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Reading for musical knowledge in early sixteenth-century Italy: Introduction

TIM SHEPHARD, LAURA ȘTEFĂNESCU, OLIVER DOYLE and CIARA O'FLAHERTY

The essays included in this section of the journal present case studies prepared within the project 'Sounding the Bookshelf 1501: Music in a Year of Italian Printed Books', funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2020-149) and hosted at the University of Sheffield. The project asks a simple question: standing in a Venetian bookshop towards the end of the year 1501, what information about music might you encounter as you browse the new printed titles available for purchase? Very few of the books printed in Italy in 1501 were 'about' music, but many of them mention music in passing, and sometimes at length, whilst discussing something else. These kinds of casual, fragmentary comments on music were surely read by many more people than specialist music theory, the audience for which was probably quite small. To recover these comments, and characterise the contradictory and incoherent field of everyday musical knowledge they comprise, we are reading every book printed in Italy in 1501 cover-to-cover, excerpting every passage mentioning music, sound or hearing.

The final product of our project – a co-authored book, yet to be written – will present our findings in synoptic fashion. The essays presented here take a different approach, offering detailed case-studies on particular books within our 1501 corpus. Doyle writes on an *Albubather. Et Centiloquium Divi Hermetis* (Venice: Giovanni Battista Sessa), a medieval Persian work based on Ptolemy. The *Albubather* formed part of a network of closely related astrological treatises that were consulted by Italian Renaissance astrologers in order to produce accurate prognostications and horoscopes, and among this group, it is noteworthy for offering some of the most detailed information concerning the influence of particular celestial spheres on one's musical skills. Shephard and Melany Rice cover Giovanni Pontano's *Opera* (Venice: Bernardino de' Viani), an anthology presenting works of literature, literary criticism and moral philosophy by one of the most significant and celebrated Italian statesman-scholars of the 15th century. O'Flaherty and Shephard's essay is on three editions of Juvenal's *Satires* (Brescia: Angelo & Giacomo Britannico; Milan: Giovanni Angelo Scinzenzeler; Venice: Giovanni Tacuino), presenting between them

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no fewer than five recent and contemporary commentaries on what was a set text for grammar class at Italian universities. New commentaries on the classics by Italian university professors and other educators account for a significant proportion of the printed words concerned with music in our 1501 corpus as a whole; O’Flaherty and Shephard show that commentators approached music through a distinctive music-historical method and perspective, which deserves our recognition as a primary mode of musical study in Renaissance Italy. Shephard and Charlotte Hancock write on both a *Problemata Aristotelis* (Venice: Boneto Locatelli) and an edition of Niccolò Perotti’s *Cornucopiae* (Venice: Giovanni Tacuino), extremely different publications that are nonetheless linked by the fact that both are printed with tools intended to facilitate reference use. The protagonists in this essay are not so much the books’ main texts as their detailed alphabetical indexes, compiled around 1400 and around 1500, respectively, and suggesting particular ways to find and excerpt musical information. Finally, Ștefănescu discusses Zaccaria Lilio’s *De Gloria et Gaudiis Beatorum* (Venice: Simone Bevilacqua), an obscure text by an obscure author which is nonetheless emblematic of the roles played by music, sound and hearing in a much wider ‘sensory turn’ seen across 15th-century Italian devotional experience, with implications for musicology and art history as well as the history of religion.

In approaching these books, we have deliberately taken contrasting approaches and methodologies in each essay, and in some cases used playful and provocative framing devices, in order to explore the different kinds of reading practices and interpretative strategies that might be imagined in relation to books printed in 1501 and their musical contents. The essays by Doyle and Ștefănescu take what we might roughly characterise as etic approaches, reading the books as modern scholars equipped with the tools of philology, the history of ideas and cultural history. In contrast, those by O’Flaherty and Shephard, and Shephard and Hancock, attempt readings that are in some sense emic: in the former by following the five commentators as they read and make sense out of Juvenal’s musical moments; in the latter by imagining a scenario in which a reader in 1501 uses indexes to locate musical information in reference books. Meanwhile, Shephard and Rice adopt an approach that is perhaps both etic and emic: playing the different texts in Pontano’s *Opera* off against each other, they use his works of moral philosophy to examine the acoustic ideologies through which he constructs, or ‘hears’, the soundscape of a Neapolitan street scene in his dialogue *Antonius*.

