

Blake Wilson. *Singing Poetry in Renaissance Florence: The Cantasi Come Tradition (1375–1550)*.

Italian Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2009. 291 pp. + CD-ROM. index. append. illus. tpls. €35. ISBN: 978–88–222–5810–6.

In a series of published studies on the *lauda* in fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Florence, including a book (*Music and Merchants: the Laudesi Companies of Republican Florence* [1992]), an edition (*The Florence Laudario: An Edition of Florence, Bibl. Naz. B 18*, with Nello Barbieri [1995]), and a series of four substantial articles dating from 1996 to the soon-to-be-published present, Blake Wilson has studied the history, organization, and musical activities of Florentine *laudesi*, singers of sacred vernacular songs and members of companies based in churches, chapels, and oratorios across Florence.

The book under consideration here bears, as is now all too common, a somewhat misleading title — it is not a general study of song — followed by an accurate subtitle. The volume is indeed concerned with the “cantasi come” practice. The words are a shorthand directive meaning “one sings [this *lauda*] like [this secular song, identified by its opening text].”

An example is the *lauda* “Alzando gli occhi vidi Maria” with its secular source, “Alzando gli occhi et vidi una donzella” (222, 258). The text of the “cantasi come” *lauda* is a devotional poem related in differing degrees to its secular counterpart, using the latter’s rhyme scheme and sometimes its actual rhymes, and copying its line lengths and formal structure. The *lauda*’s music is “sung like,” that is, drawn from that of the secular poem. Very few written examples of this phenomenon have come down to us; and few scholars have addressed the question of how faithfully or freely the sung *lauda* uses the borrowed music, especially in the many polyphonic versions of the latter.

Wilson skirts detailed consideration of this perhaps somewhat thorny subject while taking an optimistic general view of it. Typical is what he says (46) of the later Trecento *lauda*: “The [cantasi come] practice arose in Florence precisely under the unique conditions of a thriving polyphonic tradition that provided musical settings intended for poetic forms compatible with the Trecento *lauda*.” This is surely putting the *carro* before the *cavallo*. True, the *lauda* was often cast in the form of the *ballata*, useful for its varied line lengths and its repeated refrain; but that any *ballata*

was designed to accommodate a *lauda* gives the latter exaggerated importance. It would seem rather that the existence of a large secular musico-poetic repertory served as a welcome source for *laudesi* who may not have been all that capable of inventing words and music on their own. What Wilson takes to be evidence of a thriving literary-musical culture could be interpreted in a directly opposite fashion as the sign of an unenterprising, even somewhat lazy one.

The book is divided into three historical sections: late Trecento (1375–1430), the Belcari era (1430–1510), and the early sixteenth century (1510–50). The middle chapter refers to Feo Belcari (1410–84), the most prolific and influential of *lauda* poets. There is a good deal of useful information here, most though not all of it present in Wilson's earlier writings. The strong emphasis on sources (nearly all of them without musical notation) and their interrelationships stresses ever more strongly as the pages roll by that this book is primarily bibliographical in content, with interpretative material — what this reviewer thinks necessary for the subject — at a minimum. One gets the impression that the book was somewhat hastily put together, an impression strengthened by the numerous typographical errors and the serious gaffes in the musical examples, surprising in a volume issued by such a distinguished publisher.

The last hundred pages of the book contain a series of appendices of varying interest and a very long double-column list, first of *lauda* — “cantasi come” titles, then of the same works in reverse order. These serve as a double index of the “cantasi come” database, contained on the CD-ROM inserted in an incautiously capacious sleeve at the back of the volume. There are over 1,800 entries, each a single *lauda*, in this database, which is crammed with factual material and a richly proliferated set of cross-references. This is obviously the heart of the volume, and what will make it useful as a reference work. Seen in this light the book itself is really an explanatory booklet; even the description of the database and directions for its use form part of the text (11–12).

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