CHICKEN OR EGG? FROTTOLA ‘ARRANGEMENTS’
FOR VOICE AND LUTE

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The well-known painting of ‘A Concert’, generally attributed to Lorenzo Costa, and today hanging in the National Gallery, London, offers a window through which we can glimpse some of the musical activities of late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Italian society.\textsuperscript{1} It depicts three performers, two men and a woman, singing together. The man in the middle is playing a lute at the same time. A small fiddle with a bow, and a recorder, are lying on the table in front of the musicians. The young woman is no doubt singing the highest voice part; perhaps the younger-looking man on the right is singing the middle part. The lute has five courses; the lower four courses are double strung while the highest is single strung. The lute has eight frets on the fingerboard, and three, probably only fingering position marks, painted or drawn on the soundboard. Such a lute would have a total range of two octaves and a third. The lutenist is playing with his right-hand thumb and index finger, rather than with a plectrum, and so, being able to pluck non-adjacent strings, can provide polyphonic accompaniment in at least two parts.\textsuperscript{2}

If this painting can be assumed to be a faithful representation of the musical life with which the painter was familiar, then the repertory his musicians are likely to have chosen may reflect both the taste of the northern Italian dilettanti, and the music that was available to them. Regrettably, the music book in front of the performers does not help us conjecture what kind of music they favoured; it depicts a stylised notation that cannot be deciphered. But it is quite conceivable for those Italian amateurs to have chosen secular vocal music in Italian, rather than, say, French chansons which, though popular in Italy at the time, involved the problem of texts in a foreign language. One such genre popular in Italy, especially in the north from around 1490 to 1530, was the frottola, often a courtly song with an amorous text, and a variety of poetic forms.

The Venetian publisher Ottaviano Petrucci published eleven books of frottola between 1504 and 1514, an enterprise that made him the chief disseminator of frottola to various regions of Italy.\textsuperscript{3} The standard format for these frottola sources is the so-called ‘choir book’, in which the parts are presented separately (rather than in score), in mensural notation, but all facing the same way (unlike the later ‘table book’ format) and in a single opening. This format suggests that the frottola were usually performed by singers, with or without instrumental accompaniment. Alfred Einstein summarised the problem of performance practice of the frottola thus: ‘Petrucci in his prins offered these compositions as material,
leaving the execution—whether entirely vocal, or with an instrumental accompaniment—to practice.\textsuperscript{4} Einstein also pointed out that the size of the book and the arrangement of the voices on the page indicate that Petrucci’s frottola publications were codifications, and suggested that each part was copied for actual performance.\textsuperscript{5} The frontispiece to Andrea Antico’s anthology of frottola, \textit{Canzoni nove con alcune scelte de vari liibri di canto}, published in Venice in 1510, offers a representation of a purely vocal performance of frottola.\textsuperscript{6} It depicts four male singers reading from a choir book; see Illustration 1 below.

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{illustration1.png}
  \caption{Illustration 1: Four men singing from a ‘choir book’, from Andrea Antico, \textit{Canzoni nove con alcune scelte de vari liibri di canto} (Venice, 1510).}
\end{figure}

The singers consist of three adults and an adolescent. It is likely that the young man is assigned to the highest voice while the others sing the lower ones, singing one to a part. This illustration, however, cannot be taken as concrete evidence for the \textit{a cappella} performance of the frottola, for the woodcut may have been
designed to comply with the format of the book, not vice versa. It might be a sort of performance suggestion, rather than a portrayal of usual practice.

Apart from the frottola notated in mensural notation, in choir book format, frottola survive in three other notations, all involving tablature: keyboard tablature, for solo keyboard, lute tablature, for solo lute, and a combination of mensural notation and lute tablature, for lute and voice. It has been assumed that the frottola notated in tablature are arrangements made from the 'original' vocal pieces. My argument here is that the frottola notated in a combination of mensural notation and lute tablature not only show one of the ways of performing frottola but also reveal an early stage of the compositional process of the frottola.

