

Bronzino's Lute Player: Music and Youth Culture in Renaissance Florence

VICTOR COELHO



In Agnolo Bronzino's portrait of a *Young Man with a Lute* in the Uffizi painted in Florence around 1532–34, an unidentified youth dressed austerely in black sits in a small, dark room with a statuette visible to his side and, more discreetly, the pegbox of a lute's neck leaning against his right thigh (Fig. 1).¹ Even though the instrument is almost entirely concealed, it is still a prominent part of the composition. The boy grasps it firmly with his right hand, but shows apprehension about playing it – an echo, perhaps, of Baldassare Castiglione's warning (through Federico Fregoso) that musicians should refrain from “showing off what they know...and [playing] in the presence of common people and a large crowd”.² The painting, devoid of any others listening or observing, conveys a certain privacy of space and therefore a personal ownership of music that are revealing of the boy's close identification with his instrument. His sudden, almost annoyed, glance towards something outside of the frame makes even the viewer feel like an intruder upon the boy's personal space. The long fingers of the boy's left hand – a detail noted in almost every description of this portrait – evoke, in this context,

1. For the dating of the painting, I have followed CARMEN C. BAMBACH, JANET COX-REARICK, and GEORGE R. GOLDNER, *The Drawings of Bronzino*, exh. cat. (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), New York and London 2010, p. 233.

2. BALDESAR CASTIGLIONE, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. GEORGE BULL, New York 1976, p. 120. The passage appears in the second book of Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, following a lengthy discourse about youth and the perils of age. For an exploration of the musical themes in *The Courtier*, see JAMES HAAR, “The Courtier as Musician: Castiglione's View of the Science and Art of Music”, in *The Science and Art of Renaissance Music*, ed. PAUL CORNEILSON, Princeton 1998, pp. 20–37.

musical dexterity. An inkwell with a statuette depicting the biblical story of Susanna in a similar moment of being startled by the three elders spying on her sits on a table to the right of the lutenist, along with the tip of a quill that is barely noticeable next to the inkwell. The quill, combined with the lute, represents music coupled with poetry, with the statuette being a symbol of youth confronting age.

Rejecting the iconic, human shape of the lute's body for the mechanism of the tuning pegs, Agnolo Bronzino (1503–1572) opens a window onto youth. These are the pegs that bring the lute into tune, from dissonance to harmony. Images of tuning an instrument were often used to represent the Platonic idea of being “in harmony” with the universe, but the most common idea represented by tuning, or by the presence of a broken string, was *vanitas*.³ Just as a string can unexpectedly break, turning sound quickly into silence, the image of tuning can be seen as a comment on the evanescence of youth.⁴

But beyond these well-known metaphorical allusions, how does this image of a young musician not even playing music contribute to our knowledge of Renaissance music history, and what can it tell us about youth culture and music in Florence during the sixteenth century? Compared to the many other portraits by Bronzino, this particular painting – a typical example of his work in the 1530s shortly after his

3. A famous example of “tuning the universe” is the depiction of God tuning the “Divine Monochord” in Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Historia* (Oppenheim 1617, p. 90), reproduced (among many other places) in PENELOPE GOUK, “The Role of Harmonics in the Scientific Revolution”, in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. THOMAS CHRISTENSEN, Cambridge 2002, p. 230. On tuning and broken strings as symbols of *vanitas*, see ANDREA BAYER's discussion of *The Lute Player* by Theodoor Rombouts (1597–1637) in KEITH CHRISTIANSEN, *A Caravaggio Rediscovered: The Lute Player*, New York 1990, p. 76. See also VICTOR COELHO, “The Baroque Guitar: Players, Patrons, Paintings, and the Public”, in *The World of Baroque Music*, ed. GEORGE P. STAUFFER, Bloomington 2006, pp. 175–176.

4. In her exploration of the *vanitas* theme in the musical still lifes painted by Evaristo Baschenis (1617–1677), Andrea Bayer cites Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata*, in which the emblem (no. X) for concluding treaties is an unplayed lute, with Alciati's commentary that while harmonious alliances are like a properly and skillfully strung lute, just as a string can quickly break, so can such harmony become discordant. See *The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis: The Music of Silence*, ed. ANDREA BAYER, Milan 2000, p. 41.

