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INTRODUCTION

Street Singers: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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Cantastorie, canterini, cantimpanca, saltimbanchi, cerretani, ciarlatani, ciurmadori, istrioni, buffoni, ioculatori, giullari: so many different names (and one might think of even more) must indicate many different things. Or do they?

They all refer to the street singers and performers of Renaissance Italy, and at first sight they appear to designate many distinct specializations within the large spectrum of interrelated activities that they carried out in the piazzas and marketplaces of the peninsula. Hence, *cantastorie* or *canterini* would be the specific names for the poet-singers, whose principal trade was to perform verses, stories, and songs, usually to musical accompaniment, in urban public (or semi-public) spaces, and whose mastery of words and music even allowed them to improvise their compositions; *saltimbanchi* or *ioculatori* would be used for the acrobats, jugglers, dancers, and conjurers, whose skills were physical more than verbal; *istrioni* and *buffoni* for the actors, either playing parts in comedies or performing solo their best set pieces; *cerretani* and *ciurmadori* for the charlatans and pedlars who advertised and sold their multifarious wares to passers-by whom they mesmerized with speeches, gestures, and images. Yet, all those wandering entertainers and itinerant salesmen were so protean, and therefore so elusive, that the more we deepen our knowledge of them (as far as the scarce documentation allows us to), the more we wonder whether the abovementioned labels really designated different arts and professions, or rather different aspects of the same multifaceted identity. If we try to create a taxonomy of the street singers, all of their different social and cultural characteristics no longer appear as distinct categories or careers. For the sake of convenience, in this issue we have chosen to favour the term *cantastorie*, but most of them could in fact be labelled with many other different names, depending on which of their facets was showing on a given occasion, or in a specific context, or in a particular period of their career.

Cantastorie were, in the first place, oral poets. The heirs of medieval minstrels and jesters, they entertained, educated, and informed their audiences with a manifold repertoire

of narrative, lyrical, didactic, and dramatic works, either of other authors or of their own, drawing upon both the anonymous popular tradition and the production of canonical writers; historical and chivalric epics were one of their typical subjects, but they also sang about politics and current affairs, as well as performing amorous, comic, moral, religious, scientific and fantastical verses. Secondly, while their capacity to entrance broad audiences was founded on the attraction of their voices, they were often also skilled musicians, sometimes excellent players of stringed instruments such as the *viola da braccio*, to whose accompaniment they sang their verse. Thirdly, many of them were also successful actors and buffoons, as their vocal, mimetic, and mnemonic skills made them capable of impersonating different characters, each of them displaying a specific language and repertoire, either in one-man-shows or in company with a few fellow performers. Furthermore, the physical skills and the nimbleness that enhanced their stage presence could be so well-developed as to allow them to astonish their spectators also as acrobats and dancers. Similarly, the training in the art of memory required by their activity as oral poets could as well be put to use in amazing conjuring tricks. Finally, *cantastorie* very often were keen to exploit their own natural magnetism and refined art of verbal persuasion in transforming spectators into consumers of an array of novel products: numerous street entertainers were therefore also well-known charlatans, public healers, tooth-pullers, and sellers of recipes, remedies, panaceas, perfumes, balls of soap, and many other wares. What is more, from the late fifteenth century many developed another important activity and source of profit as pioneering publishers and booksellers, quickly recognising the possibilities of the new art of printing to allow them to sell copies of their works cheaply, even if the press would also ultimately hasten their decline.

Although some *cantastorie* found success in palaces and courts, their primary stage was the urban piazza, where they captured the attention of a variegated public, from merchants and artisans to peasants, nobles and men of letters, women as well as men. These seemingly marginal and shadowy figures held a place at the epicentre of Italian Renaissance civilization, and moved fluidly between different cultural and social spheres, acting as crucial mediators in the dynamic continuum of learned and popular, oral and literate, Medieval and humanistic cultures that characterised that era. They were, symbolically, a focal point where the culture of the piazza and the culture of the palazzo collided and intermingled.