The practice of singing poems or narrative verses with an accompanying instrument such as a lute or a lira da braccio was a well-developed form of secular entertainment in the early sixteenth century. This kind of music may have had its precedent in the musical style of the fifteenth-century improvisers who recited poems, often accompanied by an instrument; Francesco da Ferrara, Giovanni and Francesco di Firenze are known to have accompanied themselves on the 'lira.' In his Il libro del cortegiano, Baldassare Castiglione advocated vocal music, of which the most artistic form was the solo singing of poetry to the accompaniment of the 'viola', for the instrument's character does not distract from, but rather helps to project the words. In fact, Pietro Bembo demanded that his poems be sung with instrumental accompaniment. Giorgio Vasari reported Giorgione's love of singing with the lute. Likewise, Irene di Spilimbergo, a gentlewoman from a respectable family, cultivated a similar pastime. Having learned singing from the frottola composer Bartolomeo Tromboncino and lute playing from Bartolomeo Gassa, her repertory must presumably have included Tromboncino's frottola, and her singing style must have reflected his performance practice.

Various combinations of voices and instruments were adopted for the performance of frottola, as can be seen, for instance, from the performance practices of the frottola composer, Marchetto Cara. He is known to have been a singer who had an excellent voice and singing technique. Castiglione praised Cara's gentle manner of singing. Several documents refer to his cultivation of the lute, which would suggest the possibility of self-accompaniment, and indeed Pietro Aaron, in his music treatise Lucidario musica included Cara, together with his fellow Mantuan frrotolists Bartolomeo Tromboncino, among the 'cantori al liuto'. Cara is also known to have accompanied his wife Giovanna Morechi who was herself a renowned singer. An instrument maker, Lorenzo da Pavia, wrote to Isabella d'Este about the marvel of their duet performance, which he had heard in Venice, in 1503. No doubt Giovanna sung the highest voice part and Marchetto Cara a lower one, while providing an accompaniment on the lute.

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A Mantuan lutenist, Giovanni Angelo Testagrossa, reported to Isabella d'Este in 1510 when, together with Cara and his 'companions', he visited Torresetella prison in Venice, where Francesco Gornaga was being detained by the Venetians. Their entertainment would presumably have included some performance of frottola, which would have given the Marchese a much-needed emotional boost. Indeed, Testagrossa reported to Isabella that the Marchese 'remained cheerful and laughing in enjoyment' throughout the concert. The presence of singers and lutenists would have offered various combinations of ensemble. An eyewitness account of the entertainment at the court of Mantua in 1515, given for visiting ambassadors from Venice, described Cara and his companion performing certain songs ('certe canzone') with two lutes, to the ambassadors' astonishment. This could mean a quartet of two singers and two lute players, or two singers accompanying themselves.

The fashion for singing songs with instrumental accompaniment, especially the lute, encouraged some publishers to publish frottola 'arrangements' for voice and lute. Ottaviano Petrucci published Franciscus Bossinensis' two volumes of music, entitled Tenori e contrabassi intabulati col sopran in canto figurato per cantar e sonar col lato libro primo (Venice, 1509) and the libro secondo (Fossumbrone, 1511). André Antico published a similar collection, entitled Frottole de messer Bortolomeo [sic] Tromboneino & de messer Marchetto Cara con Tenori & Bassi intabulati & con soprani in canto figurato per cantar & sonar col lato in Rome, in 1520. Despite the animosity and rivalry between Petrucci and Antico, Antico's book replicates Bossinensis', in format, title, and instructions.

As the titles of Bossinensis' books indicate, the frottola are to be performed with voice and instrumental accompaniment; the title may be roughly rendered as 'Tenor and Bassus parts [of frottola] enciphered in tabulature to be played on the lute, with the Superius, notated in mensural notation, to be sung'. The superius parts are notated in staff notation with their texts, while the lute parts are notated in Italian tablature. The texts are printed underneath the voice parts so the singer can read the words with ease. When lute parts are compared with surviving four-part vocal versions, the lute accompaniment is seen to be a quasiLiteral intabulation of the tenor and bassus parts, sometimes with modest ornamentation. The lowest two vocal lines make a good, easy lute part, since they often move homophonically, and the omission of the altus, which makes the lute part easier, does not cause any serious musical weakness since it often functions merely as a harmonic filler, lacking melodic interest. Its inclusion would make life harder for the lute player, to little musical advantage.

