Review

Singing Dante: The Literary Origins of Cinquecento Monody, by Elena Abramov-van Rijk. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014.

In her *Parlar cantando*,[1] Elena Abramov-van Rijk presented her intriguing findings concerning "The Practice of Reciting Verses in Italy from 1300 to 1600" (as the subtitle of her book reads)—an important contribution to unveiling the mystery of "the unwritten tradition" and disclosing the roots of *trecento* music. In her present book, the author goes a step further, endeavoring "to explore and understand the earliest pre-operatic phases of the crystallization of the *stile recitative*" (p. 10).

The author's point of departure is an experiment carried out by Vincenso Galilei in around 1580, in which he sang an excerpt from Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the presence of the members of the Florentine Camerata. This event is recorded in a letter written in 1634, sent by Pietro de Bardi (son of the founder of the Camerata, Giovanni de Bardi) to Giovan Battista Doni, at the request of the latter, who incorporated it in the new version of his *Trattato della musica scenica*. It says: "Galilei […] was the first to compose melodies for one voice only, having performed that passionate Lament of Count Ugolino written by Dante, which he himself sang sweetly, accompanied by a consort of viols." Pietro de Bardi also records, tongue in cheek, the reactions of some of the members of the Camerata: "[…] jealous persons were not lacking, who, green with envy, at first even laughed at him" (pp. 5-6). Abramov-van Rijk convincingly defines this excerpt, not yet studied in depth by musicologists, as a documentation of the first experiment in singing in *stile recitativo*.

> To earlier attempts to reconstruct antique practices, one should add perhaps the musical settings of Horatian odes in humanistic circles of the 15th century, especially at Marsilio Ficino's Platonic academies. Ficino himself was proud, as James Haar tells us, of his ability to sing Orphic hymns to his own accompaniment on the *lira*.[2] Haar also mentions a Sapphic ode on planetary virtues and powers, set as a quantitatively correct duo by Gaffurius and published in his *De harmonia* (1518), and Glareanus's inclusion of a number of monophonic settings of Horatian texts in his *Dodecachordon* (ii, 1547), suggesting that successive stanzas ought to be embellished and altered.[3]

These are Latin texts, but one should also mention an additional source that predates Galilei's undertaking: Alfonso dalla Viola's music to Act III, scene iii of Agostino Beccari's pastoral play *Il sacrificio*, performed in Ferrara in 1554. This is a dialogue between a priest, accompanying himself on the *lira*, and a chorus of shepherds. The priest recites the text syllabically using only 1 to 5 pitches, paying attention to declamation and elongating accented syllables, monosyllabic words, and caesuras.[4]

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[1] Bern: Peter Lang, 2009.
[2] James Haar, "Ode (ii) 2: Humanistic Settings," in *Grove Music Online*.
[3] Ibid.

These are also the principles of the scansion of Ugolino's Lament as detailed by the author in chapter 8 of her book. A comparison between the two pieces, however, is revealing: Beccari's hendecasyllable and settenario lines prompt dalla Viola to a stiff and schematic musical setting, while Dante's hendecasyllables, as Abramov-van Rijk's analysis demonstrates (Galilei's music, alas, has not been preserved), are "elastic and variable. […] Dante's verses are harsh and irregular from the viewpoint of prosody, as if the words are constantly clashing and bumping, sometimes creating an impression that there are no verses at all" (p. 115).

Alfred Einstein in one of his early articles, and again in his monumental *The Italian Madrigal*, referred to the scarcity of Dante's texts in musical settings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He blamed Pietro Bembo's famous verdict, which "peremptorily determined the literary taste of his time" by claiming that only Petrarch could serve as a model for poets, "for he had avoided all those '*voci rozze e disonorate*,' those 'rough and inelegant expressions,' of which Dante had been guilty."[5]

Abramov-van Rijk does not take this explanation, generally accepted by musicologists, at its face value, and suspects that "a more substantial reason for Cinquecento composers to ignore Dante's poetry" must have existed (p. 23). After scrutinizing an array of critical discourses by sixteenth-century literati, she overturns Einstein's theory, suggesting that it was, rather, "the exalted position of Dante's *Comedy* in the hierarchy of contemporary Italian literature that caused Cinquecento composers to keep their distance from it." In addition, and relating to the problem of the *Comedy*'s genre (epic poem or comedy?)—an ongoing debate between thirteenth- to sixteenth-century writers—she concludes that, in the sixteenth century, "most writers accepted the idea that Dante's *Comedy* was an epic poem, ranging it from a 'normative' epic to a much superior modification of this genre, as a philosophic and theological poem" (p. 38).

