Music and feasts in the fifteenth century

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... after supper, in the garden of the Tadei, the famous Casolana sang divinely to the lute.¹

Maddalena Casolana’s after-supper singing is a late Renaissance instance of an ancient practice: the association of music and dining in Western civilization is as old as Western civilization itself. In Homer’s Iliad, book 9 – the famous “embassy book” – Achilleus is “delighting his heart in a lyre, clear-sounding, / splendid and carefully wrought, with a bridge of silver upon it” when the delegation arrives. He instructs Patroklos to “‘set up a mixing-bowl that is bigger, / and mix us stronger drink, and make ready a cup for each man, / since these who have come beneath my roof are the men I love best’.”²

The association of music-making with dining is not difficult to understand: both activities occur in “real time” and are dynamic or kinetic in nature.³ In that respect, they are like others of the arts involving movement – theater, dance – where the substance of the work unfolds in time. In contrast, other art forms – painting, sculpture, architecture – have a static materiality. The substance of the work is unchanging, although the viewer’s experience of it evolves, of course. And static works of art can also be featured in dynamic art forms, such as processions, where a painting can figure in a dynamic tableau vivant. These qualifications notwithstanding, music-making and dining share the characteristic of kinesis, which makes them ideally suited to their concurrent use.

Indeed, before the advent of recording technology, one’s experience of music – as sounding music – was invariably of a live performance, and before the establishment of the nineteenth-century concert tradition, musical performances typically accompanied other kinds of dynamic, real-time activity: liturgical ceremonies, theatrical performances, public festivals organized into a series of discrete phases, and so on. Because all such activities, like a

¹ Fabretti, Cronache, 4:44. ² Homer, Iliad, trans. Lattimore, 203-4. ³ Allen Grieco developed this interpretation in conversation with Margaret Bent; I am grateful to Dr. Grieco for useful discussion of it.
musical performance, also unfolded in time, the concurrent use of several different media sharing this characteristic was logical. Liturgical ceremonies comprised complex ritual action interspersed with the recitation of texts and performance of musical settings thereof; theatrical performances accommodated entr'acte music; public festivals might feature a procession of floats, accompanied by instrumental playing or the singing of explanatory verse elucidating the metaphoric meanings intended by the festivals' organizers. In all such cases, a series of episodes occasioned the alternation of music with other kinds of activity or performative elements (or, in some instances, the simultaneous use of music and another performative element, such as at a banquet, where instrumental playing could accompany attendees' consumption of one of the courses). As we shall see, there were also contemporary theoretical justifications for associating music-making and dining, such as music's supposed aid in digestion.

Moreover, both banqueting and music-making involve similar creative processes. Both originate in raw material: undifferentiated pitches and pitch durations in the case of music-making; more or less undifferentiated foodstuffs in the case of banqueting. The creative act entails forging a dynamic artistic result from such materials.

Sources

The relevant sources are varied in nature: textual, visual, musical. The textual material is of several types, of potentially varying historical value. On the one hand, there are treatises whose authors make theoretical arguments about the relationship of feasting and music-making, which demand careful interpretation and an evaluation of the authors' assumptions. On the other hand, there are eyewitness accounts of festive events where music-making and banqueting occurred. In some respects, the evidential status of these latter is less suspect, since their authors often had no other objective than reporting in a straightforward manner on the event witnessed.

Fifteenth-century Franco-Burgundian practice

The fifteenth century inherited particulars of the practice of convivial music-making from the earlier Middle Ages. For example, in 1343, Clement VI was feted by Cardinal Annibale di Ceccano on the outskirts of Avignon: "The meal consisted of nine courses (vivande) each having three dishes, that is a total of twenty-seven dishes ... A concert brought the main part of the feast to a close ... After dessert the master cook danced, together with his ...
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assistants." More than a century later (1454), a famous banquet attended by Philip of Burgundy and his son Charles the Bold had a similar structure, characterized by F. Alberto Gallo as "rigidly symmetrical": there were nine dramatic and nine musical performances, just as there were nine courses in 1343. The occasion for the 1454 banquet was a meeting of the Knights of the Golden Fleece, at the conclusion of which Philip announced a crusade to reclaim Constantinople from the Turks, who had taken the city the previous year. The contemporary descriptions of the banquet are uncommonly detailed, and unusually permit us to identify one of the actual compositions performed: "a marvelously large and beautiful stag entered," on whose back was

