

Can Heteroclito Giancarli change the world?

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People with unusual names often turn out to be unusual customers. In the 2008 film “The curious case of Benjamin Button” the fictitious protagonist with the unusual name turned out to be an elusive figure who enters this world as a newborn old man and who regresses, bit by bit, from old age to infancy. He is a mirage brought into conscious reality by cinematic magic and whose story seeks to change the course of history by reversing our understanding of the human lifecycle. Benjamin Button was a maverick.

And so, if Benjamin Button was nought but a maverick, who is Heteroclito Giancarli? Why does he interest me? Why do I suggest that he might be able to change the world? Moreover, why would I want to tell you, and why would I want to make him the subject of my homage to my dear friend Roger Covell on such a celebratory occasion?

Unusual name? Yes — Heteroclito Giancarli is no ordinary name. He is unlikely to be the son of your local tinker, tailor or pasta merchant. Quite to the contrary, our Heteroclito was a Venetian patrician, amateur singer who accompanied himself on the lute, and author of a collection of *Compositione musicali* published in 1602 when he already in the golden years of later middle age.¹ You will be interested to know, all of you whose ancient Greek has fallen into disuse, that Heteroclito was indeed a maverick. His name derived from “*heteros*” (“other” or “different”) and “*klino*” (“to lean” or “to incline”) and means “a person who leans the other way, who is unconventional,” in short, a maverick.² As yet, I don't know much about Signore Giancarli, only that he was an amateur singer, he was well connected in Venice, that he was a self-confessed disciple

¹ Heteroclito Giancarli, *Compositioni musicali intavolate per cantare et sonare nel liuto* (Venice: Giacomo Vicentini, 1602.) All biographical information is taken directly from this print.

² I thank my friend Leofranc Holford-Strevens for pointing out that Heteroclite (in English), with similar forms in other languages, is also a grammatical term for words that are irregular in declension or inflection, changing in mid-stream.

of the mid-century singer-songwriter Hippolito Tromboncino, and that his *Compositione musicali* is the earliest Italian printed source of original lute songs. (There are many earlier sources of Italian lute songs, but they are *all*—without exception— arrangements of vocal polyphony, not solo songs with independently crafted lute accompaniments.) Heteroclitto did not publish these songs due to ambition or vanity, but in response to the supplication of his friends. He makes clear that these were not new songs, but probably songs he had composed during the preceding twenty or thirty years.

So, how can Heteroclitto Giancarli change the world? He's been dead for four hundred years. In any case, it is not possible to change the world without something like a big bang theory.

— Do we have one?... Maybe... Let's see.

What we *do* seem to have is an exception to conventional wisdom. We seem to have at least one other composer (maybe two —Domenico Maria Melii is next on my agenda³) who published books of monodies in the same year as Giulio Caccini's epoch-making *Le nuove musiche*.⁴ This might give us just enough ammunition for a big bang to unsettle the pillars that shoulder one of the significant moments in the history of Western Music: the birth of opera.

What might be achieved?...

- We might unsettle Giulio Caccini as the patriarch of modern monody...
- We might unsettle Florence as the birthplace of opera... (Warren Kirkendale tried for years to promote Rome as a counter-capital, but now there's also the possibility of Venice.⁵)
- We might unseat Giovanni Bardi's so-called *Florentine camerata* as the laboratory that created opera out of a little chunk of clay...

Giancarli's songs are in many ways similar to Caccini's but their lineage is different and they allow us to propose a more realistic alternative to the theory that we've all swallowed for the last century: that the monodic style (and hence opera) was concocted in the Bardi Laboratories in Florence by experimental scientists Mei, Galilei and Peri who were commissioned to play with some ideas from classical Greek tragedy until they came up with something that Monteverdi could soon after label the *seconda prattica*.⁶

³ See, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-maria-melli_\(Dizionario_Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-maria-melli_(Dizionario_Biografico)/) *Musiche di D.M. Melio reggiano dottor di leggi composte sopra alcuni madrigali di diversi. Per cantare nel chitarone, clavicembalo, et altri instramenti...* (Venezia 1602; rist. nel 1603 e nel 1609 con il titolo *Le prime musiche di D.M. Megli...* nelle quali si contengono madrigali et arie a una et due voci...);

⁴ Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche* (Florence, 1602; rpt. Florence: Studio Per Edizioni Scelte, 1983).