Taken together, the books considered in these case studies quite accurately reflect the wide range of genres, and types of authors, translators and editors, found across our 1501 corpus – although, at the same time, they are rather unrepresentative of the quantity of musical material present in an ‘average’ 1501 book, because inevitably we have chosen from among our

more productive texts in order to generate article-length case-studies. The case studies stand on their own well enough, but they are better read as contributions produced within the larger Sounding the Bookshelf project, and throughout this package of essays we highlight their interconnections. So that the reader may more easily place them in that wider context, in the remainder of this Introduction we will review our project, its methodologies, affordances, limitations and preliminary findings, noting how these impact the essays that follow. Over the past 2 years, we have presented our project in some 11 panels, seminars and colloquia, and we have chosen to model what follows here closely on the discussions that unfolded after those presentations, on the basis that questions occurring to colloquium participants, and questions occurring to readers of this journal, are likely to overlap. We are immensely grateful to the participants in those events for their stimulating contributions.¹

Our project sets out to investigate the period around 1500, using a single year of print book production as a kind of cross-section, rather like using a razor blade to take a thin slice out of the stem of a plant in school biology class. 1500 is a Goldilocks moment for our methodology, at which print is well established in Italy, but not sufficiently well established to generate an annual production that is obviously beyond the capacity of four people to read in 3 years. The Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC; ustc.ac.uk) produces a very cluttered dataset for the year 1500, however, because it includes many books with vague date ranges, such as 1500–1549 or 1500–1599; therefore we chose 1501 as our sample year, for which the USTC lists 358 titles printed in Italy. By defining our sample in this simple way, we do not mean to imply that books printed in 1501 were the only books available to read in Italy in that year. Books printed in previous years remained in the book-chests or shelves of readers and the catalogues of booksellers, and Italian readers could also acquire books printed abroad – not to mention the continuing ownership and production of manuscripts. Taking account of all books available to read in Italy in 1501 would pull our project well beyond the bounds of practicality, however; therefore we have chosen more limited terms in which to define our sample.

Of the 358 books printed in Italy in 1501, religious books make up the largest category, roughly 30%, including devotional literature such as saints' lives and advice on pious lifestyle, patristic literature and theology, canon law, a handful of liturgical books and one monastic rule. After religious books, three approximate genres make up around 20% each. Liberal

¹ Specifically, we extend our thanks to Julie Cumming at McGill University, Richard Freedman at Haverford College, Kevin Killeen at the University of York, Melinda Latour at Tufts University, Peter Loewen at Rice University, Marica Tacconi at Penn State University and Giovanni Zanovello at Indiana University for their kind invitations to present our project at seminars and colloquia. Other important fora have included the Medieval and Renaissance Music Conferences in Lisbon, Uppsala and Munich, and the Renaissance Society of America conference in Dublin.

Arts books are one important category, comprising ancient, medieval and new works on history, geography, ethics, grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic and astrology, often commented, printed for the use of school and university students, and/or on behalf of their professors. Another 20% category is literature, broadly defined, dominated by classical Latin, neo-Latin and Italian poetry. Among these, the production of commented editions of Roman verse was also substantially driven by university demand, but Virgil and Ovid also blended into the market for leisure reading, where they sat alongside modern authors. The third 20% category is also the most approximate and diffuse, and is best characterised using the modern term 'lifestyle literature'. Here we find books telling you how to lead a good and healthy life, such as books on how to educate your children, texts explaining how to behave in a manner fitting your rank (i.e. conduct literature), works describing the regimen and diet that will result in good health and well-being, and books revealing what you could expect in your character and life circumstances thanks to the influence of the stars. Finally, about 10% of the books in our 1501 corpus are on civil law, associated with higher study at the universities and with professional legal practice. Around two-thirds of the 358 books are in Latin and a third in Italian; the Italian group is dominated by devotional literature and poetry.

