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THE LIMITS OF PETRUCCI'S WORLD

by Jeremy Noble

Petrucci, in spite of a few minor revisionary modifications to the record, was to all intents and purposes the discoverer, and certainly the first systematic exploiter, of a satisfactory method of printing mensural music. It is really astounding, when one comes to think of it, that a man possessed of the desire and ability to analyse musical orthography into its constituent parts and the mechanical skills needed to combine them accurately and elegantly on the printed page, should also have possessed the vision to set about publishing a comprehensive anthology of the music of his time. It is true that he had before his eyes in Venice the example of Aldus Manutius, who had overcome the similarly specialized problems of printing Greek, and was likewise beginning to tackle the task of a comprehensive coverage of classical texts; Petrucci may well have thought in terms of a musical literature, embracing all of its many genres, sacred and secular. The result is a body of published work comprising 72 complete masses, over 300 motets and other types of liturgical piece, some 300 chansons (if one can call chansons pieces which are clearly intended to be played rather than sung), 119 laude, and well over 700 Italian secular songs ranging from the simplest to the most up-to-date and sophisticated, not to mention four volumes of lute pieces – a truly astonishing achievement in a mere two decades of activity, particularly when one considers that those decades were disturbed by wars and sieges and a forced translocation from the great merchant city of Venice to Petrucci's own little hometown of Fossombrone in the politically troubled Duchy of Urbino.

I am sure some readers will already be finding reason to quarrel with the conventional claims I have just put forward. In the first place, as Bonnie Blackburn has convincingly demonstrated in two brilliant pieces of historical detective work, it is more than likely that Petrucci drew his repertory (and not just the sacred part of it) from the musical collections of Petrus Castellanus, the choirmaster at the fashionable Dominican church of San Zanipolo, and that Castellanus himself almost certainly benefited from the musical enthusiasms of Girolamo Donato, the much travelled patrician and humanist whose ambassadorial duties gave him the opportunity to hear and collect music by many different composers in many different cities.[1] If Castellanus provided the expertise to prepare the musical texts for Petrucci's press, it may well have been the highly educated Donato who suggested what I might call the taxonomy of its publications, separating sacred from secular, masses from motets, French from Italian, in a way that seems logical enough to us, but which is by no means universally characteristic of the manuscript sources of the 15th century. The dedication of the *Odhecaton*, the first-fruits of Petrucci's endeavour, to Donato surely indicates the printer's profound indebtedness to him.

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[1] Bonnie J. Blackburn, „Petrucci's Venetian Editor: Petrus Castellanus and his musical garden“, *Musica Disciplina* 49 (1995) 15–45; id., „Lorenzo de' Medici, a lost Isaac manuscript, and the Venetian ambassador“, in: *Musica Franca: Essays in honor of Frank A. D'Accone*, ed. Irene Alm, Alyson McLamore, and Colleen Reardon (Stuyvesant, NY 1996), 19–44.

But if Petrucci owed a great deal to Donato's wide travels and even wider contacts, it must surely be admitted that they are also responsible for some of the limitations inherent in his great project, for his œuvre, immensely impressive though it is, does have its limitations. Systematic it certainly is, but within the conditions of the time there was no way, even in Venice, even with the assistance of a patrician ambassador, that it could be truly comprehensive. Certain gaps are so obvious that they hardly need to be mentioned. English music, for example. I hope not to seem motivated by a crude chauvinism if I point out that there is not a note of music by any English composer among Petrucci's publications unless it be among the numerous anonymous pieces of the three chanson collections. Of course the unfamiliarity of our barbarous language would constitute a barrier for the dissemination of secular music, but it is nevertheless worth noting that English church music by the generation after Dunstable seems to have been completely unknown to Petrucci, even though some of it did circulate on the Continent, and even in Italy, as witness the fragmentary Lucca choirbook reassembled by Reinhard Strohm. It may of course have been that the style of the music seemed repugnantly undisciplined or old-fashioned, though Petrucci's sympathies do stretch to the not dissimilar music of Johannes Regis. Or is the reason perhaps that the many-voiced style of so much English music of the period simply couldn't be adapted to the limitations of Petrucci's standard format? I am not entirely serious in asking this question, because one would really not expect to find the music of the Eton choirbook composers in Petrucci, any more than one does in Gafori's mammoth choirbooks in Milan. What I want to stress, though, is that Petrucci's publications inevitably, by virtue of their dissemination throughout Europe, established a kind of canon, and that the absence of these composers from it did much to perpetuate the Continent's ignorance of English music – an ignorance that lasted throughout the 16th century and which has not been completely unknown even in our own day.

I deliberately started with a rather far-fetched example. That of Spanish music is surely less easily explained. It is true that one or two Spanish composers occur in Petrucci's collections: Urrede, with his justly popular setting of „Nuncafue pena maior“, and presumably the Johannes Pinarol whose „Surge propera“ figures in *Motetti A*. The most substantial item by a Spanish composer is the Lamentation-setting by Bernardus Ycart, who we now know came from the Catalan diocese of Tortosa and was employed at the court of Naples. But the musical traffic between Naples and the north, if not with Spain itself, was frequent in the decades immediately before Petrucci started publishing, and one might perhaps have expected more evidence of music by Spanish composers to have filtered into his repertory. Instead we find the northerners who worked in Naples: Vincenet in the *Odhecaton*; and of course Tinctoris.

