Franchino Gafori and Marsilio Ficino

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Accessibility
Franchino Gafori and Marsilio Ficino

The brilliant court of Lorenzo, the Magnificent, in Florence was rivelled in the last two decades of the fifteenth century in several other cities in the North of Italy. Not the least significant of these centers of Renaissance activity and humanistic culture was the court of Milan under the rule of Ludovico Sforza, commonly known as Il Moro. From 1481, when by an act of gross usurpation he supplanted his nephew, Gian Galeazzo Sforza (d.1494), he ruled Milan with an iron hand, cruel, vindictive, warlike, but also a patron of arts and letters, who invested his court with a splendor and with an atmosphere of culture entirely in keeping with the strange spirit of his age. His rule ended when he was captured by the invading French forces of Louis XII in 1500.

It was during The Moro's reign that Leonardo da Vinci, coming from Florence, lived for sixteen years (1483-1499) in Milan. It was during this period that the University of Pavia, some twenty-two miles from Milan, became the greatest Italian rival of the University of Padua. The art of music was cultivated by the Sforza dukes long before the reign of Ludovico. Ludovico's immediate predecessors had encouraged a lively musical activity at the court which was closely connected with the development of the art in the Cathedral of Milan.

In 1484 we find the first indication of the connection of Franchino Gafori (Gaffori, Gaffurius, 1451-1522) with Milan. Engaged nominally as a singer, he assumed, either at once or very shortly, the office of Choirmaster of the Cathedral. Gafori is recognized today, by the side of Johannes Tinctoris (ca. 1446-1511), as one of the greatest musical theorists of the Renaissance. With his duties as Choirmaster of the Cathedral he combined, for some years at any rate, the office of Professor of Music at the University of Pavia. He often signs his name as 'phonascus' and 'musics professor.' He likewise composed music. A few manuscripts (masses, motets, etc.) are

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1 The best account of the life of Gafori is to be found in the historical introduction of the facsimile of his Theoria Musica (Milan, 1947) edited by Gaetano Cesare (Roma, 1934).
preserved in the archives of the Cathedral, but he seems not to have risen to great eminence in this direction.

But that he was a great student and a scholar of no mean attainments is evident from his theoretical works. He seems to have had only a slight knowledge of Greek, for we know that he had a number of Greek treatises translated into Latin for his use. Of the breadth of his studies we have an example in a book deposited at present in the Harvard College Library. It is a copy of a part of the translation into Latin by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) of the complete works of Plato.

Ficino, with his younger contemporary and protégé, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), made the Platonic Academy, founded at Florence by Cosimo de’ Medici and magnificently supported by Lorenzo, his grandson, the acknowledged center of philosophic studies in the second half of the fifteenth century. Ficino had been specifically commissioned by Cosimo to translate the whole of Plato into Latin. The work was finally put through the press in Florence by Laurentius de Alopa, Venetus, in the years 1484 and 1485. It was dedicated to Lorenzo. A complete copy consists of 562 leaves. The copy in question, which bears the place and the printer’s name but no date, includes 160 unnumbered leaves. It contains the Timaeus, the Critias, the Laws, the Eunomia, and the Letters. An apparently identical copy is owned by the British Museum.

The copy deposited at Harvard was once the property of Franchino Gafuri. Below the colophon we find the note, presumably in the possessor’s autograph: ‘Franchino Gaffori musices professoris est hic liber; die mi maii 1489 emptus.’ Great interest is added to the volume by the fact that Gafuri made copious marginal notes. In addition to numerous passages of the text singled out for emphasis by the word ‘Nota’ in the margin, or by a pointing hand, there are more than one hundred and forty actual marginal notes or comments. They are written in the same hand as the possessor note at the end, and as a rule do no more than paraphrase a passage of the text.