The notation used by Bossinensis, with parallel lute and (fully texted) voice parts makes self-accompaniment easy. By way of contrast, a lute manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Rés. ms. 27), compiled in about 1505 by a musician
from the region of Venice, contains 79 pieces which are intabulations of the lower voices of Italian secular compositions. On f. 36, where these intabulations begin, there is an inscription ‘Tenori da sonar e cantar sopra il lauto’, implying that these are accompaniments. But there are no voice parts or texts. Did the compiler expect the performer to know both melodies and texts by heart? Probably not, considering the large number of accompaniment parts. Did the compiler assume that the performer had access to all the melodies and texts? If there was a superius part book, it appears to have been lost.

Iconographical, literary and musical sources do not enlighten us as to the voice range in which these songs were sung; whether male singers sang falsetto, or sang in the lower octave. Bossinensis gives a tablature cue for the singer’s starting note for each song; for instance: ‘la voce del sopran al terzo tasto del canto’—which informs the singer that the first note of the voice part corresponds to the note produced on the third fret, on the top course of the lute. So the voice part does not establish a pitch for the lute, but rather the reverse. Tablature, of course, does not indicate any absolute pitch, but only fingerling positions on the lute. And while there may have been general pitch standards at this period, lutes do not appear to have been tuned up with reference to a fixed pitch source, but rather according to the acoustic and physical properties of the strings; sixteenth-century lute instructions merely recommend that the highest string of the lute should be tuned as high as possible before it breaks.

If the pitch of the lute does not accommodate the voice range of the singer, one solution is to change the size of the instrument. This practice is recorded in a letter of 1497 from Isabella d’Este to Lorenzo da Pavia: ‘We require you to make [the lute] of such a size that when it is strung, it will have two steps (‘due voce’) higher than the viola [da mano] you made, which is a little low for our voice.’ Some professional lutenists are known to have had lutes of different sizes. They needed these for instrumental ensemble playing, and, as may be inferred from Isabella’s letter, for accompanying singers. Yet this practice does not necessarily confirm that lutenists followed the direction of Bossinensis, whose intabulations might appear to call for several tunings. The tunings specified in his tablature are nominal, and do not necessarily correspond with actual pitches. His choice of nominal tunings is likely to have been based on the intabulation conventions of the time.

Another solution to the problem of matching the pitch of the lute with the vocal range of the singer would be to make several intabulations in different nominal tunings. One can imagine this practice would be a possibility for the accompanist who did not have the use of lutes of varying sizes, but who might encounter singers with different vocal ranges. A vocal model is played in different positions on the lute if it is intabulated in different nominal tunings.
While music as simple as the two-part frottola accompaniments would not be impossible to intabulate in different keys, the practice of preparing several intabulations of the same composition would be less practical than changing instrument, because the intabulation process is so time-consuming. From the Renaissance period as a whole, only a few lute songs survive in multiple versions, intabulated in more than one nominal key.

We tend to regard the four-voice version of the frottola as the original compositional form which composers used, and the version for voice and lute as an arrangement, adapted for a particular performing ensemble. Tromboncino’s explanation of the compositional process of one of his frottole suggests that this was not necessarily the case, and that an *a capella* version in four voices and a lute song version in three harmonic voices might be equally musically acceptable. Writing to the music theorist Giovanni del Lago, in Venice in 1535, concerning a frottola ‘Se la mia morte brami’ sent to him, he wrote: ‘I composed it to be sung to the lute, so it has no alto, which would only get in the way of the singer. If you had not been in a hurry, I should have made a version that could be sung for four voices without one disrupting the other.’ That Tromboncino specifically described his compositional process in detail does not necessarily imply that this was an unusual way of composing frottola or that the four-voice version was normally the original form. The letter makes it clear that the lute-song version was the original version, and the first stage of the compositional process; and that different musical forces would require a new arrangement. Clearly, to transform the lute song into an acceptable part song for four voices, various changes would be needed. An altus part would have to be added; the counterpoint would have to be properly composed, since the technical limitations of the lute often force the intabulator to omit some notes or simplify counterpoint (unisons, for instance, are often represented by a single cipher in tablature); and the rhythms and note (and rest) lengths of each individual voice would have to be specified in mensural notation, since the rhythm flags in tablature indicate the value of only the shortest of the notes that are played simultaneously.

