

The Panther and the Rose program notes

Today's program takes us back to fourteenth-century Italy, to a musical period known as the *Trecento*. For many not familiar with this style of music, the next few paragraphs will introduce and guide you in your experience of this lesser-known repertoire, to make sense of its enigmatic elements while preserving its mystery. As you will hear throughout the program, the music is imbued with astonishing complexity as well as disarming ease, a style some say is rivaled only by the avant-garde music of the twentieth century. The "who's who" of the *Trecento* features composers from varied backgrounds: **Jacopo da Bologna** (fl. 1340-1386), a professor at the University of Bologna; **Johannes Ciconia** (c. 1370-1412) of the Cathedral in Padua; **Francesco Landini** (c. 1325-1397), a troubadour from the artisan class who is often depicted with closed eyes to show that he was blind; and **Matteo Perugia** (fl. 1400-1416) of the Milan Cathedral. These *Trecento* composers distinguished themselves from the earlier French styles of the fourteenth century—the ground-breaking rhythmic innovations of the *Ars Nova* (think Machaut from the *French Café* program a few years ago) and the highly mannered style of the *Ars Subtilior* (or the post-Machaut generation)—and also borrowed from these movements to ultimately create a distinctly Italian musical language.

At the very outset, you may notice that each piece features two to three independent parts (that we sometimes double with instruments), creating a polyphonic **texture** that can sound at times dense, overgrown, or even chaotic. While the texture of the French *Ars Nova* was treble-dominated, the *Trecento* featured equal voices, a framework that is often challenging for performers and listeners alike to comprehend (how can I keep track of one voice, let alone two or three?). Imitation between voices can often help the hearing of the complex texture, that is, until the composer disrupts it with the introduction of a new idea. Still, simply listening to and enjoying the interplay of voices—following a line if you like, but being at peace when you lose track of it—can help acclimate you to the world of *Trecento* music.

You will quickly notice that at the micro-level, each of the voices often features highly intricate **rhythms**, a marker of the innovations of fourteenth-century rhythmic notation. The story of rhythmic innovations in this period is a narrative that features experimentation with and codification of rhythmic possibilities. The French *Ars Nova* and *Ars Subtilior* movements expanded the rhythmic palate through syncopations and hockets (two or more voices alternating that simulate the sound of hiccups...or popping corn, if you like), among other things. These rhythmic features energize the music, pushing it towards its phrase endings. While we hear these borrowed French elements in the *Trecento*, the *Trecento* brought its own multiplication of rhythmic options—increased subdivisions that were notated with various shapes, stems, and flags and the use of colors (black and red) to notate the alternation between duple or triple divisions of the beat. Ironically for the listener, the more precise and complicated the notation of the music is, the more effortless and natural the delivery should be. Some say that this is because this musical style stems from improvised singing.

When trying to make sense of the **harmonic language** of the *Trecento*, it is best to abandon our "modern" sense of expectation—tension and release—as well as major or minor sonorities. The harmony of the *Trecento*, though centered on open, hollow-sounding fifths and octaves, pushes the boundaries by including sweet-sounding thirds and sixths within phrases. Many of the pieces pause on fifths or octaves at their openings, allowing the listener and performer to orient themselves before skipping ahead. Phrase endings or

cadences are also marked by the fifths, octaves, or unisons. Double-leading tone cadences (ornamented according to the practice of Francesco Landini) are perhaps the singular most recognizable feature of the style, but can sound striking and almost foreign to our modern, conventional ears. But think of them (and the opening sonorities) as the music's "goalposts." Just as the singer or player catches his or her breath at these moments, listeners can also collect their thoughts before the parts diverge again. Between each "goalpost" are meandering, chattering, or expansive lines that are often juxtaposed with more bouncy, rhythmically taut sections.

But how do you know when you are approaching one of these **cadences**? Conveniently, the approach to a cadence is usually prefaced with a long melisma or ornamental tag in all of the voices. These melismas often sound like they are wandering since there is no text under them, making the cadential arrivals that much more satisfying. Florid or flowery melismas also often mark the beginnings of phrases.

When attending concerts of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century music, we are usually familiar with the **genres** at play: the sonata, the cantata, the dance suite, for example. In music of the *Trecento*, we find two primary forms being used: the **madrigal**, distinct from a seventeenth-century madrigal you have heard in prior concerts, and the **ballata**, a relative of the French virelai. Both of these forms bring order and coherence to the pieces. They are each comprised of two sections, let us call them "A" and "B." In the madrigal (AAB), the "A" and "B" sections are distinguished from each other by a change in meter, duple to triple or vice versa. The ballata follows the AbbaA form of the French virelai (the lower case "a" uses the same music as the capital "A," but with different text). The initial "b" phrase in the ballata often follows an "open" ending that brings a sense of momentum to the form, compelling the "b" phrase to repeat. Both the ballata and its counterpart, the virelai, were originally meant to accompany dance as "ballare" means "to dance" and "virer" means "to turn." But, as you will hear, the *Trecento*'s ballata with its often complicated polyphonic music has distanced itself from dance. In any case, hearing the large-scale form gives the listener (and the performer!) a sense of grounding.

Interspersed within the highly intricate music of the *Trecento* are a handful of musical "sorbets," if you will, pieces that are written for one voice, but whose accompaniment is improvised by one of our plucking players. Some pieces are lyrical, the others are dances. These moments offer you the chance to listen with a different ear, to enjoy the narrative of a single melody or the infectious beat of the dance.

---Dongmyung Ahn