Although the principal focus of our project is music, in reading through the books we have cast the net of musical relevance quite wide, noting discussions of sound and hearing as well as those directly addressing music. This is partly for pragmatic reasons: at the beginning of the project, it was by no means clear that we would find a large fund of material directly concerned with music, thus we aimed for the largest possible haul of material in which we might find musical relevance. However, there are also sound intellectual reasons for our approach, for, as many studies over the past one or two decades have shown, music was and is practised and perceived as a distinctive component within a broader field of sound production and sound perception, its meaning-making affordances and habits significantly interleaved with a wider sonic culture. Among the case-studies in this volume, the potential of this broad approach is particularly explored in Shephard and Rice's essay on Pontano's *Opera*, where the term 'soundscape' is allowed to embrace all the sounds of the street, rather than just public performances of music. Reading for musical relevance in this way is not an activity easily accommodated to a completely systematic process, as it relies quite heavily on the judgement of the reader, and it is partly for this reason that we are reading the 358 books ourselves, rather than using an OCR-based approach. As we read, we capture basic bibliographic information on each book, noting briefly its physical proportions and typographical design, checking how often its title-page texts were printed in Italy across a period from 1480 to 1520, and observing where music-related

illustrations or handwritten annotations appear in our copy; but this is not a bibliographic project, and we are interested in such matters only to the extent that they are necessary to a nuanced discussion of a book's printed contents.

The deliberately simple methodology of our project and the nature of our 1501 sample make the project practicable and easy to understand, but they also present numerous difficulties and limitations, which are amply demonstrated, and often thematised, in the case-studies presented here. Many of the texts in the corpus, although newly printed in 1501, were not newly written, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of years old. The *Problemata* of pseudo-Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Plutarch (Shephard and Hancock), Abu Bakr al-Hassan ibn al-Khasib's *Liber Nativitatum* (Doyle) and Juvenal's *Satires* (O'Flaherty and Shephard) are all obvious examples. In most such cases, the text has undertaken a tortuous journey from its initial creation to our 1501 reader, experiencing alterations and adaptations, undergoing translations and retranslations, accumulating commentaries, diagrams, illustrations, dedications and indexes, until they are finally 'edited' for the printing press. This process introduces interventions from numerous individuals, often across several centuries, who are not the headline author of the text. Some of these contributors are named, some are mis-named and some are not named, sometimes resulting in a mismatch between a correct modern philological understanding of the text, and the understanding accessible to and accepted by readers in 1501. For example, the *Problemata* volume discussed by Shephard and Hancock names no fewer than 10 different contributors in addition to its three headline authors; one of those headline authors is now thought to be spurious, but 1501 readers thought it accurate. The two scholars – a Christian and a Jew – who collaborated to translate the *Liber Nativitatum* (Doyle) from the Arabic are named in several earlier manuscript copies, but not in our 1501 edition, so it seems very unlikely that 1501 readers were aware of their identities. As a result of these many complexities, the contents of our 1501 editions as encountered and perceived by their first readers are rarely adequately captured by modern critical editions of the texts named on their title pages.

For the purposes of our project, we deal with these difficulties by considering that the editions in our corpus are often old *texts*, but they are all new *books*. Because we want to write about musical knowledge in 1501, we have to focus on their newness as books, and only view their oldness and messiness as texts through the lens of their new acquisition and reading in particular 1501 editions. In other words, with regard to ancient and medieval authors this is a reception project. The compound nature of the books gives us some interesting starting points in this respect. An early 15th-century index to the *Problemata* included in our 1501 edition, discussed extensively by Shephard and Hancock, hints at the musical subjects

on which 15th-century readers sought information in pseudo-Aristotle's text. O'Flaherty and Shephard show how Juvenal's musical mentions are explained by several late 15th-century commentators. Perotti's *Cornucopiae*, the other book included in Shephard and Hancock's case study, is in its entirety an enormous late 15th-century commentary on Martial. Relatively recent interventions by indexers, commentators, translators, dedicators and editors can suggest the audiences and reading strategies that seemed in 1501 to be most pertinent to the headline texts, and that inflect the musical insights available in the books.