Unfortunately these remarks on Plato or on Ficino (who wrote more or less lengthy commentaries or introductions to the separate works which he translated) do not reveal as much as we should like to know of what was going on in the mind of Gafori as he read. Gafori, who could, as is known, strike out vigorously at a rival in the field of music theory, seems never, while reading this book, to have fallen into a critical or disputatious mood. On the contrary, he seems to have been in a humble or even pious frame of mind. A very large number of the marginal annotations refer to moral sentiments or to religious utterances in Plato or in Ficino. ‘Here Plato invokes God at the beginning of his discourse,’ or, ‘Nothing is better than philosophy.’ In the Timaeus he selects such statements as the following: ‘Animi irrationalis est quasi vestigium araneae rationalis.’ From a passage in Ficino’s commentary on the first letter of Plato he quotes: ‘Tutius est verbi divini committerendum quam litteris.’ There are, of course, a number of annotations of purely musical passages,
but they are not nearly as numerous as one might expect, and they are not very characteristic or very enlightening. For example, the second book of the Laws, in which Plato expounds his aesthetic theory of art as imitation, and dwells upon the significance of the choral ode for young and old, receives but scant attention in Gafori's marginal notes.

It would be interesting to discover whether Gafori was influenced by his reading of the Ficino Plato and changed any of his fundamental theoretical ideas. Gafori on the whole taught a straightforward Boethian theory of music, as did most of his predecessors and contemporaries. The Paduan professor of music, Ramis de Parcia, a Spaniard, was an exception. Gafori's nearest authorities, whom he quotes repeatedly, are Ugolino of Orvieto and one Anschmus Georgius of Parma. The latter is a little-known writer, apparently of the first half of the fifteenth century. The only known copy of his treatise 'De Harmonia,' which, like the Ficino Plato, has Gafori's possessor note on it, is now among the manuscripts in the Ambrosiana in Milan. It is not included in the great collections of Scriptores de Musica of Gerbert and Coussemaker.

Gafori published his first known theoretical work, the Theorica Opus, in Naples in 1480. A second edition, entitled Theorica Musica, was printed in Milan in 1492. By 1492 Gafori had surely read and annotated his Ficino Plato. Gaetano Cesare, the editor of the 1934 facsimile edition of Gafori's Theorica Musica, gives some indication of the passages which differ in the two editions of this book. From this it does not appear that Gafori departed in the later edition in any significant detail from his earlier position.

Twice, in the edition of 1492, he actually names and quotes Ficino. The first time, in Book 2, Chapter 3, he quotes the Latin translation of Plato's statement in the Laws, Book 2, that "harmonium esse ordinem in ipsa vo-
cum per acutum et grave contem-
portantia," with Ficino's explanation 'quam
nos concentum dicere solemus.' The
other almost literal quotation (Book 2,
Chapter 6) is from Ficino's comment-
ary on the Epinomis to the effect
that Plato often not only praises and
admires arithmetic but maintains that
arithmetic, more than any other disci-
pline, sharpens the intellect, strengthens memory, and renders the mind
most apt and prompt for all specula-
tion and action.

More interesting than these results of Gafori's study is the observation, not hitherto emphasized, that Marsilio Ficino himself indulges in a little musical theorizing. The famous Pla-
tonist is reported to have had a certain amount of musical talent. We are told that he was able to sing his own verses to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, designated as the 'plectrum.' This was probably some form of lute. It is further reported that he rarely attended a meeting of the Academy without bringing his plectrum with him. Like all other commentators on the Timaeus, from the earliest times to our own day, he becomes involved in a certain amount of musical theory and speculation. This ac-
counts for his chapters in the Timaeus
preface: (28) Cur anima rei com-
positae comparetur: cur consonantiae
The Earliest Known English Playbill

In 1931 Miss Eleanor Boswell discovered among the undated State Papers Domestic in the Public Record Office an English playbill of 1587. This broadside antedated by five years the William and Mary playbill found by the late W. J. Lawrence among the Verney Papers in 1911 and termed by him 'the oldest known English playbill.' There has been, however, in the Theatre Collection of the Harvard College Library since 1915 a small playbill (7 ½ by 5 ½ inches) — reproduced here approximately full size (Plate I) — which I believe to be more than twenty-seven years earlier than the James II bill in the Public Record Office.