In choosing Count Ugolino's Lament from Canto XXXIII, lines 4-75, Galilei turned to "the most pitiful Canto in the *Inferno*," to quote Robert Hollander.[6] In a later study, Hollander claims that, in this excerpt, "the words *piangere*, *lagrimare*, *doglia*, and *doloroso* occur a total of thirteen times."[7] The plaintive character of Ugolino's Lament might have been one of the reasons for Galilei's choice; we learn from the above-quoted letter by Pietro de Bardi to Giovan Battista Doni that, in response to the negative reactions to Galilei's enterprise, he also "set to music in the same style a part of the Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremia, which was sung in devout company" (p. 6), and apparently did not arouse any objection.

In her previous study, Abramov-van Rijk revealed a fourteenth-century use of the term *parlar cantando*, which later appeared in slight variation in the debates of the Camerata. In the present book, she likewise points to a Cinquecento use of a term—"monody"—that preceded that of the early Seicento, although we are reminded that,

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[4] Wolfgang Osthoff, *Theatergesang und darstellende Musik in der italienischen Renaissance* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1969), Vol. 1, 312-14, and Vol. 2 (music), 84-89; Jessie Ann Owens, "Music in the Early Ferrarese Pastoral: A Study of Beccari's 'Il Sacrificio, '" *Il teatro italano del Rinascimento, a cura di Maristella de Panizza Lorch* (Milan: Edizioni di Communità 1980), 583-99.

[5] Alfred Einstein, "Dante, on the Way to the Madrigal," *The Musical Quarterly* 25 (1939): 155; see also *The Italian Madrigal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1972^2), 201-202.

[6] Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's 'Commedia'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), 306.

[7] *Idem*, *Inferno* XXXIII, 37-74: "Ugolino's Importunity," *Speculum* 59 (1984): 549 n. 3.

according to Nigel Fortune and Tim Carter, this term was in any case "a product of modern scholarship" with the exception of the precedent of Giovan Battista Doni.[8]

All these terms—*Parlar cantando* (Sommacampagna, 1384), *Recitar cantando* (Cavalieri, 1600), Cantar recitando (Pirrotta's coinage), and *Monodia* (Mazzoni, 1587)—stand on the fine border between song and speech, a problem that seems to lie at the core of Abramov-van Rijk's researches, and that of course was fervently discussed in the meetings of the Camerata and the Accademia degli alterati. Trying to reconstruct a part of Galilei's presentation—a bold and challenging undertaking—the author discusses the varying musical modes that the 75-line-long text might have passed through, the melodic range Galilei used, and the quality of his own voice. It comes as no surprise to find her concluding: "It is quite possible that Galilei's singing of Dante moved between the range of poetic recitation and true singing" (p. 103).

True to Abramov-van Rijk's interest and deep acquaintance with the prosodic aspect of music, the two appendices of the book complement the scansion of lines 4 to 12 of Ugolino's Lament (pp. 113-15 and 117), where she visualizes "the latent rhythmic plan of this excerpt" (p. 116). She analyzes the metric scansion of the poetic texts of Rinuccini (the prologue to Peri's *Euridice*, 1600) and Strozzi (Monteverdi's *Possente spirto* from his *Orfeo*, 1607), discussing the coordination between the structure of their texts and their musical setting.

After all the fascinating scholarly discussion, based on every available snippet of information and a vast arsenal of literary sources, we are still left wondering: was Galilei's enterprise a musical one, or should it be judged more as an example of "the art of recited verses according to the rules of scansion" (p. 126)? As the music itself has not been preserved, we can only conclude with John Keats: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter."

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[8] Nigel Fortune/ Tim Carter, "Monody," in *Grove Music Online*.