

Singing Dante: The Literary Origins of Cinquecento Monody. Elena Abramov-
van Rijk.

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The rise of monody (solo singing) in Italy during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the music-theoretical writings penned by its practitioners have inspired much discussion and debate over the years. In particular, writers — early modern and modern alike — have been interested in explicating the influence of Greek tragedy on

opera and, more specifically, on the new *stile recitativo*. While the earliest proponents of this style, Vincenzo Galilei and Giulio Caccini, among others, trumpeted its novelty and its fidelity to ancient Greek ideals, others expressed skepticism regarding both claims. As several modern scholars have noted, the presence of a long and vibrant oral tradition of solo singing in Italy draws into question monody's newness. Moreover, the palpable break between what is and was known about ancient Greek theatrical practice and the musical reality — as opposed to theoretical descriptions — of the new *stile recitativo* remains as troubling now as it was then. *Singing Dante* is concerned with bridging this gap between theory and practice by placing music-theoretical discussions of monody by Galilei, Giovan Battista Doni, Girolamo Mei, and others in a broader context of humanist interest in ancient Greek poetics.

Abramov-van Rijk takes as her focus Vincenzo Galilei's experimental musical rendition of Ugolino's famous lament from Dante's *Commedia* (*Inferno* 32), performed for the Florentine Camerata in 1580 — an event identified in Giovan Battista Doni's *Trattato della musica scenica* as a watershed moment in the development of monody. Galilei's experiment, though long known to musicologists, has received little sustained scholarly attention, perhaps because no notated version of the setting remains. Yet, as Abramov-van Rijk demonstrates, the event itself and Doni's retelling of it warrant scrutiny, for they reveal a great deal about the relationship between monody and classical ideals. In particular, her analysis of theoretical discussions pertaining to the performance of epic poetry in works such as Giangiorgio Trissino's *La poetica* elucidates important points of contact between ancient Greek poetics, sixteenth-century treatises on the art of poetry, and the *stile recitativo*.

The book is divided into three parts. The first uses Galilei's performance as a lens through which to discuss Cinquecento views on Aristotelian poetics. Central to this section is one of the book's most interesting questions: what did it mean to sing Dante's *Commedia* in the sixteenth century, a time of heated debate regarding the status of the text and its author? Despite objections from a few fervent detractors, sixteenth-century humanists, Abramov-van Rijk argues, viewed the *Divine Comedy* as an epic poem, a classification that frames her subsequent discussion. Part 2 delves further into the realm of sixteenth-century literary criticism, demonstrating that humanist writers were very interested in the sonic effects of language and worked hard to apply ancient theories of accentuation to Italian vernacular verse. The book concludes, in part 3, by reconstructing what Galilei's performance may have sounded like, through, among other means, an analysis of verse scansion and its potential impact on musical rhythm.

In keeping with the RMA monograph series, *Singing Dante* is a focused and fairly brief study. It draws extensively on primary sources, presenting numerous quotations side-by-side in their original language and English translation — a feature that enhances this book's accessibility and utility. Placing well-known musical treatises in dialogue with poetic treatises largely unfamiliar to musicologists, and bringing to light passages until now overlooked by modern scholarship, Abramov-van Rijk enriches our understanding of the broader cultural context in which composers and theorists like Galilei and Doni worked. The frequency and length of the quotations, though, breaks up the author's

prose such that it can be hard to follow at times. Some (for example the quote from Sasseti on page 37) might have been best summarized briefly in the author's own words, which could perhaps have created room to discuss the most significant passages in slightly more detail. That being said, *Singing Dante* offers valuable new insight on the influence of Aristotelian poetics on monody and, more broadly, on humanist thought. It will thus be of interest not only to musicologists, but to literary scholars as well.

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