⁵ Warren Kirkendale, "The Myth of the 'Birth of Opera' in the Florentine Camerata Debunked by Emilio de' Cavalieri: A Commemorative Lecture," *The Opera Quarterly* 19 (2003): 631-643.

⁶ Among many publications: Claude V. Palisca, "Vincenzo Galilei and some Links between 'pseudo monody' and 'monody'" *Musical Quarterly* 46 (1960): 344-60; Claude V. Palisca, "A Discourse of the Performance of Tragedy by Giovanni de'Bardi", *Musica Disciplina* 37 (1983): 327-43; Tim Carter, "On the Composition and Performance of Caccini's *Le Nuove musiche* (1602)", *Early Music* 12 (1984): 208-17; Claude V. Palisca, *The Florentine Camerata: documentary studies and translations*. Music theory translation series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

My investigations in this area —seven studies published in the last fifteen years— have now transformed my focus.⁷ What was initially a study of music history has turned into an exercise in historiography. My main questions concern the way in which musical styles change, and how we construct history. On this latter point we all know that our musicological forefathers took their lead from art historians. Music history was conceived as the history of musical style. Music history was created by assembling the totality of known Western music, lining the works up in chronological order, and creating a narrative based on the evolution of their musical language.

Now, is this music history? The very idea would probably make many of you music historians in the room cringe. How could this be real music history? Why is it still the dominant narrative in undergraduate music history courses? Today, we are much more interested in music as part of life, we see music as a key channel of human endeavour, we encourage cross-disciplinary appreciation, and we are much more concerned about its creation, its performance, its perception, its consumption etc, etc... and not simply as a series of artworks, all in a row.

Why is there a gap between what we believe and what we teach? Using today's lenses, it is much easier to write about micro history —focussed on a narrow window of time or place— than it is to write about macro history, or anything approaching “big history” — whether it refers to a century or a millennium. We have to lose too much detail, human texture, for the sake of the overview. It is the tension between these macro and micro dimensions that is hard for us to reconcile.

My second concern is that source-based historiography denies taking into consideration any other music that does not survive in written form. Modern interdisciplinary histories of music need to be able to consider the other unwritten forms of music that sounded alongside written repertoires. It needs to happen in order to achieve a thoroughly comprehensive and realistic picture of music in human culture.

So, if Heteroclitto Giancarli is going to change the world, that's how he will help do it. It will not simply be what happened between him and a few other cronies in Venice around 1600. It is much broader. My research has been revealing a widespread practice of singing to the lute throughout the sixteenth century that is largely absent from the contemporary vision of the polyphonic

⁷ Griffiths, John. “Improvisation and Composition in the Vihuela Songs of Luis Milán and Alonso Mudarra.” *Gesang zur Laute. Troja — Trossinger Jahrbuch für Renaissancemusik*, 2. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2003. 111-31. John Griffiths, “Luis Milán, Alonso Mudarra y la canción acompañada” *Edad de Oro* 22 (2003): 7-28; Cosimo Bottegari, *Il libro de canto e liuto / The Song and Lute Book*, ed. Dinko Fabris and John Griffiths. Bibliotheca Musica Bononiensis, Serie IV, vol. 98 (Bologna: Forni, 2006); John Griffiths, “The Music of Castrato Lutenists at the Time of Caravaggio”, *La Musica al tempo di Caravaggio*, ed. Stefania Macioce & Enrico Di Pascale (Rome: Gangemi, 2012), 81-97; John Griffiths, “Cantantes, cantautores y canciones en la prehistoria de la ópera”, *Allegro cum laude: Estudios musicológicos en homenaje a Emilio Casares*, ed. María Nagore and Victor Sánchez Sánchez (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2014), 85–92; John Griffiths, “Singer-songwriters, the Lute, and the Stile Nuovo”, *Passaggio in Italia: Music on the Grand Tour in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Dinko Fabris and Margaret K. Murata (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 53-64.