a young boy, XII years of age ... And upon entering the hall the said child began the top voice of a song, very high and clear, and the said stag himself sang the tenor part without ... any other person, other than the child and the artifice of the stag, and the song they sang is entitled Je ne vis onques la pareille. A polyphonic setting of the text Je ne vis onques la pareille is attributed in period manuscripts to either Binchois or Du Fay: a three-voice chanson, in the familiar fifteenth-century disposition of discantus, tenor, and contratenor. I return to this composition at the conclusion, where I consider specific examples of the kind of music employed at fifteenth-century feasts.

The music-making on these occasions alternated with the food courses, affording variety in the succession of events and situating the courses within a contrasting, non-culinary frame. These non-culinary framing elements were quite varied in nature: "musical pieces, dances, masked processions, appearance of magical machines, live or artificial animals, minstrels, or acrobats between the courses of splendid courtly banquets." In 1468, for example, a visitor to Ferrara reported that "[y]esterday ... while we were dining, we had

4 Mollat, The Popes at Avignon, 313-14. The detailed period description cited by Mollat is in Casanova, "Visita di un papa." Of course, the extravagance of such events at the papal court of Avignon elicited the (unfair) condemnation of figures like Petrarch: Robinson, Readings in European History, 1:502.
5 Gallo, Music of the Middle Ages, 102-107.
6 Cummings, Lion's Ear, 25-40; the more extended version of the material in Cummings, "Leo X and Roman Carnival"; and Cummings, "Dance and 'the Other'."
7 Fallows, "Specific Information on the Ensembles," 135; see also 134 36, 139. The contemporary description is open to some interpretation; I have been influenced by Fallows's. There is a recording on Dufay, Guillaume Dufay c1400-1474, Missa "Ecce ancilla Domini." Le Banquet de vous 1454. Ensemble Gilles Binchois, 2 CDs, Virgin Veritas xx 7243 5 61818 2 3 (n.p., 2000), CD 2, track 7.
8 Dufay, Opera omnia, 6:109.
9 Pirrotta, "Intermedium." On the relationship of banqueting and dancing, see, for example, see Arena, "Rules of Dancing."
various amusements of playing of harpsichords and lutes, and by jesters and by Master Giovanni Orbo, who recited in a marvelous manner, quite out of the ordinary. The French word for such interpolations was “entremetz,” the Italian word “intermedij” (or “intermezzi,” or “intramesse”), terms that, despite their etymological differences, refer to the same phenomenon: between or “intermediary to” the discrete phases of a larger event, a different kind of performative activity was interpolated.

**Fifteenth-century Italian practice**

Consistent with the larger program of the Italian Renaissance, convivial music-making in fifteenth-century Italy either imaginatively resuscitated ancient Greek and Roman tradition (insofar as it was recoverable) or reframed and reinterpreted medieval tradition, overlaying it with a classicizing veneer. In Phyllis Pray Bober’s words, Plato’s Symposium thus became “a poetic paradigm for future banquets.” Indeed, Italian Renaissance texts that describe banqueting at which there was music-making are often entitled “symposium” or “convivium,” a self-conscious reference to the Platonic model.

A revealing example is provided by Giannozzo Manetti, “[e]lected ambassador to the Signoria of Venice by the signoria and colleges of Florence on the 23rd day of August, 1448.”

On Tuesday morning [8 October] ... several Florentine youths ... came to eat with the Ambassador, and because they were all meritorious youths at the table ..., there were many different and beautiful discussions. That evening we again had supper with the ambassador, and there was varied instrumental playing and most delightful singing, so that we spent all that day and evening most playfully in dancing and song.

