

IN A MUSICAL GARDEN Music of the *Trecento*

The music on our program falls within the period generally referred to as the *trecento*: literally, the 1300's but stylistically the period extending approximately from 1350 to 1420. *Trecento* music describes specifically the work of Italian composers, but falls within the larger context of the *Ars Nova* style found across Europe. The terms *Italian Ars Nova* and *trecento* are indeed sometimes used interchangeably.

Two aspects of this style that set it apart from the older style - *Ars Antiqua* - are the use of texts written in the vernacular language, and the focus on secular subjects. It is not surprising, then, that this period in music corresponds closely to the time of the Italian writers Boccaccio (1313-1375) and Petrarch (1303-1374). In fact, the literary aspect of these compositions sits neatly in the early Renaissance world while the music is usually considered to be the end of the Medieval period.

Among the musical figures of the *trecento*, the composer we know as Francesco Landini (1325-1397) stands alone in terms of his reputation during his lifetime and the longevity of his popularity. A composer, poet, organist, philosopher and instrument builder, Francesco moved among the most important circles of Florentine humanists, as described in texts from Giovanni da Prato's *Il Paradiso deglia Alberti* that constitute our narration. Blinded in childhood by smallpox, he was known during his lifetime as Francesco the Blind (*Francesco il Cieco*) or Francesco the organist (*Francesco degli Organi*). His association with the Landini family is no longer accepted by scholars, but the name has stuck and has been eternally attached to a harmonic formula the composer frequently employed at the ends of phrases - the "Landini cadence."

The fame and popularity of Francesco is evidenced by the fact that more than 150 of his compositions (all vocal) survive, many of them in multiple manuscript sources from the 14th and 15th centuries. One of the most extensive of these manuscripts is the richly illustrated Squarcialupi Codex (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Med. Pal. 87) from which we have the charming portrait of Francesco with an *organetto* (below). Francesco probably wrote most of the song texts himself. The frequent references to "eyes" (*occhi*) are particularly poignant given his blindness.



More than 90 percent of Francesco's surviving compositions - and the great majority of all compositions from the height of the *trecento* - are in the *ballata* form. The text is in five stanzas, of

which the first and last (the *ripresa*) are identical in text and musical setting (A). The second and third stanzas (the *piedi*) are both set to new musical material (b). The *volta* or fourth stanza (a) returns to the musical material of the *ripresa*. Hence the musical form can be described as AbbaA. This form is illustrated by the following piece from our program, *Non avrà ma' pietà*, which is given below in Italian and English along with copies from two of the existing manuscript sources of this *ballata*. To acquaint yourself with this form, listen to one of the many YouTube recordings of *Non avrà ma' pietà*, such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N626JzR7EMU>.

[A] Non avrà ma' pietà questa mie donna,
Se tu non faj, amore,
Ch'ella sia certa del mio grand' ardore.

Never will my lady have pity
if you, Love,
do not convince her of my great passion.

[b] S'ella sapesse quanta pena porto per onestà
celata nella mente,

If only she knew how much pain I carry in
my mind, hidden for the sake of modesty,

[b] sol per la sua belleça, chè conforto d'altro
non prende l'anima dolente.

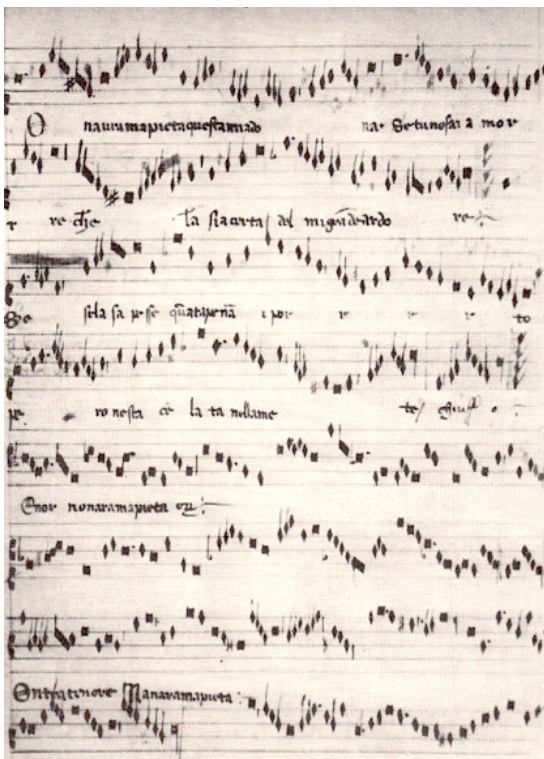
due to her beauty alone, for my sorrowful
soul takes no comfort in anything else.

