carole—to mention just the most popular ones—there seems to be no reference to the Bergamasca, either as a dance or as a tune, until the second half of the sixteenth century. There are reports of *Zanni* dancing, mainly during carnival celebrations and in the intermezzi of theatrical presentations, but none of these dances is specifically called "a Bergamasca."[32] In fact, if a dance name is mentioned at all in relation to *Zanni*, it is more often than not the Moresca.[33] Indeed, folk dances called Bergamasca can still be seen today, but they are not from Bergamo; rather, they reflect a cultural perception of "how the people of Bergamo probably dance."[34] References to the Bergamasca as a dance are later, but even Shakespeare's reference to a "Bergomask" dance, as early as the end of the sixteenth century, clearly is constructed on a reputation connecting the term to "the simpleton" rather than being based on any dance familiar to the Bard and his audience.[35] Ungarelli, for example, wrote about the Bergamasco dance in 1894, reflecting turn-of-the-century post-Romantic perceptions of Bergamo and the Bergamasque; his "Bergamasco" is a folk dance from Emilia-Romagna, near Bologna, probably reflecting Bolognese disparaging opinions of the Bergamo—or peasant—people. For example, the Bergamasco described as "ballo popolare staccato dell'Emilia-Romagna" in a folk dance festival in Bologna starts with the dancers frolicking backwards in a circle, followed by the men jumping in a quite acrobatic manner—both gestures pointing to a perception of an imaginary *Zanni* show rather than a historic folk dance.[36] Particularly when compared with the wealth of information about satires of "bergamasco" (or Bergamasco-like) dialects, the lack of reference to a supposedly popular folk dance is curious. Moreover, the fact that poetry and simple ditties called "Bergamasca" exist in manuscripts of the early sixteenth century, while there are no records of the Bergamasca as a dance strongly suggest that the Bergamasca dance is *a cultural unit*, which has no actual existing counterpart in historical evidence. It

32 Dance in the theater is mentioned by Andrews, 37 and 110.

33 The Moresca is specified in Andrews, 33 and in Jordan, 65.

34 The event took place in July 2012. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQvssK1dRQ4 (accessed 30 November 2015). This type of "cultural referral" brings to mind Nijinsky's choreography (and Stravinsky's music!) for *The Rite of Spring*, expressing a cultural perception of "The Primitive" rather than a historical reflection of it.

35 The quotation from Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream*, Act V, when Bottom asks Theseus: "Will it please you to see the epilogue, or to hear a Bergomask dance between two of our company?" is given by virtually every study of the Bergamasca.

36 Gaspare Ungarelli, *Le vecchie danze italiane ancora in uso nella provincia bolognese* (Rome: Arnaldo Forni, 1894), 30.

is a topical invention satirizing the *perception* of the *Bergamaschi*, a kinetic reference to the cultural unit of *The Dancing Peasant*.[37]

Alessandra Mignatti cites Castoldi's study of Bergamo, where the location is referred to within "a sort of mental geography of the fantastic (…) a region similar to a mythical Orient, extraordinarily remote."[38] It might be reasonable, therefore, to seek the roots of the Bergamasca not in rural folk traditions but rather in the *cultural perceptions* of Bergamo and its people by their contemporary urban society, perceptions that affected fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries' descriptions and references in poetry, theater, and music.[39]

## The Bergamasca: A Musical Topic of Simplicity

The same approach applies to music: the musical Bergamasca is here interpreted as *a musical topic based on a cultural perception rather than on real folk tradition*. The idea is not new. Raymond Monelle developed it in his analysis of three musical topics. His work proves that a musical topic can—and does—develop from *ideas* presented in literary and art sources: "A musical topic needs never to have existed. It needs to exist as a cultural unit."[40] The musical Bergamasca, as it appears in the music of Frescobaldi and, later, J.S. Bach, more than two hundred years after the great *facchini* migration from Bergamo to Venice, is observed here, therefore, as resulting from an *imaginary construction* that correlates with a specific cultural perception. The "music of the peasant" is supposed to be simple, symmetrical, and repetitive. Such a construct clearly contradicts the aesthetic ideal of high Renaissance music, which aimed at inspiration, inventiveness, and refinement, and was expressed through sophisticated instrumental forms, such as the Ricercare or the Fantasia. These highly ornamented, free-form compositions, exercise a hypnotizing effect on the willing human ear, just like the mesmerizing power that a moving light-dot has on a cat. Richard Taruskin quotes a 1555 source that describes such a state of rapturous listening to the lutenist Francesco da Milano, who played "with such ravishing skill" until his hearers "remained deprived of all senses save that of hearing, as if the spirit, having abandoned all the seats of the senses, had retired to the ears," and were left with "as much astonishment … as if we had

37 This kind of topic appears frequently in art (e.g. Breughel's feasts) and also throughout history (Schumann's *Fröhlicher Landmann*, Bach's *Bauern Kantate*, Haydn's Minuets, Beethoven's dances, to mention just a few).