Manetti left a detailed account of the actual discussions that took place at the banquet; its title expressly invokes the Platonistic term “symposium.” The banquet’s attendees were from celebrated Florentine families: the Bardi, the Neri, the Portinari, the Strozzi. Precisely because their discussions proved so absorbing, Manetti invited the attendees to remain for supper. Two of them

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13 Ibid., 279.
14 “Jannotij manetti dialogus in domestico et familiarum amorum symposio venetijs habitus dum ibi florentini populi nomine legationis munere fungeretur ad donatum acciaiolum incipit feliciter”; ibid.
who had been appointed to judge the debate withdrew to Manetti's bedroom to deliberate:\textsuperscript{15}

while we were waiting impatiently for the forthcoming judgment of the above-mentioned judges, in order not to be affected by excessive tediousness of waiting, we, fortunately, joined with excellent masters of the lute and organ who had participated with us at the symposium, so that they might play some melodies. As they had been ordered, those men obeyed right away and made so great and sweet an effort with the melodies of the various instruments, until the judges – who had spent the long time of roughly three hours in the bedroom chamber – returned to us.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus banqueting, learned discussion, and music-making all occurred on the same occasion.

Another celebrated quattrocento humanist furnishes similar information. In his \textit{Convivia mediolanensia}, Francesco Filelfo reports on a (fictive?) convivial occasion featuring musical performances; there is an explicit appeal to custom (classical custom, certainly) as a guide to how such convivia ought to be structured. One of the guests, Francesco Landriano, suggests to his host, G. Antonio Rembaldo, that Rembaldo's sons sing to the accompaniment of (neoclassical) string instruments:\textsuperscript{17}

"so as not to seem to have ignored entirely the normal customs of a symposium, it may perhaps be timely to hear how capable in playing and singing your boys are, Rembaldo, both of whom I see ready, the one with the lyre, the other with the psaltery." "You admonish correctly," Rembaldo said, and – having turned to his boys – he ordered them to fulfill their tasks. And thus touching and gently strumming the strings, they – taking turns – accommodated the rhythms to these words: "Whoever wishes to see the beauty of the stars and the splendid unifications of the one who thunders, come here, happy, to rich meals under a benevolent star."\textsuperscript{18}

A well-known poetic description of the wedding banquet for Francesco Sforza and Bianca Maria Visconti by Filelfo's contemporary Antonio Cornazano depicts a performance by the celebrated lutenist-singer Pietro Bono.\textsuperscript{19} Here, too, there is an obvious attempt at classicization, since the language – though vernacular – "aims to recreate the flavor of Homeric times, probably known to the poet through Virgil's \textit{Aeneid}, or ... some snatch of

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 282 (trans. Claudia Wiener and Markus Dubischar).
\textsuperscript{17} Pirrotta, "Musica e umanesimo."
\textsuperscript{18} Filelfo, \textit{Conviviun}, c. 3 (trans. Claudia Wiener and Markus Dubischar). On Filelfo's text, see also Pirrotta, "Italien."
Homeric translation provided to him by ... Filelfo. Although also fictive, Cornazano's account is useful in conveying a picture of the structure of such occasions and the place within them for music-making. In Nino Pirrotta's synopsis, 21

[the stage is Cremona, given to the bride as part of her dowry. The year is 1441... Cornazano ... dismisses the banquet itself in a few lines and swiftly moves on to describe the mood of relaxation following the meal ... [A]ll become silent while the protagonist himself, Sforza, tells of an episode of war and of mercy on the vanquished. After him one of his captains, whose name, Troilo, happens to have a classical ring, recalls past adventures and perils. Only when the pathos of reminiscence has reached its peak is the musician introduced, "whom the stars have endowed with the power of soothing and pacifying."