[a] Forse da lej sarebbono in me spente
Le fiamme che nel core
Di giorno in giorno acrescono 'l dolore.

Perhaps she would extinguish
those flames which seem
day by day to increase my suffering.

[A] Non arà ma' pietà . .

Never will my lady have pity . . .



Two other forms of vocal compositions are included in our program The *caccia* - such as *Tosto che l'alba* - is a lively canonic composition with subject matter usually referring to the hunting or feasting. The *madrigal* - a form that saw a resurgence of popularity toward the end of the *trecento* - consists of a repeated verse section followed by a refrain (*ritornello*) in contrasting meter. The subject matter of madrigals was often pastoral, as with *Alba colonba con sua verde rama* from our program.

In addition to the large number of vocal compositions from the *trecento*, a more limited number of purely instrumental pieces survive, mostly in the form of dances. The *saltarello* describes a dance with a particular jumping step, *saltare* meaning to jump. Some of the dances appear in slow-fast pairs in which the fast half may be referred to as a *rotta* or *trotto*. The meaning of these terms is obscure but they presumably describe fast-paced dance 'routes' or forms. Apart from dances, the largest collection of purely instrumental compositions from this period is contained within the so-called *Faenza codex*, assembled in the early 15th century. Many of the pieces in this collection are instrumental elaborations on vocal music. *De tout flors* (after a vocal piece by Machaut) and *Constantia* (based on an anonymous French *virelai*) come from the *Faenza codex*.

By the beginning of the 15th century the classic *trecento* style was giving way to the *ars subtilior*, or "more subtle" style and the geographic center of gravity was shifting north to the Netherlands. Two compositions on our program - *Alba colonba con sua verde rama* by Bartolino da Padova and *Leggiadra donna* (performed instrumentally) by Johannes Ciconia - illustrate the growing harmonic and rhythmic complexity typical of this style.

As compared to much of the earlier Medieval music, we have considerable information about how to perform *trecento* music. Advances in musical notation had made it possible for composers and their scribes to precisely specify pitch and rhythm. But much still remains unknown, and modern day performers are faced with a number of choices and decisions to be made.

For instance, the surviving *ballate* exist in settings for one, two or three voices. In some cases, we find both two-part and three-part settings of the same piece. In the multi-voice settings, the text is sometimes fully noted in all parts, while in others the text may only be in one part. We cannot know whether it was intended for all parts to be sung or whether instruments took some of the un-texted parts. And if instruments were used, which ones? The instruments we will use in our performance - fiddles, lute, winds, organetto and percussion - are all depicted in Medieval illustrations, but we have little other than their constraints of range and technical capabilities to tell us how they were employed.



Some of the same uncertainty exists with regard to voice types. Essentially all of the texts are written from a male point of view (at least in the prevailing heteronormative context!) although there are certainly literary references to women singing secular music, and some of the ranges would be high for adult male voices. But most of the music lies in a range that is high for modern tenors and low for modern altos. Our approach has been to find pieces that “work” for our singers rather than to transpose the music far from the originally notated pitch. But that is only one approach among many that can be justified for the sake of bringing this ancient music to life.

Finally, if you know any of this music from recordings, you are likely to encounter things in our performance that sound like “wrong” notes; i.e., different than what you’ve heard before. The use of musical *ficta* (the sharpening or flattening of a notated pitch) is a widely accepted practice based on what we know about medieval music theory; however, the application to individual examples is inherently problematic and often the subject of debate among performers and musicologists. Taken to an extreme, the application of *ficta* can make this music sound more “correct” to our modern ears - that is, more like our current system of major and minor keys. We have tried to be judicious in our choices, allowing the music to sound dissonant and even foreign at times. After all, more than 600 years have passed and we wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that things sounded drastically different then.

In the end, our aim is not to re-create the sounds of the *trecento*, but to honor this remarkable musical era with performances that are informed and respectful while still being accessible and entertaining to modern audiences. After all, those singing and dancing in a medieval garden were surely more intent on enjoying themselves and their music than on making art for the ages! We hope you will enjoy with us this 21st century exploration of the sounds of the *trecento*.

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