return from Pesaro – has not been the subject of a detailed examination, nor of any detailed discussion in the field of musical iconography.⁵ Like most of Bronzino's portraits, it is largely indebted stylistically to his teacher, friend, and collaborator, Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1557). Indeed, in 1938 Berenson proposed that a drawing from Chatsworth, which he attributed to Pontormo but which is now given to Bronzino, was the model for this painting, even though the drawing lacks the statuette and quill, the sitter holds a handkerchief rather than a lute, and the youth was, in Berenson's words, "plebeian" in comparison to the young, aristocratic lutenist of means in the painting. Berenson concluded that Bronzino's painting "turns the rather thick-set though still young mechanic [of the drawing] into a humanist, a collector perhaps, a musician certainly".⁶

Using as a guide Bronzino's other youthful male sitters, such as Ugolino Martelli, Lorenzo Lenzi, or the unidentified subject holding a book in the *Portrait of a Young Man* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, we can say that the lutenist is likely a young Florentine patrician with a humanistic education, training in the arts, and an overall spirit of *cortigianismo*. Statues behind the sitters or classical texts held by them are frequently encountered in Bronzino's portraits of this period, reminding us of the emerging taste of these youths as collectors of artistic objects, and, as Goldthwaite and others have reminded us, the value they placed on their possessions as a source of identity.⁷ Giorgio Vasari alluded to the definitive quality of these portraits, writing in his *Vite* that they were

"finished so well, that nothing more could be desired".⁸ Other writers see in these portraits the browning leaves of an autumnal Florentine culture. In Arthur McComb's durable study of 1928, the paintings are said to exhibit a "Spanish gravity, for the Renaissance is ending...[The subjects] will dress quietly in dark clothes...but no more in the gay colors of the Quattrocento". The sitters are members of the "Florentine decadence, [exhibiting] magnificent apartness", he continues. "They have known everything and felt everything. They are beyond good and evil."⁹ There is substantial agreement among early Bronzino specialists that his later portraits narrate a story of aristocracy, status, detachment, and impenetrability, all associated with a new kind of feudalism at the court of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici.

More recent critics, wary of interpreting Bronzino's young nobles as posing in nostalgic decadence, have revised this interpretation. Elizabeth Cropper has summed up these works as an "astonishing series of male portraits" that informs about a *particular* Florentine culture searching for a new identity, one that is linked to the *aspirations*, not the decadence, of a growing group of young nobles schooled in the new, vernacular style of the early sixteenth century.¹⁰ Bronzino himself was part of this milieu. He was regarded by his contemporaries as an excellent poet, and, as a member of the Accademia Fiorentina from 1541 to 1547 and again from 1563 to 1572, participated in discussions of the works of the *tre corone*, engaging in debates about contemporary, and particularly Florentine, poetic aesthetics, and imitating Petrarch along the lines proposed by his

5. The most detailed analysis of this work is by JANET COX-REARICK, "Art at the Court of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1537–1574)", in CRISTINA ACIDINI LUCHINAT *et al.*, *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, New York 2002, pp. 150–151. See also the entry by SEFY HENDLER in *Bronzino: Artist and Poet at the Court of the Medici*, ed. CARLO FALCIANI and ANTONIO NATALI, Florence 2010, V.3.

6. BERNARD BERENSON, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters* [Chicago 1938], reprint Chicago 1970, 3 vols., II, pp. 273–274, and III, pl. 974. The Chatsworth drawing is reproduced and discussed in detail in GOLDNER (as in n. 1), pp. 104–105.

7. On the importance of consumerism, see RICHARD A. GOLDTHWAITE, "The Empire of Things: Consumer Demand in Renaissance Italy", in *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F. W. KENT, PATRICIA SIMONS, and J. C. EADE, Oxford 1987, pp. 153–175, as well as RICHARD A. GOLDTHWAITE, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600*, Baltimore 1993.

8. GIORGIO VASARI, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. GASTON DU C. DE VÈRE, X, London 1915, p. 5.

9. ARTHUR MCCOMB, *Agnolo Bronzino: His Life and Works*, Cambridge, Mass. 1928, p. 7.

10. ELIZABETH CROPPER, "Prolegomena to a New Interpretation of Bronzino's Florentine Portraits", in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smyth*, ed. ANDREW MORROGH *et al.*, II, Florence 1985, p. 149. Similarly, in the introduction to his translation of the *Cinque canti* (ca. 1519), David Quint interprets Ariosto's text as chronicling the reality of "feudalism falling victim to a new social arrangement" in early sixteenth-century Italy, and shows how canonical texts (such as Castiglione's *Courtier* and Machiavelli's *Prince*) were essentially used as self-fashioning handbooks by the new, aristocratized families of this period. See LODOVICO ARIOSTO, *Cinque canti / Five Cantos*, trans. ALEXANDER SHEERS and DAVID QUINT, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996, pp. 25–44.

friend and fellow academician, Benedetto Varchi, a follower of Pietro Bembo.¹¹ His sensitivity to this young group, seeking through the word a unique cultural identity, is already anticipated in many of his Florentine portraits of the 1530s, such as the 1535 painting of the teenage Florentine noble Ugolino Martelli (Fig. 2). Standing in front of a statue of David from his family's collection, Ugolino holds a book of Bembo in one hand while marking a chapter in the *Iliad* with the other.