Even in the years after Alexander VI's papacy had admitted so many Spanish musicians into the papal chapel, we don't find them making any impression on the contents of the *Motetti de la corona*.

When we turn to German music, or at least the German elements in Petrucci's repertory, we seem to be on stronger ground – and this is hardly surprising, given Venice's position on the immemorial trade-route over the Brenner Pass. Names such as Aulen and Reingott, even if we cannot attach many biographical details to them, are pretty suggestive in themselves. More to the point, though, is the way in which even Flemish compositions seem to be related to a German tradition of transmission. When we see Obrecht's name standing second among Petrucci's list of mass-collections, we naturally tend to think of that composer's close connection with Ferrara. Yet of the five masses Petrucci chose to print, only one, „Fortuna desperata", occurs in the Estense choirbooks, and even that one is also found in the Saxon manuscript Berlin 40021. Of the remaining four, all have predominantly German concordances, with the exception of the „Missa Grecorum", which has none at all. The same general route of transmission may apply to Petrucci's selection of masses by Agricola, since they too occur primarily in northern sources. As Bonnie Blackburn has pointed out, Girolamo Donato had the opportunity of meeting Agricola at Blois just two years before Petrucci published his masses, but this must surely count as a Hapsburg connection rather than a French one, even if it took place at the French court. With La Rue, who was of course also at the Blois meeting of princes in 1501–02, we are on more speculative ground. Because of Margaret of Austria's habit of distributing handsome presentation copies of his masses far and wide throughout Europe, the source-picture is geographically rather dispersed. Certainly the Sistine Chapel owned copies of all of Petrucci's La Rue masses in one form or another, but the northern copies are far more numerous than any Italian ones.

Because of the presence of a great many French names within the roster of Petrucci's publications it seems to have been assumed that his access to the music of French court composers was relatively good, and it is certainly true that from the summer of 1514, with the first volume of *Motetti de la Corona*, the names of Mouton and Fevin suddenly begin to appear with some frequency; but what about the earlier part of Petrucci's career? It is of course notorious that he published not a single mass by Ockeghem, and only a scant handful of his other works. This might just be put down to conscious aesthetic choice, I suppose, though we might nowadays find it hard to imagine how Petrucci or his collaborators could prefer, let us say, the masses of Weerbecke or De Orto to those of Ockeghem. But why is it that Compère, the most frequently represented of all the named composers in the *Odhecaton* and *Canti B*, does not figure in the series of mass collections? Is it possible that he simply wrote too few mass-settings to qualify for Petrucci's attention? Or is it not more likely that the couple that survive (in non-Petrucci sources) represent a mere fragment of what the French chapel may once have possessed, and that while Petrucci clearly had access to Compère's secular compositions, he had very little to his church music? The same might well apply to such French court composers as Fresneau and Prioris – not available to Petrucci in the earliest years of his activity, and perhaps regarded as rather old-fashioned by the time he did acquire closer contacts with the French repertory in his Fossombrone years.

I realise that by drawing attention to those parts of the repertory which Petrucci did not print, whether by necessity or by choice, I may seem to have been denigrating his achievement. Nothing could be further from my intentions. The sheer amount of music that he made available to the public, not to mention the care and imagination he devoted to his task, has left succeeding generations for ever in his debt. But the mere fact that this mountain of music was printed and published has given it a kind of exponential advantage as compared with music that existed only in manuscripts, perhaps only in a single manuscript, and was thus far more vulnerable to the ravages of time.

What I have tried to do is to encourage you to look at Petrucci's total repertory as if it were a landscape – perhaps one of those landscapes, simultaneously detailed and fantastic, that we find in the paintings of his northern contemporary Joachim Patinir. This will be a landscape with depth, but also with a horizon, it goes without saying. Spain and England are quite simply beyond the horizon to north and west. Close at hand, and rather brilliantly illuminated – particularly in the field of secular music – are the court cities of Mantua and Ferrara, the university city of Padua, and of course Venice itself (though we have to take this on trust, since so high a proportion of what we know about Venetian music in the years immediately before 1500 derives from Petrucci himself). Farther afield the view is less consistent. Some glimpses of Florence and more still of Rome if we turn to the south, but Naples is almost beyond the southern horizon. To the north there are patches of apparent clarity in the Burgundian Netherlands and Germany, but patches of deep obscurity too, particularly in Vienna and farther east. Where, to take just a single example, is the work of that long-lived and presumably productive composer Erasmus Lapicida? Scarcely visible on Petrucci's map. But the greatest mystery, as I have suggested, is France. Until 1514 the genre of sacred music seems to be obscured – I am still speaking of *Petrucci's* landscape – by the densest fog. Then, after 1514, and more particularly with the publication of Mouton's and Fevin's masses in the following year, there comes a sudden shaft of light. I cannot help wondering whether this is connected to Louis XII's failing health and his death at the beginning of 1515, and the accession of a new king who may well have taken a less possessive view of his chapel's music.

By virtue of its sheer bulk and relative accessibility Petrucci's œuvre has come to be seen as in some sense defining the central musical tradition of its time. All I want to provide, as a background to our forthcoming discussions, is a reminder that there are some segments, some quite important segments, of late 15th-century music about which we can never know very much, in spite of Petrucci's incomparable achievement. That should deter us, I think, from feeling too sure about what is central and what is peripheral in the wider picture of music history.