38 Alberto Castoldi, *L'altra Bergamo* (Bergamo: Lubrina, 1997), 46, quoted in Alessandra Mignatti, *La maschera e il viaggio: sull'origine dello Zanni* (Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 2007), 184 ("…una sorta di geografia mentale del fantastic (…) una regione assimilata ad un Oriente mitico e straordinariamente lontano").

39 An excellent survey and analysis of a similar socio-cultural process is described in Marina Ritzarev's "Between the Field and the Salon," in *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations—in Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle*, ed. Esti Sheinberg (Ashgate, 2012), 35-46.

40 Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). See, for example, his discussions of Monteverdi's madrigals (135 ff.), his *Orfeo* (220 ff.), and Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum* (209 ff.).

been elevated by an ecstatic transport of some divine frenzy."[41] Such a description represents an aesthetic ideal that is strongly tied to an aural experience that cannot be based on simple or repetitious patterns.

Within such a cultural context, the musical topic of the Bergamasca might have served as an index to the opposite kind of music, that of the rural, folk, simplistic lowbrow peasantry of the Italian Renaissance. The first musical Bergamasche, then, would not be folk dances but rather *musical satires on an imaginary entity rooted in a social phenomenon*.

If this assumption is correct, there should be a clear difference between the earliest pieces called "Bergamasca" (or *alla Bergamasca*) and other contemporary compositions. A tentative inspection of the earliest known composition bearing such a title, the "Saltarello dito il Bergamasco" in Gorzanis's *Il Terzo Libro de Intabolatura di Liuto*, presents interesting facts.[42] While there is no resemblance whatsoever to the familiar, simple Bergamasca tune of the late seventeenth century, the transcription of this "Bergamasco" shows a structure significantly different from that of other works in the same collection. Most of these lute tablaturas show remarkable inventiveness: although the general structure is, usually, of variations, hardly any bar is repeated literally. A good example for this kind of composition is, for example, the first composition: "Pass e mezzo antico." This work, in six movements, is a miracle of musical variety. Its two movements transcribed here (Figures 1a and 1b), show no repetition, in spite of being structured over a quite simple four-bar melo-harmonic scheme.

**Figure 1a** Giacomo Gorzanis, "Pass e mezzo antico: primo" from *Il Terzo Libro de Intabolatura di Liuto* (1564)

41 Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 1: *Music from the Earliest Notations to the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; rep. 2010), 626.

42 Giacomo Gorzanis, *Il Terzo Libro de Intabolatura di Liuto* (Venice: Antonio Gardano, 1564), No. 12.

**Figure 1b** Giacomo Gorzanis, "Pass e mezzo antico: seconda parte" from *Il Terzo Libro de Intabolatura di Liuto* (1564)

In this, it follows the aesthetic ideals expressed above—of constant inventiveness and inspiration. The "dito il Bergamasco," however, is completely different: after a two-bar introduction, a short musical phrase is repeated five times, all with an almost identical opening bar. A longer phrase follows and then repeats, leading to the end of the movement: a disproportionally long closing phrase, sounding as if someone with very little inventiveness is trying to catch up and impress his audience toward the end of his composition (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Giacomo Gorzanis, "Satarello dito il Bergamasco," from *Il Terzo Libro de Intabolatura di Liuto* (1564)

These pieces are not based on any folk tune: they are satirical inventions of Venetian musicians imitating in music the Venetian, sixteenth-century concept of illiterate peasantry: many repetitions and a pretentious ending.[43] Within a context that rejects literal repetition, the exaggerated repetition of a pattern cannot but be satirical.

Later in the century, the burlesque extends its exaggerated traits into a simpler structure, where even the notes in each of the four-bar melodies are squarely presented and repeated. Then, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Cohen masterfully portrays, composers take this satirical presentation as a given and, using musical irony,

43 Pretentiousness is another vice mocked in the Renaissance and the Baroque (think of Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*). In the Commedia dell'Arte, the pretentious characters of the doctor and the lawyer are often mocked.

rework it into a sophisticated, masterly virtuosic piece. In this, I believe that music went through a similar process as the theater, from popular burlesque to more sophisticated ironic expressions, from mocking imitations of dialects to sophisticated double—and triple!—structures of opposing figures, albeit all of them "Bergamaschi": Brighella the simpleton, Arlecchino the resourceful one, and Pierrot — the dreamer.

The historical process of the Bergamasca seems thus to follow a pendulum movement. Within a sophisticated context of musically inspired virtuoso "seeking," where repetitions are perceived as lacking, a mocking satire exposes the repetitive, unimaginative "dito il Bergamasco," strongly suggesting that the early Bergamascas are cultural descriptions of the speech, songs, dances and plays of imagined people from an imagined Bergamo, a fact that, culturally speaking, does not make the topic less real.[44]

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44 This is, actually, an approach very similar to that of Britten's "Bergomask," in his *Midsummer's Night Dream*, and Mendelssohn, in his "Rüpeltanz" at the end of his own incidental music to Shakespeare's play.

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