The impact that the Petrarchan revival and the literary trends of the 1530s had on the development of a new cultural identity in Florence was also strongly felt in music. The 1520s and 1530s witness the emergence of the madrigal, which would soon become the most progressive and widely circulated genre of Italian vocal music. Years before madrigals were mass-printed in Venice – they comprise almost three-fourths of all music published there between 1550 and 1570 – madrigals by Jacques Arcadelt (1507–1568) circulated in manuscript among Florentine families like the Strozzi, the Manelli, and the Cavalcanti, whose personal tastes also guided the actual composition and performance of these works.¹² These

11. See DEBORAH PARKER, "Towards a Reading of Bronzino's Burlesque Poetry", *Renaissance Quarterly*, L, 1997, pp. 1011–1044. For a background of the political and often anti-Bembist sentiments of the Accademia Fiorentina, see MICHAEL SHERBERG, "The Accademia Fiorentina and the Question of the Language: The Politics of Theory in Ducal Florence", *Renaissance Quarterly*, LVI, 2003, pp. 26–55.

12. On Venetian and Roman printing during this period, with much interesting data on secular and sacred print culture, see JANE A. BERNSTEIN, "Publish or Perish? Palestrina and Print Culture in 16th-Century Italy", *Early Music*, XXXV, 2007, p. 232. On the early circulation of the madrigal in Florence underlining the role of Arcadelt and Verdelot, see RICHARD AGEE, "Ruberto Strozzi and the Early Madrigal", *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, XXXVI, 1983, pp. 1–17 (for the letter between Varchi and Strozzi, see pp. 1–2); and IAIN FENLON and JAMES HAAR, *The Italian Madrigal in the Early Sixteenth Century: Sources and Interpretation*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 15–69. For a somewhat revisionist history of the early madrigal in Florence within elite circles and private settings, and a reclamation of the importance of private Medici patronage, see ANTHONY M. CUMMINGS, *The Maecenas and the Madrigalist: Patrons, Patronage, and the Origins of the Italian Madrigal*, Philadelphia 2004, esp. pp. 153–166, 171–182; similarly to the context we have created for the Bronzino lutenist, Cummings (p. 176) describes the cultivation of the early madrigal by the Rucellai family during the early sixteenth century as characterized by musical practices "typified by singing to the lute or viol, or the singing of quasi-contrapuntal elaborations of popular tunes".

madrigals differed from the older refrain styles of the fifteenth-century *ballata* and the strophic forms of the *frottola*. They employed instead the contemporary, through-composed poetry inspired by Petrarch and Bembo, which was set to a flexible, rhetorical musical style that was fitted to the nuances, rhythms, and sentiment of the verse. Both Ruberto Strozzi (d. 1566) and his father, Filippo (1489–1538), were trained in music and employed professional musicians as their teachers. Ruberto's inner circle of friends included members of the Neri, Manelli, and Capponi families with whom he played and composed music, and he also corresponded with Varchi about setting verses to music. It was through their influential contacts and family ties that Ruberto Strozzi was able to have madrigals written for him *and* to his literary specifications by emerging composers such as Arcadelt and Cipriano de Rore (1515/16–1565). Prior to their publication these works circulated for years among Strozzi and his circle, which included the diplomat Bartolommeo Cavalcanti, who acted as Strozzi's intermediary in his dealings with Cipriano. The early madrigal is thus a perfect example of how Florentine composers reacted to the new literary culture around them.

This is precisely the setting for Bronzino's Florentine portraits of youths. The sitters in his paintings are not only contemporary with the emergence of the madrigal of the 1530s; it was in the houses of such families that these madrigals were sung, and many of these works were personalized through the versions made by their performers. For example, even though early printed madrigals include parts to be sung by three or four voices, by 1536 printed *arrangements* of these madrigals for solo voice and lute accompaniment had appeared, testifying to a well-understood, decades-long practice of reducing polyphonic vocal music to a single part with lute accompaniment, creating, essentially, accompanied song.¹³ It is