In many instances the tendency toward classicization extended to the iconography of the staged presentations. A 1495 supper in honor of the prince of Capua featured "Venus with Jupiter and Juno with fountains," who "came" after "the plates" had been "set on the tables"; the "float with Neptune led by ten silvered marine monsters" and "the fable of Neptune"; "three Sirens and Arion" who "sang verses"; and "Pan with an eclogue" and "Pomona with the same eclogue." 22

At the 1475 wedding festivities of Costanzo Sforza and Camilla d'Aragona, "ORPHEO" sang verses to the accompaniment of what was described in the period account, classicistically, as "una lyra d'oro," 23 but to judge from the contemporary miniatures done as a record of the event, the instrument was some variety of viola da braccio. (The period miniatures are invaluable in our efforts to imagine these sumptuous occasions. 24) Orpheus's particular role on that occasion was to offer dishes sent by Apollo. 25 In 1489, at the wedding festivities for Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Isabella d'Aragona, Orpheus makes yet another appearance, on this occasion presenting the roasted game he had beguiled with his singing. 26 At a 1473 banquet hosted by Cardinal Pietro Riario in his Palazzo della Cancelleria for Eleonora d'Aragona, who was in transit to Ferrara for her wedding to Ercole d'Este, Perseus, Andromeda, Ceres, Venus, Atalante,

20 Pirrotta, "Music and Cultural Tendencies," 139. Filelfo's translations of Homer remained unpublished; he was composing a Latin Sfortias at around the time when Cornazano was composing his Sforziade; Pirrotta, "Music and Cultural Tendencies," 139 n. 47. For assistance on Filelfo, I am grateful to Jeroen De Keyser and Luigi Silvano.
22 Marinis, ed., Le nozze di Costanzo Sforza e Camilla d'Aragona.
23 Ibid., pl. 10.
24 Ibid., 20-21.
25 Ibid., 75-77.
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Hercules, Bacchus, and other figures of classical mythology appeared. One course, which consisted of "five very large dishes of roast meats," featured "a young man ... with a garland and a viola in hand, and having arrived, he sang ... verses." And amid the quasi-dramatic presentations were free-standing musical performances by the renowned solo singer Baccio Ugolini, among others.

Such restitutions of antique tradition are attested by other kinds of sources, such as a 1424 letter to Vitaliano Faella from Guarino da Verona, who offers the classicizing justification that "you read about hardly any feasts of ancient times in which singers were not involved."

Theoretical arguments

Guarino's justification leads in turn to a fuller consideration of period rationales for convivial music-making. Famed Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Gioviano Pantano justified banqueting and accompanying music-making on grounds of their obvious effectiveness as means of rendering homage:

Feasts organized to render homage / ... it is suitable that they be those ... demonstrated a short time ago in that feast ... offered to Charles, Duke of Burgundy ... Besides the great many courses of varied foods and great decorations, besides the sweetest musical compositions, after the second part of the dinner - which was truly splendid - mimes were introduced and a spectacle offered under the light of lamps.

Another Neapolitan humanist, Johannes Tinctoris, similarly argued that music-making intensified the entire experience of a convivium: one of the effects of music enumerated in his treatise *Complexus effectuum musices* suggests that "[m]usic increases the joyfulness of banquets." (Here, too, there is a classicizing impulse, in that Tinctoris's objective was to identify past precedents for the habits of listening to music current among his contemporaries.)

Paolo Cortesi argued that music aided in digestion:

How passions should be avoided, and music used after meals ... The same must be said about the kind of all other passions, against which an adverse position must be taken always by the senator [i.e., the cardinal] at other times, but more

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27 The description is by "ELEONORA ... DUCISSA FERRARIE" herself. See Corvisieri, "Il trionfo romano di Eleonora d'Aragona," esp. 649. As Pirrotta, "Rom," suggested, the "jovene con una jorlanda" was Apollo. The account contains many other fascinating details about the music-making and theatrical effects.
28 Corvisieri, "Il trionfo romano di Eleonora d'Aragona," 680-81; Ferroni, "Appunti sulla politica festiva," esp. 61 and n. 44.
than ever at this time of recreation, lest his body be prevented from digesting the food by some intervening discomfort of his soul. Wherefore, since at this time those things must be sought after by which a cheerful mood is usually aroused, it may well be inquired whether the pleasure of music should be put to use particularly at this point, ... [W]e are convinced that music should be put to use at this time for the sake not only of merriment, but also of knowledge and morals.\textsuperscript{31}

Musical \textit{intermedij} thus enhanced attendees' experience of the banquets, articulated (and introduced substantial variety into) the sequence of elements of which convivia were composed, and supposedly aided in the digestive process.