renaissance. I posit that there was a courtly and urban culture of solo singing that was possibly just as audible and significant as the surviving polyphonic vocal repertory. The music was seldom written down, but is implicit from various forms of often circumstantial or sketchy evidence. It is the bit that is missing from the background that makes sense of what was to come next. It is the bit that is missing to make sense of the background from which opera emerged.

What I have been doing in my studies is to connect up various sets of dots in the hope that they will eventually all make sense together. They start with singer lutenists of the late fifteenth century such as Pietrobono detto il Chitarrino. Next are the humanists of the same period. Opera possibly starts back then with Poliziano.⁸ Consider his colleague Marsilio Ficino, for example, who accompanied himself on his “lira” every day to improvise Latin verse in classical metre.⁹ A little later, we have Spanish evidence —vihuelists of the 1530s and 40s— whose “original” songs are the oldest preserved in Europe. At the same time, Italian singer-songwriters perfected a way of adapting madrigals to the lute —first seen in 1536. Arcadelt’s madrigals were the best suited, it seems. These songs and this style appears to have remained in fashion for over half a century, as is borne out in Caravaggio’s portraits of lutenists in the 1590s. One of the singers who was a master of this style was the mercenary Giulio Cesare Brancaccio.¹⁰ Another was Hippolito Tromboncino, active in the middle decades of the century. A handful of his songs were preserved in the 1570s songbook of another professional singer-songwriter, Cosimo Bottegari. Tromboncino passed his art to Heteroclitio Giancarli who preserved it until 1602, at least. Surprise, surprise! The music that reaches us along this pathway is not very different in sound and style from the new monodies of Caccini and Peri. It makes you wonder what all the fuss is about, really. But if all you had ever heard was Palestrina, Byrd and a few madrigalists, then very likely you might believe that a revolution was underway when there wasn’t one at all.

After all, changes in musical style occur as a process of gradual transformation; seldom by reaction or as the product of full frontal attack.

⁸ Nino Perrotta and Elena Povoledo. *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁹ Grantley McDonald, “*Orpheus Germanicus*: Metrical Music and the Reception of Marsilio Ficino’s Poetics and Music theory in Renaissance Germany”, (PhD diss. University of Melbourne, 2002).

¹⁰ Richard Wistreich, *Warrior, Courtier, Singer: Giulio Cesare Brancaccio and the performance of Identity in the late Renaissance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

abstract

Can Heterocrito Giancarli change the world?

Less familiar to contemporary musicologists than Benjamin Button, Heterocrito Giancarli might be poised to do more for music than Benjamin Button did for the science of ageing. A Venetian patrician, amateur singer and author of a collection of *Compositione musicali* published in 1602, Heterocrito Giancarli might be just the man to unsettle one of the pivotal foundation stones of Western musical culture concerning the genesis of opera. He is the tip of an iceberg that offers an alternate history to the modern myth starring Florentine nobleman Giovanni Bardi and his Camerata of monody co-conspirators, Girolamo Mei, Vincenzo Galilei and Jacopo Peri. Instead, the Giancarli story tells of a hundred years of singing to the lute, of a much more realistic and subtle development and reshaping of existing practices, and of Baroque styles that grew from renaissance traditions rather than as reaction against them. It therefore questions whether it was really the Bardi Laboratories that killed off polyphony in order to reinvent monody, and that acted to enable the Ancient World to triumph over Modernity. My research suggests a less theatrical scenario that recognises the presence of singer-songwriters throughout the sixteenth century, musicians usually omitted from general histories of sixteenth-century music, and suggests a series of continuities that link Giulio Caccini and other early baroque monodists to the lutenist songsters who flourished throughout the sixteenth century.