13. In 1536 the Venetian printer Ottaviano Scotto (II) published the *Intavolatura de li madrigali di Verdelotto da cantare et sonare nel lauto*, which contained twenty-two madrigals by Philippe Verdelot arranged for lute and solo voice by Adrian Willaert. Earlier, in 1509 and 1511, Ottaviano Petrucci had published two books of *frottole* arranged for lute and voice. The most detailed study tracing the development of lute-accompanied solo song is in KEVIN MASON, "Per cantare e sonare: Accompanying Italian Lute Song of the Late Sixteenth Century", in *Performance on Lute, Guitar, and Vihuela: Historical Practice and Modern Interpretation*, ed. VICTOR COELHO, Cambridge 1997, pp. 72–107.

mostly in this reduced format that madrigals and chansons were sung in the domestic spaces inhabited by Bronzino's lutenist, or, indeed, lutenist/singer. In many ways, this is no different from any young amateur musician today who sings a popular song to her guitar, basically reducing and recontextualizing music originally intended for a band of singers and players (including, perhaps, instrumental and vocal overdubs) to a single voice and instrument. As these madrigals were similarly arranged and adapted, their performance became personalized, and they accomplished what the Accademia Fiorentina had done for poetry and Bronzino for art: they helped to express the values and identity of a new, young Florentine culture. Indeed, in 1543 the Accademia Fiorentina itself was the site for a spirited debate on the merits of accompanied or improvised song versus fully notated polyphonic song, with the former being endorsed as more natural and sensitive to the language.¹⁴

The close association between music and the Florentine literary culture of the early sixteenth century – of which the madrigal is a direct outgrowth – opened up new audiences for music and blurred the distinction between the amateur and professional musician. Where a young nobleman once read a sonnet or heard a madrigal, now he could participate in performing them. What results is a new personal context for music, a subculture, in which music circulates freely in a domestic setting or among close friends. Largely through the new availability of printed music, but also as a result of insular routes of transmission, this music is shared through the networks of family and kinship rather than the traditional circuitry of court culture, for which repertoires are dependent upon function and immediate or ceremonial need. Rather, the adaptation of madrigals into solo song and the arrangement of vocal works for solo lute, including sacred genres like the Mass and motet, result in courtly occasional music becoming an *everyday* domestic pastime that is both non-hierarchical and without dependence on ceremony, calendar, or original purpose. This quality of the everyday, which both *secularizes* (playing sacred music on the lute in a domestic setting) and *democratizes* (stripping

14. See ROBERT NOSOW, "The Debate on Song in the Accademia Fiorentina", *Early Music History*, XXI, 2002, pp. 175–221.

music of its original courtly or sacred status and broadening its reach), has been identified as central to the workings of youth culture.¹⁵

Thus, the madrigal and other secular genres, notably solo lute music, were increasingly important as cultural expression for youth during this period. Painted representations of musicians almost always show them in their youth, and often with lutes. To cite a few famous examples: in Giorgione's treatment of the *Three Ages of Man* (Fig. 3) it is the young boy who is holding the sheet of music;¹⁶ Caravaggio's famous *Lute Player* of many decades later (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) still shows a youth reducing an Arcadelt madrigal for lute and voice;¹⁷ and the *Lute Player* attributed to Francesco Salviati shows another youth, similar in age to Bronzino's lutenist, playing the instrument with an open book of music

15. Grounded in critical theory and offering an excellent review of the theoretical constitutions of youth culture, DAN LAUGHEY (*Music and Youth Culture*, Edinburgh 2006) focuses mainly on contemporary youth culture through several case studies, but I am persuaded of the application of these ideas to Renaissance culture of the early sixteenth century particularly in his discussion of the "everyday", of the importance of social mobility among youth (both upward and downward), and of the impact on youth of large-scale "transitional" cultural change observed through successive generations. On the domesticization of sacred music through arrangement, see JOHN GRIFFITHS, "At Court and at Home with the *Vihuela de Mano*: Current Perspectives of the Instrument, its Music, and its World", *Journal of the Lute Society of America*, XXII, 1989, pp. 1–27; and VICTOR COELHO, "Revisiting the Workshop of Howard Mayer Brown: Josquin's *Obsecro Te Domina* and the Context of Arrangement", in *La musique de tous les Passetemps le plus beau...*: *Hommage a Jean-Michel Vaccaro*, ed. FRANÇOIS LESURE and HENRI VANHULST, Paris 1998, pp. 47–65.