The music

Contemporary sources document an impressive variety of musical styles and genres deployed during banqueting. "[T]he \textit{entrees} of convivial \textit{entremets}" prominently featured "a custom": "the instrumentalist – almost always a tambourinist – who led the entrance of characters ... and then remained to provide a rhythmic background without participating in the action."\textsuperscript{32} Further: depending upon their significance to the larger event, some of the phases of the convivium could be announced by instrumental fanfares.\textsuperscript{33} When Eleonora d’Aragona was betrothed to Ercole d’Este,

\begin{quote}
[o]nce the ... publication of the marriage contract was finished ..., there came His Lordship and Madama ... Everything was ... in order in the great hall, ... Then began the festivities and dancing, ... and ... after the dancing went on for a while, it seemed suitable to His Excellency to announce the new kinship ... At the end of the speeches there began to sound trumpets and piffari to solemnize the announcements, then again there began the dancing ...; then there came the confections, with trumpets and piffari in the royal style.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

More elaborate instrumental playing, manifesting an appealing variety of instrumental colors, occurred during the courses themselves. In such cases, the performances were presumably of instrumental arrangements of vocal compositions, such as in the Casanatense chansonnier;\textsuperscript{35} or of instrumental works conceived to accompany dancing, momentarily redeployed from their original purpose to a less functional role; or of more abstract instrumental genres

\textsuperscript{31} Cortese, quoted and translated in Pirrotra, “Music and Cultural Tendencies,” 146–48, 152.
\textsuperscript{33} For other evidence, which suggests that instrumental fanfares could occur at the beginning and conclusion of the dinner proper, see Baroncini, “Zorzi Trombetta,” esp. 61–62.
\textsuperscript{34} Lockwood, ed., \textit{Ferrarese Chansonnier}, xxvii–xxviii and n. 25.
\textsuperscript{35} Rome 2856. Lockwood, \textit{Ferrarese Chansonnier}. 
divine pleasure. He then performed an heroic song which he had himself recently composed in praise of our own Piero dei Medici ... His voice was not entirely that of someone reading, nor entirely that of someone singing; both could be heard, and yet neither separated one from the other; it was, in any case, even or modulated, and changed as required by the passage ... You might have thought that an adolescent Roscius was acting on the stage.\footnote{Politianus, \textit{Opera omnia}, 1:165–66, trans. Pirrotta and Povoledo, \textit{Music and Theatre}, ch. 1, conclusion.}

In such cases of oral transmission, we can only extrapolate from extant compositions that seem to reflect the unwritten tradition, however imperfectly. For example, around 1470, lutenist-singer Filippo Scarlatti copied the texts of \textquote{"Rispetti to be sung to the lute"} and \textquote{"stanze"} that \textquote{are declaimed to the lute at night as serenades.}\footnote{Pasquini, \textquote{"Il codice di Filippo Scarlatti,"} esp. 428; Pirrotta, \textquote{"Italien."}} (Although there is no mention of banqueting—the occasion for the performances is specified simply as \textquote{"la sera"}—the performance context is obviously related to that at issue here.) Scarlatti then copied two texts for which musical settings are extant (in the manuscript El Escorial IV.a.24), one of which—\textquote{Ora maj che fora sono}—is especially illustrative. In the Escorial manuscript, it is for solo voice and three lower instrumental \textquote{voices."

