

Laudario di Cortona, Manuscript 91, Biblioteca del Comune e dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona (Arezzo, Italy)

By Franco Radicchia, choral director and teacher

It is difficult to take on musical programmes drawn from sources that are many centuries old: the codices bring us identifying features, more schematic than exhaustive, of a practice evolving across time and space. Only after a careful assessment of the relevant historic, ethnic, religious and musical parameters can one attempt an interpretation of the sources' contents. This makes for a distinctly modern operation, which cannot overlook the contexts and emotional environments in which the work is performed, characterising the strong link between the musical aspect of a work and its surrounding social landscape, be that sacred or secular.

Research into musical colour and soundscape is inspired by the popular expression of religious passions, which stimulate the mind to recreate a pure, simple and communicative space. During the period in which medieval Italy witnessed the birth of communal societies as an alternative to the feudal tradition (which had characterised society from the first centuries of the Middle Ages until the 12th – 13th centuries), in the musical world we observe the production of manuscripts that are associated with this period in history, and that bear the fruit of its innovation and culture.

It was precisely this context of communal societies that gave rise to confraternities of lay people (linked, in particular, to the bourgeoisie) which became the expression of the common arts. These associations became very important in the production of paraliturgical musical manuscripts. These manuscripts consisted of texts which were written, for the most part, in the common vernacular, and which described the Christian images and symbols of medieval Italy. Each confraternity was charged with the important responsibility of offering sustenance to the poor, and committed itself to the devotional exaltation of a relevant saint, after whom the confraternity was often named. These confraternities also looked after their associated places of worship, many of which still exist today in numerous Italian cities, and kept them running smoothly and for their intended purpose.

Cortona, an extraordinary medieval Tuscan city, is lucky enough to still count among its collection one of the best examples of paraliturgical musical production made by the confraternity of Santa Maria delle Laude from the Church of San Francesco: Manuscript 91, commonly known as the *Laudario di Cortona*. The date of the manuscript is not entirely clear. Some sources maintain that it was written around 1250 but, according to others, it could have been produced at any time between 1270 and 1290.

The manuscript was found in 1876 thanks to Girolamo Mancini, and the discovery of this codex brought to light one of the very few examples of a *laudario* composed of both text and music.

The importance of Cortona's Manuscript 91 is due principally to its content, which includes monodic sections of devotions to Mary, hagiographic texts regarding the saints, tales of the apostles, texts of moral instruction and many references to Franciscanism and the liturgical calendar. The variety of topics included also establishes the value of the work in the historical-literary sphere.

Devotion to the Virgin accounts for much of the theme of the Laudario; a fact which does not seem at all unusual if we consider that in the 13th century all of Europe was feeling the urge to produce literary and musical works specifically dedicated to the worship of Mary. It is also necessary, therefore, refer to the Fourth Council of the Lateran, announced in 1215 by Pope Innocent III, the pontiff who reinforced the ideal according to which the Spirit should prevail over the flesh. The Council led the fight against heterodoxy, and pushed devotion to Mary, amongst its various other initiatives, maintaining that it was a demonstration of anti-hereticism.

The sound of Codex 91 is characterised by texts from the legend genre which evoke a musical and interpretative perspective based on the Word as the guiding light for the medieval Christian, who listens respectfully to the sacred text and finds within it the essence of the Divine. It evokes an atmosphere full of auditory meanings linked to symbolism, where the melody is put to the service of the text; the melody, therefore, exists only to give auditory amplification to the theological meaning.

The musical components of the Laudario are influenced by pre-existing melodic patterns of the Gregorian repertoire and are 'contaminated' by phrases from popular dances and songs. One notes, therefore, an evident mixing of sacred and secular, which for the Christian of the time served as a vehicle, travelling to the sacred texts via an intelligible linguistic bridge. The understanding of the texts is associated with a practical, popular (for some verses, theatrical) iconography of the Christian message. Popular religiosity, which until that time had passively lived out the Christian dogma, now came into contact with the *disciplinati*, who came down into the *piazze* to preach penance in a tangible form. This phenomenon played out alongside the birth of the confraternities, that popular associationism which created a

Christian path parallel to the liturgical one.

Confirming all of this, we note that the melodies included in the *Laudario* often recall the secular tunes of the period, favouring the phenomenon of the *contrafacta*: sacred texts applied to music of secular origin (and vice-versa). The manuscript avails itself of a collection of extracts and poems used by the Confraternity, written in the vernacular of the 1200s to promote popular participation in devotion at the most important points in the liturgical calendar.

The *Laudario di Cortona* consists of 171 pages of parchment containing 47 laude, 46 of which are provided with both lyrics and music on the first verse. N° 5, however, consists only of text. This work is held as the most important document for the lauda of the 13th century: a testament to the sacred musical expression practised in the villages of southern Tuscany and Umbria. It constitutes the first known document in vernacular Italian to be set to music. This is an Italian organised around structures that recall its origins in the Arab and Hispanic traditions, transplanted into the Franciscan *melopea* at the climax of the period.