16. Other explanations have been offered. PETER HUMFREY (*Painting in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven and London 1995) interprets the work as representing a music lesson, with "the boy at the centre learning to sing a madrigal" (p. 124). (The madrigal genre to which Humfrey alludes, of course, would take another twenty-five years to develop if we accept his dating of the painting to ca. 1500.) DAVID ALAN BROWN *et al.* (*Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*, New Haven and London 2006, p. 242), following Humfrey, similarly interpret the depiction as a music lesson, but with the young boy being the pupil of the master to his left, and the old man emphasizing "the lofty ideal of music as transporting both the performer and the listener/viewer".

17. For a detailed study, see CHRISTIANSEN (as in n. 3).

on the table in front of him (Fig. 4).¹⁸ Moreover, it was to this demographic – the young (but skilled) amateur musician at university towns such as Padua – that Venetian publishers targeted their books of madrigals and lute music through their distribution during the sixteenth century.¹⁹

The identification and recognition of ‘youth culture’ in the sixteenth century force us to revise our notion of what ‘amateur tastes and technique’ really mean. It reminds us that the thousands of editions of music books printed during the sixteenth century were primarily intended for amateur, not professional, consumption, whose history can be viewed through the eyes and surroundings of Bronzino’s young, learned amateurs. They are the ones who consumed printed music and were the main clients for instrument makers; they are the ones whose tastes had so canonized the sixteenth-century musical repertory that they created a robust market for published anthologies as well as for reissued ‘classic’ editions like Arcadelt’s *First Book of Madrigals*; they are the ones who domesticized and even ‘domesticated’ music thorough arrangement, revision, and transcription; and finally, they are the ones who anthologized the repertory into manuscript *florilegia* such as the Cavalcanti Lutebook, an important Florentine manuscript anthology of the late sixteenth century compiled by the fifteen-year-old Raffaello Cavalcanti (1575–1649).²⁰ This important anthology is a good example of what happened to music when placed in the hands of the new young musical consumers of the sixteenth century. In the Cavalcanti Lutebook and other similar anthologies used by

these musicians, new and old music mingle comfortably and seamlessly, music is adapted, recast, and reinterpreted according to skill and intent, performance conventions change according to context, and these sources, being divorced from courtly needs and demands, transmit many popular, improvised, and regional styles of music that are difficult to detect in courtly sources.

Consumption, identity, the synthesis of popular and low style, the ‘everyday’ recontextualizing of artistic traditions, and revival: all these elements are characteristic of a youth culture. As the repertory of masses, motets, and courtly music got into the hands of amateur players like the *Young Man with the Lute*, it was redirected towards private pleasure rather than public display, and recast (or in the case of art, removed from one location and placed in another) according to the demands of succeeding generations. To acknowledge the existence of a youth culture is to accept the relationship between the personal identity of self and the shifting values of a work. In this way, domesticization is analogous to vernacularization, and both are characteristic of a renewed Florentine youth culture in the sixteenth century that was beginning to assert itself through music.

18. See *Francesco Salviati o la Bella Maniera*, ed. CATHERINE MONBEIG GOGUEL, Milan 1998, pp. 218–219; see also, in the same volume, JOËL DUGOT’s analysis of the instrument and the music book in front of the lutenist, pp. 220–221.

19. JANE A. BERNSTEIN, *Music Printing in Renaissance Venice: The Scotto Press, 1539–1572*, New York and Oxford 1998, p. 124.

20. For information on the Cavalcanti Lutebook, see VICTOR COELHO, “Raffaello Cavalcanti’s Lutebook (1590) and the Ideal of Singing and Playing”, in *Le concert des voix et des instruments à la Renaissance*, ed. JEAN-MICHEL VACCARO, Paris 1995, pp. 423–442; and IDEM, “The Reputation of Francesco da Milano and the Ricercars in the Cavalcanti Lute Book”, *Revue Belge de Musicologie*, L, 1996, pp. 49–72. On the biography of Raffaello Cavalcanti and related archival information, see IDEM, “The Players of Florentine Monody in Context and in History, and a Newly Recognized Source for *Le Nuove Musiche*”, *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music*, IX, 2003, <http://sscm-jscm.press.illinois.edu/v9/no1/coelho.html>.



1. AGNOLO BRONZINO, *Young Man with a Lute*, 1532–34, oil on wood, 94 × 79 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, no. 1575.



2. AGNOLO BRONZINO, *Portrait of Ugolino Martelli*, ca. 1535, oil on wood, 102 × 85 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.



3. GIORGIONE, *The Three Ages of Man*, ca. 1500, oil on wood, 62 × 77 cm. Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, inv. 1912 n. 110.



4. FRANCESCO SALVIATI, *Portrait of a Lute Player*, ca. 1527, oil on wood, 96 × 77 cm. Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris, no. 657.