This interesting broadside, slightly imperfect, was acquired about 1830 for two guineas by William Upcott, the antiquary and collector, from Thomas Thorpe, the bookseller. Upcott had twelve copies of it lithographed for himself and his friends and then sold it to George Daniel, the miscellaneous writer and collector of theatrical curiosities. Daniel mounted it on one of the leaves of a quarto volume bound for him in calf in 1835 and containing twenty tracts, broadsides, and clippings concerning Bartholomew Fair that he has assembled from various sources. When his library came up for auction at his death in 1864, this volume passed into the possession of Henry Huth; and as lot 489 in the great Huth sale it was purchased in 1911 by the firm of Tregaskis, who sold it to Robert Gould Shaw, founder of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

Without giving the date or the time, the playbill announces that at John Harris's Booth, in Bartholomew-Fair . . . next the Rope-dancers, is to be seen, The Court of King Henry the Second; And the Death of Fair Rosamond; With the merry Humours of Punchinello, and the Lancashire-Witches. As also the famous History of Bunyf and Frier Bacon: With the


*W. J. Lawrence, The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, Second Series (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 236, 239 (facsimiles of four William and Mary playbills, the oldest dated 9 November 1602).

*Two of these copies are in the Harvard Theatre Collection.
CONTENTS

HAMILTON VAUGHAN BAIL, Views of Harvard to 1860: An Iconographic Study — Parts I-III 11, 185, 339

WILLIAM BERTRON, The Modern Language Center 396

JOHN H. BIRKS, The Story of Toby, a Sequel to Tytus 118

WILLIAM H. BOND, Nancy Oldfield: An Unrecorded Printed Play by Charles Reade 386

WILLIAM H. BOND, Wordsworth's Thanksgiving Ode: An Unpublished Postscript 115

EDWIN G. BORING, The Library of the Psychological Laboratories 394

ETHEL B. CLARK, A Manuscript of John Keats at Dumbarton Oaks 90

I. BERNARD COHEN, A Lost Letter from Hobbes to Mersenne Found 112

ARTHUR H. COLE, The Business School Library and Its Setting 333

C. LESLIE CRAIN, The Earliest Little Gidding Concordance 311

Exhibitions, 1946 123

REGINALD FITZ, President Eliot and Dr Holmes Leap Forward 212

EVA FLEISCHNER, Napoleon to His Mother: The First Draft of a Letter Written from School 244

LOUISE B. GRAVES, The Likeness of Emily Dickinson 248

ELMER M. GRIEGER, The Collecting of War Agency Material at Harvard 122

Guides to the Harvard Libraries 323

The Harvard Keats Memorial Studies 323

The Harvard-Newberry Calligraphic Series 262

PHILIP HOFER, The Graphic Arts Department: An Experiment in Specialization 252

PHILIP HOFER, A Newly Discovered Book with Painted Decorations from Willibald Pirckheimer's Library 66

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, The Carl T. Keller Collection of Don Quixote 305

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, The First Separately Printed English Translation of Horace 238

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, Humphrey Dyson and His Collections of Elizabethan Proclamations 76

HAROLD S. JANTZ, A Funeral Elegy for Thomas Danforth, Treasurer of Harvard 113

FRANK N. JONES, Harvard's Importation of Foreign Books since the War 356

OTTO KINKELDEY, Francesco Gafuri and Marsilio Ficino 379

RUPERT B. LILLIE, The Historical Series of Harvard Dioramas 391

List of Contributors 127, 264, 399
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THOMAS LITTLE, The Thomas Wolfe Collection of William B. Wisdom</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT W. LOVETT, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1877--</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHILIP J. McNIFF, Reading Room Problems in the Harvard College</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library, 1942--1947</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRANCIS P. MAGOUN, JR, Photostats of the <em>Historia de Praefiis Alexandri Magni</em> (18)</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEYES D. METCALF, Foreword</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEYES D. METCALF, Spatial Growth in University Libraries</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765--1877</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1937--1947</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGNES MONGAN, A Group of Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century French Portraits Drawings</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGNES MONGAN, A Group of French Portrait Drawings — Addendum</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW. Catalogues of the Library of Congress</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATALIE N. NICHOLSON, The Engineering Library at Harvard University</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAXWELL E. PERKINS, Thomas Wolfe</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRED N. ROBBINS, Celtic Books at Harvard: The History of a Departmental Collection</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HYDER E. ROLLS, An O. Henry Cocktail</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADRIANA R. SALEM, The Purchases of a Seventeenth-Century Librarian</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales of Duplicate Books</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Collections of the Harvard University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archives</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Harvard University Archives: Goal and Function</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAFF ACTIVITIES</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE Theatre Collection in New Quarters</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, The Earliest Known English Playbill</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, John Adams to a Young Playwright</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOMAS WOLFE and MAXWELL E. PERKINS, The Last Letter of Thomas Wolfe, and the Reply to It</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>