The use of the lute as a compositional tool may have given rise to a different method of composing lower harmonic voices, departing from purely vocal concepts. This can be seen in the setting of the *capriccio* ‘Se mai per maraviglia’ in Bossinensis’ *Libro secondo* for instance, which contains some purely ‘instrumental’ writing in the lute part: see Example 1. A striking feature is the inclusion of an instrumental prelude, interlude and postlude, containing chords arpeggiated and syncopated to give a ‘broken chord’ effect. The superius is in a declamatory melodic style without any melismatic ornaments, and in places comes in unaccompanied, subsequently being supported by two or three alternating lute chords. Such chordal textures could only be played on an instrument capable
of producing polyphony. No vocal model for this piece has been found, so it cannot be shown to be an arrangement.41

**Example 1: 'Se mai per maraviglia', from Franciscus Bossinensis, *Tenori e contrabassi . . . libro secondo* (Fossombrone, 1511), ff. 5v–6**
Al chiaro chiel pensaste, o checa gente A qu...
To conclude, the forms of musical notation in which frottola are notated reflect the composers' intentions as to how the music should be performed, in some respects at least. The four-voice versions in staff notation published by Ottaviano Petrucci and Andrea Antico have been regarded as the original musical form intended by the composers, while the versions in three harmonic voices notated in staff notation and lute tablature have been considered as arrangements made for lute and voice. There are some indications, however, that the form of notation does not necessarily reflect the original form in which a frottola was composed. Iconographical, literary, and musical sources indicate that various combinations of voices and instruments (including voices a cappella, a solo instrument, and mixed ensemble performance) were cultivated for the performance of the frottola. The performer had some freedom to choose the manner of performance, although the availability of singers and instrumentalists must often have been the deciding factor. More importantly, many of the frottola composers were canitori al liuto, singers accompanying themselves on the lute, whose compositions were closely related to their performance style. One may speculate that frottola may have first been conceived in improvisation during performance, at least sometimes using the lute as a compositional tool. As both composers and performers, they did not consider the compositional process and performance practice to be two distinct matters. They composed frottola either in a four-voice or lute-song version, chose a notation according to performance media, and could make alterations for different musical forces. Thus notation, musical style, and performance media were integrally related to both compositional and performance practices of the frottola.

Notes

I would like to thank Véronique Lafargue for reading and commenting on this paper.


5 Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, 1: 59.


7 The applicability of the engraving to actual performance of the frottola is discussed in Alfred Einstein, Andrea Antico’s Canonone novae of 1510. The Musical Quarterly 37 (1951), pp. 330–9.

8 Early sixteenth-century lutenists made arrangements of frottola for solo lute, which may be found in four lute books (three manuscript and one printed book) of Italian origin (two certainly originated in Venice and two others possibly from the same city). Andrea Antico published Frottile intabulase da sonare organi libro primo, a collection of 26 keyboard arrangements, in Rome in 1517. The symbolism in the frontispiece of this book is discussed by Hirokuki Minamino, ‘A Monkey Business: Petrucci, Antico, and the Frottola Intabulation’, JSPA 26/27 (1993/4), pp. 96–106.


11 See Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, 1: 110.

13 See Anne Jacobson Schutte, 'Irene di Spilimbergo: The Image of a Creative Woman in Late Renaissance Italy', Renaissance Quarterly 54 (1991), 50.