At least since Peter Burke's seminal work on early modern popular culture, *cantastorie* and their counterparts in other parts of Europe have been identified as a subject of pivotal importance, albeit one difficult to study.¹ More recently, scholars from various disciplines have considered different facets of these performers: cultural historians have used anthropological tools to analyse how some of their compositions contributed to spread anticlericalism, prophetic culture, and even heterodox ideas widely through Italian society;² historians of communication have recognized the fundamental role played by *cantastorie* in the formation of an ephemeral form of public sphere and their capacity to act as oral proto-journalists by providing not only entertainment but also information and breaking news to a wide

¹ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978; 3rd revised edition, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), and idem, 'Oral Culture and Print Culture in Renaissance Italy', *ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, 54 (1998), 7–18.

² Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990; Italian edn. Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1987), and idem, *Rinascimento anticlericale* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005).

audience;³ book historians have increasingly highlighted their primary importance in the dissemination of print, not only from the commercial point of view, but also from that of editorial strategies;⁴ others have scrutinized their medical activity as charlatans, who used their performative skills to draw a crowd around them and to advertise and sell their miraculous remedies;⁵ literary scholars have explored texts and contexts of some of the favourite genres of the *cantastorie*, chivalric romances above all,⁶ lately shedding some light on the interactions between oral performances and written sources and records, and reassessing the long-lasting influence of their poetic craft on the composition and circulation of both popular and learned poems;⁷ historians of theatre have investigated the close connections of street entertainers with the birth and the developments of Renaissance comedy, and their direct involvement in the fortunes of the so-called *Commedia dell'Arte*;⁸ and musicologists have examined the oral and aural dimension of *cantastorie*'s art, typically linked to non-written traditions and improvisational techniques.⁹

If *cantastorie* nevertheless remain so elusive, it is partly due to the actual ambivalences of the fluid macro-category of piazza entertainers, with their many interconnected skills and activities and their diverse and overlapping social and cultural characteristics; partly to the apparent ambiguities produced by our present-mindedness and by the (sometimes one-eyed) perspectives of different disciplines and academic traditions; and partly to the lack of documentation, that can only be overcome by combining the use of archival documents, substantial textual analysis and iconographic materials.

In order for the cultural role of these protean and multi-faceted figures to be fully understood, then, there is a need to combine different narratives and disciplinary skills

³ Rosa Salzberg and Massimo Rospoche, 'Street Singers in Italian Renaissance Urban Culture and Communication', *Cultural and Social History*, 9 (2012), 9–26; Massimo Rospoche, 'Songs of War. Historical and Literary Narratives in the "Horrendous Italian Wars" (1494–1559)', in *Narrating War. Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Marco Mondini and Massimo Rospoche (Bologna: il Mulino; Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2013), pp. 79–97.

⁴ Rosa Salzberg, 'In the Mouth of Charlatans: Street Performers and the Dissemination of Pamphlets in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance Studies*, 24 (2010), 638–53, and idem, *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Massimo Rospoche, 'From Orality to Print: Revolution or Transition? Street Singers in the Renaissance Multi-Media System', in *The Historiography of Transition: Critical Phases in the Development of Modernity*, ed. by Paolo Pombeni (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 23–39; Giancarlo Petrella, *Ippolito Ferrarese, a Traveling "Cerretano" and Publisher in Sixteenth Century Italy*, in *Print Culture and Peripheries in Early Modern Europe. A Contribution to the History of Printing and the Book Trade in Small European and Spanish Cities*, ed. by B. Rial Costas (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 201–26.

⁵ David Gentilcore, *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶ Marco Villosi, *La fabbrica dei cavalieri. Cantari, poemi, romanzi in prosa fra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Rome: Salerno editrice, 2005).

⁷ Luca Degl'Innocenti, *I "Reali" dell'Altissimo: un ciclo di cantari fra oralità e scrittura* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2008), and idem, 'The Singing Voice and the Printing Press: Itineraries of the Altissimo's Performed Texts in Renaissance Italy', *The Italianist*, 34 (2014), 318–35; Marco Villosi, 'La voce in piazza. Note e divagazioni sulla figura del canterino', *Paragone Letteratura*, 84–86 (2009), 41–72.