But if one assumes a redaction—entirely typical of the time—where the singer performed only the cantus and tenor (the cantus sung, the tenor played on the lute or viola), \textquote{the necessary and sufficient nucleus of the composition} is preserved.\footnote{Pirrotta, \textquote{"Su alcuni testi."}} Works like \textquote{Ora maj} must have been typical of the provisions for many fifteenth-century Italian banquets,\footnote{A qualification, however: Scarlatti describes \textquote{Ora maj} as a \textquote{"Chanzona napoletana,"} and its text is irreverent (a nun escaping from the cloister). The documents quoted suggest instead that the texts set for these convivial occasions invoked classical material, and were often in Latin. Compositions like \textquote{Ora maj} would hardly have been deemed appropriate. It is, rather, the style of the setting that suggests something about the provisions for these banquets.} as the accounts cited here suggest. The extant settings are precious testimony to unwritten practices that are now almost irretrievable.\footnote{For an edition, see Pirrotta, \textquote{"Su alcuni testi,"} 155–56. A recording—of the unredacted four-voice version—is on \textit{Il cantar moderno}, Ensemble Daedalus. Accent ACC 9068D (Beert, n.d. [?1990]).}

One final illustrative example. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, a repertory emerges that reflects fifteenth-century unwritten practice. Settings of Italian verse are identified as to text type, the implication being that any text in the poetic form identified could be substituted for the one provided with the musical setting. Thereafter, the setting is arranged for voice and lute. A lutenist-singer thus had readily available a repertory of model settings of sonnets, odes, and other verse forms.\footnote{Cummings and Dean, \textquote{"The ‘Great Italian Songbook’."}} Such model settings, like that in Example 19.1, suggest the kind of music performed by Orpheus, Apollo, and

\footnotesize
42 Pasquini, \textquote{"Il codice di Filippo Scarlatti,"} esp. 428; Pirrotta, \textquote{"Italien."}
43 Pirrotta, \textquote{"Su alcuni testi."}
44 A qualification, however: Scarlatti describes \textquote{Ora maj} as a \textquote{"Chanzona napoletana,"} and its text is irreverent (a nun escaping from the cloister). The documents quoted suggest instead that the texts set for these convivial occasions invoked classical material, and were often in Latin. Compositions like \textquote{Ora maj} would hardly have been deemed appropriate. It is, rather, the style of the setting that suggests something about the provisions for these banquets.
46 Cummings and Dean, \textquote{"The ‘Great Italian Songbook’."}
Example 19.1 Model setting for voice and instruments of the oda text *La dolce diva mia*. Vocal line from Petrucci, *Strambotti Ode Frottole Sonetti. Et modo de cantar versi latini e capituli. Libro quarto*, Venice, 1507, fol. 46v, with a period intabulation of the accompaniment for lute, from Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, Rés. Vmd. 27, fol. 47v

the other mythological figures who appeared at the sumptuous and atmospheric convivia reconstructed here.

Banqueting was a time-honored occasion for music-making during the fifteenth century. The fundamental structure of such an event was inherited from the earlier Middle Ages: the separate courses alternated with other kinds of
intermediary activity, music prominent among them. In northern Europe, the music performed exemplified established compositional convention: the tradition of three-voice polyphonic settings of French secular texts, for example. The Italian Renaissance, perhaps predictably, classicized the activity inherited from the preceding centuries, so that convivial music-making was rationalized by reference to ancient precedent, the iconographic material was often classical in origin, and the kind of music-making privileged (solo singing to the accompaniment of one’s own playing of a plucked or strummed string instrument) was understood as a classicizing restitution of ancient musical practice.

More generally, music’s essential status as a kinetic phenomenon that unfolds in time afforded its simultaneous use with other kinds of performative activity, particularly where the larger activity was organized into such discrete phases, which furnished occasion for contrasting intermediary activity. During banqueting, there was an aesthetically satisfying concurrent appeal to various agents of human sense experience – the senses of smell, taste, sight, hearing, and even of touch – as the vivid contemporary accounts evocatively attest. They afford a reintegration into that world, an imagined reconstruction of the convivial activity of the medieval and early modern eras.

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