15 See idem, 'Lutenists at the Court of Mantua in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries', JLSM 13 (1980), pp. 6-7.

16 Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, I: 77. Hieronimo Cassio's Libro intitolato cronica di 1525 contains a premature epitaph for Tromboncino who is praised for his ability to play the lute with the plucked; see Prizer, 'Lutenists at the Court of Mantua', 7. Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, I: 47, casts doubt on Cassio's epitaph being for the frottolist.

17 For the document, see Prizer, Courtly Pastimes, pp. 42-4 (translation), p. 298 (text).

18 For the document, see ibid., p. 43 (translation), p. 260 (text).

19 For the document, see ibid., Document 64.

20 Another possibility is a purely instrumental performance on two lutes. This style may have resembled the fifteenth-century ensemble lute style in which the uppermost part is decorated with ornaments in improvisation while a tenorista plays a lower structural voice in a simple counterpoint or a polyphonic arrangement of the lower voices.

21 Facsimile edition of both volumes by Minkoff (Genoa, 1977; revised edn, 1982); for modern transcriptions, see Benvenuto Disertori, Le Frotole per canto e liuto intabulate de Franciscus Bossinenis, Istituzioni e monumenti dell'arte musicale italiana, 3 (Milan: Ricordi, 1964); on the volumes, see Claudio Sattori, 'A Little-Known Petrucci Publication: The Second Book of Lute Tablatures by Francesco Bossinenis', The Musical Quarterly 34 (1948), pp. 234-45. Three other lute books containing collections of vocal music arranged for voice and lute were published shortly after Bossinenis's books: Anolf Schlick's arrangements of German Lieder in 1512, Andrea Antico's arrangements of frotole of about 1520, and Pietro Biondese's arrangements of chansons in Pietro Attaino's lute book in 1523. For the practice of singing with the viola da mano, see my study 'The Earliest Viola da Mano Song' (in preparation).

22 For the volume, see Francesco Luisi, 'Le frotole per canto e liuto di B. Tromboncino e M. Cara nella edizione aedipota di Andrea Antico', Nuova rivista musicale italiana


24 See Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, 1: 77.


26 This term also appears in Filoteo Achillini’s mythological poem, Il Vivarario which includes a scene where a nymph sings to an instrument ‘tenor e contra’: see Thibault, ‘Un manuscrit italien’, p. 45. The rubric ‘tenor e contra’ is attached to the second lute parts of lute duets in Joan Ambrosio Dalza’s lute book (Venice: Ottaviano Petrucci, 1508). These parts are chordal accompaniments in four to five voices.

27 An exception is the setting of ‘Ave Maria’ in two voices with occasional three- or fourvoice texture. The text is provided directly above the tablature. It is transcribed in Thibault, ‘Un manuscrit italien’, pp. 67–70.

28 This assumption was made by Denis Stevens, ‘German Lute-Songs of the Early Sixteenth Century’, Festschrift Heinrich Beneler zum 65. Geburtstag ed. Institut für Musikwissenschaft, (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag, 1961), p. 254. Arnolt Schlick in his Intabulaturen etlicher Lobgesang und Lidlein uff die orgeln und lauten (Mainz, 1512) included arrangements of the German Lieder for voice and lute. Although he did not provide any text to the Superius, they were song arrangements as indicated by his inscription given at the beginning of the section. It reads: ‘Ein Stim zu singen die andern zwicken’ (One voice is to be sung, while the other voices are to be played). For song arrangements in early sixteenth-century Germany, see Charles Turner, ‘Arnolt Schlick’s Maria sort for Lute and Voice: Background, Sources, Performance’, JLSM 19 (1986), pp. 68–80; and Stephen Keary, ‘Tenorled, Discantled, Polyphonic Lied: Voices and Instruments in German Secular Polyphony of the Renaissance’, Early Music 20 (1992), pp. 434–45. Cf. Christian Meyer, ‘Ein stim zu singen die andern zwicken, les arrangements pour voix et lute d’Arnolt Schlick’, Le concert . . ., pp. 288–97; Kent

29 A manuscript compiled by Giovanni Mazzuoli da Sessa of about 1510 contains fourteen frottole texts; see Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, 1: 78. Interesting parallels from the Elizabethan lute song repertoire are the Brogynyn and Paston MSS, for which the presumed—and in the later case, documented—voice part books are missing.