⁸ Paola Ventrone, *Gli araldi della commedia: teatro a Firenze nel Rinascimento* (Pisa: Pacini, 1993); Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); M. A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560–1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2006).

⁹ James Haar, 'Improvisatori and their Relationship to Sixteenth-Century Music', in idem, *Essays on Italian Poetry and Music in the Renaissance, 1350–1600* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 76–99; Blake Wilson, 'Dominion of the Ear: Singing the Vernacular in Piazza San Martino', *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 16 (2013), 273–87, and idem, 'Canterino and Improvisatore: Oral Poetry and Performance', in *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music*, ed. by Anna Maria Busse-Berger and Jesse Rodin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 292–310.

and perspectives. If we are to look at such scarcely-documented and many-sided figures without seeing only a flat and partial image, scholars must adopt multiple points of view, either each on their own, or else by joining forces. This is what we aim to do in the present volume, whose essays have been chosen with a view to assembling an array of case studies from specialists in different disciplines. Each essay offers a specific approach to the general topic, but at the same time all of them encompass more than one aspect, so that their diverse projections of street singers' profiles should make many common traits and interconnections readily apparent to readers.

Blake Wilson, for instance, not only investigates musical delivery as an essential component of Renaissance poetry, but addresses questions that are crucial for both musical and verbal composition, such the conscious employment of mnemonic techniques on the part of *cantastorie*-improvisers. Anna Pegoretti tackles an aspect apparently limited to the realm of literacy, the imitation of Dante, but then highlights its deep connection with orality (and aurality) as well, showing how *cantastorie* acted as mouthpieces perpetuating the oral success of literary masterpieces. By examining the wide-spread poems about poverty, Rosa Salzberg deals with the ambivalence of *cantastorie*'s social status and communication strategies (balanced between exclusion and advancement, protest and resignation), and also reflects on how performing and printing related to each other. Laura Carnelos presents the blindness typical of many *cantastorie* (since Homer's time) on the one hand as a disability that marginalised performers socially and economically, and on the other as a gift that endowed them with exceptional musical, linguistic and mnemonic talents. By comparing the visual personae of elite *canterini* and urban *buffoni* perpetuated by portraits and book illustrations, Chrisinda Henry shows how they merged together elements associated with performers as (apparently) diverse as virtuosic musicians, Arcadian shepherds, mock-heroic entertainers, medical charlatans, and poets laureate. Robert Henke re-examines the vexed question of the links between street entertainment and the Commedia dell'Arte by exploring the many cheap prints that connect the (nick)names and repertoires of professional actors with piazza performances, thus showing how those worlds overlapped and intersected; and Eugenio Refini portrays a paradigmatic example of a medical charlatan who at once epitomises the protean nature of the *cantastorie*, since his strategies of self-promotion are refracted through a prism that simultaneously encompasses street performance, poetry and music, publishing and book-selling, high literature and popular advertisement, visual communication, public appeal and social climbing.

Ultimately, these essays make abundantly clear why, as Peter Burke argues in his postscript, the *cantastorie* represent exemplary figures of what Burke calls the 'hybrid Renaissance'. Not only do they occupy a hybrid cultural space in which we hear both popular rhymes and lyrical echoes of Dante (Pegoretti); they also inhabit the multiform physical space of the piazza, a public arena animated by *buffoni* (Henry) and by charlatans (Refini); by celebrated actors such as those of the Commedia dell'Arte (Henke) and by virtuosic musical improvisers (Wilson); by anonymous blind performers (Carnelos) and by a multitude of humble singers who made ends meet by singing about the poverty and misery that afflicted them (Salzberg). For these reasons, it is our belief that, by exploring the social and cultural world of the street singers, we also cast new light on the Renaissance itself, viewing it not simply 'from below' or 'from above', but from a different perspective altogether.

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