The *silloge* consists of laude in a variety of forms: hymnodic, responsorial, chorused (where the repetition of text is accompanied by a recurring melody) and *zajalesque* (where the musical structure mirrors the poetic shape).

The *Laudario* brings us a musical dimension inspired by early Franciscanism, characterised by musical forms which were plain and simple. This can be closely linked to its impact, which was forged between the psychology of the early Franciscans and the particular moment in the evolution of the musical expression of the 13th century, a historical period in which the Church became involved in a confrontation between political reasoning and religious thought. In this way, Gregorian chant, the pure form of sung prayer, became

contaminated by secular music, both in its melodic aspect as well as in the expression of the texts. The urgency of the reform towards an evangelisation closer to a humble, "simple" Christianity favoured the development of popular forms of prayer characterised by the inclusion of melodies already known in the secular world over those with their origins in the repertoire of Latin liturgy. Pope Innocent III was instrumental in receiving and listening to the "little man", Francis, and authorising him to preach the Gospel in Romanic language. This was man's honour in the second millennium, the product of the attempt to forge a new means of human, social, artistic and religious communication. Saint Francis worked with a sublime equilibrium of spirit and form, bringing faith and sacraments to the fore. Will prevailed over intellect, compassion over rationality, generosity over science, the life of Christ, the Virgin and the Saints over theological concepts, devotion over discussion. In this period it was the monastic orders linked to Latinity (the Benedictines in particular) who conceded to others their predominant roles of Christian practice and as custodians of the religious spirit. The musical expression of the early Franciscans was therefore guided by an approach inspired by a purely evangelical, and therefore simple, lifestyle. Confronted with the choice of employing monodic or polyphonic elements, they opted for the first, because they considered it to be more humble and communicative.

The monody written in codex did not preclude the use of polyphonic expressions in the Middle Ages; the concepts of multivocalism or polyphony had already emerged by the 6th and 7th centuries and asserted themselves later, thanks to the contribution made by Guido d'Arezzo in the 11th century. A kind of official status was granted to the Organum and the Discantus (descant), where the melody of Gregorian origin became the base element for elaborations of varying richness and sonorous elements from a sustained voice as a drone or false drone.

It is only fair to ask how this seemingly complicated type of expression found its way into popular use. One possible response could be that the first organum was presented as a simple *punctum contra punctum*, or counterpoint. This brought forward a kind of archaic polyphony, which highlighted the sense of community expression, giving everyone the possibility of expressing themselves using their own voice; not only regardless of a person's identity as man, woman or child, but also irrespective of the quality of their sound, be that even very limited.

The melodies used for descants, with simple or double drones, did not go beyond the tetrachord or the hexachord, and only rarely reached the octave. This form of polyphony therefore went some way towards meeting the needs and abilities of the faithful. It created textures that were simple yet extremely evocative, even where popular instruments were used in order to sustain and reinforce the polyphony. These included the portative organ, the lute, the vielle, the recorder and double recorder, the psaltery and various percussive instruments.

The aesthetic, research and publishing of repertoire featuring laude in the vernacular language of the 1200s still attract great interest in the fields of musicology and social history. This unusual level of attention insistently demonstrates just what a cultural "revolution" it was which underpinned the foundation of Middle Ages. The Codex provides us, after all these centuries, with a potential snapshot of the medieval époque; an image and an aesthetic that describes anew a cross-section of our history and of the history of Western music right up to the present day. This is our rich inheritance from the past.

The ARMONIOSOINCANTO Vocal Group, which I founded and direct, proposes that a new recording be made of the 47 laude from the Laudario di Cortona N° 91 to highlight all of the aspects of medieval religiosity linked to the popular message expressed

in common language by the sacred texts. The intention of this new executive proposal is based on the insertion of the lauda's musical message in the expressive language of Gregorian philosophy in order to leave a popular stamp on the work, without, however, distorting the liturgical message, ever-present in the works of the 1200s – 1300s.

This interpretative idea has allowed us to remain more faithful to the transparency of the word expressed in the sacred texts, preventing the executive level from becoming too “vulgar” as a result of the inclusion of excerpts from popular dances and processions, despite their use during the period. Our work represents an attempt to highlight the religious message from a Christian mould that could not overlook the practical liturgy of Gregorian chant, as distinguished by the linearity and purity expressed in the symbolism practiced in those centuries.

Let us propose here to use some of the pieces from the Laudario to form part of a book, containing all 46 laude, which will be ready for the first months of 2017. We propose to use the traditional notation to allow everyone the possibility of reading it immediately. We do not propose to elaborate on the pieces, but simply to provide a modern restoration of the melody and rhythm with simple polyphonies, as they would have been rendered in the devotional performances of the Middle Ages. This is therefore not a typically philological operation, but rather a personal act of interpretation, based on understandings gleaned from the study of Gregorian chant and the knowledge of sacred traditions of Central Italy. The unabridged recording of the Laudario di Cortona is edited by Brilliant Classics (www.brilliantclassics.com).

Laudario_Scores_Samples

Translated by Karen Bradberry, Australia

Edited by Mirella Biagi, UK/Italy