30 Example from Tromboncino (or Cara): 'Deh vi deh so deh si'. Bosio’s arrangement appears in his *libro primo*, f. 8; transcribed in Dusset, *Le Frottole*, p. 363. The vocal model may be found in Ottaviano Petrucci, *Frottole, libro primo* (Venice, 1504), f. 15; transcribed in Rudolf Schwartz, ed. *Ottaviano Petrucci Frottole, Buch I und Buch IV* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1967), pp. 11-12.


32 For lute pitch and tuning, see Misamino, *Sixteenth-Century Lute Treatises*, pp. 71-82.

33 According to Lodovico Zacconi, sixteenth-century singers changed the pitch to a comfortable level for all voices when performing *a cappella*; see James Haar, 'A Sixteenth-Century Attempt at Music Criticism', *JAMS* 56 (1983), p. 158. See a scene from this era, *Misogonus* (1577) where a group of singers is portrayed singing just this, quoted in ed. C. Goodwin, *Songs from Additional Manuscript 4900 and Other Early Sources* (The Lute Society, 1997), p. 9.


36 See Howard Mayer Brown, 'Bosio’s, Willaert and Verdelot: Pitch and the Conventions of Transcribing Music for Lute and Voice in Italy in the Early Sixteenth Century', *Revue de musicologie* 75 (1989), pp. 25-46. I am indebted to the late Professor Brown for allowing me to read this article before its publication.

37 Bosio’s *Frottole libro primo* is the source for twenty-three arrangements in Bosio’s *libro primo* and five in the *libro secondo*. Petrucci’s *Frottole libro quarto* is the source for seven arrangements in Bosio’s *libro primo* and one in the *libro secondo*. For the concordances, see Sartori, 'A Little-Known Petrucci Publication', pp. 242-5. Otto Gombosi, ed. *Composizioni de Messer Vincenzo Caporale: Lute-Book (circa 1517)* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Société de musique d’autrefois, 1955), XXVIII, n. 1, notes that Petrucci’s *libro primo* is the source for no. 57 in Bosio’s *libro primo*. Sartori lists Petrucci’s *libro quarto* as the source for no. 20 in Bosio’s *libro secondo*. After the
initial notes, the two versions are quite different. Disertori's transcription of no. 64 in Bossinensis' libro primo is transposed one note higher than the vocal model. Goodwin, op. cit. pp. 8–9, observes that likewise in the Elizabethan lute song intabulation corpus, intabulators seem never to have transposed the voice part, even where the lute part had to be transposed in intabulation to fit on the lute. Many renaissance lute solos survive in more than one nominal key—notably, in the period under discussion, in the Daia lute book (Venice, 1508)—but few alternate key variants of lute song accompaniments survive. One example from a later era is Robert Hales's 'O eyes leave off your weeping', found in (nominal) D minor in the Turpin lute book and (nominal) C minor in Robert Dowland's A Musickall Banquet (1610), though interestingly, the voice part is in the same key in both versions.


39 It appears in Bossinensis' libro secondo, ff. 5v–6; transcribed in Disertori, Le Frottola, 464.

40 The 'monodic style' is also found in Cara's four-voice setting of a sonnet in praise of the power of Cupid, discussed and transcribed in Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, 1: 101. The last section of Tromboncino's capitolo 'Amor che voi' may be regarded as a coda; discussed and transcribed, idem, 'Andrea Antico's Canzoni noci' pp. 336–9.

41 See Sartori, 'A Little-Known Petrucci Publication', 244; Jeppesen, La Frottola, 1: 118; and Howard Mayer Brown, Instrumental Music Printed before 1650: a Bibliography (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), item 1511/1, no. 5. The vocal model may be found in Petrucci's tenth frottola book which is now lost.