A focus on readers in 1501 is central to the project. The different books in our corpus are clearly designed to meet the expectations and needs of very different kinds of readers. A highly specialised Latin work with just a couple of Venetian editions, such as the *Liber Nativitatum*, probably reached few readers, and only those with a professional interest in astrology. In contrast, the numerous commented editions of Juvenal's *Satires*, issued regularly by printers based in several cities of northern and central Italy, were probably thumbed by many university students as they studied Latin poetry in Grammar class. Exceptional documentation surviving concerning the print-run and circulation of sensory treatises on the afterlife related to Lilio's *De Gloria et Gaudiis Beatorum*, discussed in Ștefănescu's essay, indicates that these were not only (or perhaps primarily) retail products: instead, or as well, copies were sent by the authors as gifts to their correspondents. Although Venice dominated the book trade, many other Italian cities had their own printers, and some books were angled at local and regional audiences rather than Italy- or Europe-wide circulation. Giovanni Pontano's *Opera*, the subject of Shephard and Rice's essay, exemplifies a common publication trajectory whereby a local celebrity is first published by a local printer, primarily for local circulation, and then, if successful, the work is picked up by a larger Venetian printing house and reaches a wider audience. More irrevocably rooted in the local within our 1501 corpus is the so-called *Mirabilia Romae* (Rome: Johann Besicken), an octavo guidebook for pilgrims and tourists visiting Rome (coincidentally, containing a prayer on Veronica's veil versions of which were set to music by Jacob Obrecht and Josquin des Prez), issued in dozens of editions by German printers based in Rome in the decades either side of 1500: a local product for local distribution to an international readership. Although a small, pocket-sized volume, the *Mirabilia Romae* was richly illustrated, and was available in Latin, Italian or German. It is clear that in this case, as in others, the choice of language and the inclusion of illustrations are directly related to the expected readership. Plain, commented Latin editions of Juvenal's *Satires* surely appealed to a different, though overlapping, group of readers from illustrated, vernacular editions of the lives of saints, such as the *Vita di sancti padri* (Venice: Otino Luna, 1501), which also enjoyed a

strong run of editions in our period. The former was probably purchased for use at university; the latter probably for use at home, or perhaps in a convent library. In the focussed case-studies presented here, it is easy to address the specificities of readership for each book, because each essay has just one or two books to deal with; later on in the project, when we come to write up our findings synoptically, questions of readership will become more treacherous.

The majority of books printed in Italy in 1501 were in Latin, a circumstance that seems to constrain quite significantly their potential readership. If some degree of literacy was relatively widespread in Italy, where elementary schooling was reasonably well established in some regions, Latin literacy sufficient to read classical literature was largely the preserve of the priesthood, the professional class (lawyers, doctors, accountants, secretaries) and the rich – most of them men. This is a significant problem in a project that seeks to chart ‘everyday musical knowledge’ through printed books. Cracks in the veneer of exclusivity associated with Latin literacy can be found, however, at the interface of the written and the oral. As Doyle points out in his contribution, it seems likely that the *Liber Nativitatum* was mostly read by specialists, but those specialists read it to inform their *viva voce* consultations with clients, and their preparation of advisory horoscopes and prognostications, at least some of which activity was transacted in the vernacular. Thus, ideas written down in Latin need not stay written down, or in Latin, but in some cases could make their way quite easily into the wider world of oral, vernacular and indeed visual discourse. A similar argument can be made in respect of medical books and practising physicians and pharmacists. Another point of interface is noted by Ștefănescu, who observes that Lilio, as also some of the correspondents with whom he shared his book and his interests, was a preacher, thus ideas encountered by us in written form in his 1501 book probably also found oral expression, perhaps earlier, and in the vernacular, before what could sometimes be large audiences. A different kind of connection with oral culture is found in Pontano’s *Opera*, and exploited by Shephard and Rice: Pontano’s dialogue *Antonius* is set in a Neapolitan street in the 1470s and includes reportage-style passages, thus it can be read as a written, Latin representation of oral, vernacular street culture. Our hope is that approaches such as these can open out the ‘readership’ for our 1501 books well beyond the confines of those who had the intellectual and financial capital, and the motivation, to buy and read them.

Of course, it is incumbent upon us to explain what we mean by ‘everyday musical knowledge’, and why it is reasonable to suppose that a year’s printed books can give us access to it. Roughly, in the project we use the phrase ‘everyday musical knowledge’ to capture all the things people could know and think about music in their daily lives, which are different from

the 'music theory' discussed by musical specialists. Accordingly, in reading our 1501 books, we are particularly interested to see what is said or implied about music when music is not the main subject of discussion. We think of this as adding up to a kind of 'musical worldview' – which is more a set of affordances than a precise prescription, because it seems unlikely that every Italian in 1501 inhabited it in the same way (a point made by Shephard and Rice in their essay). However, our 1501 corpus, for all its neat chronological coherence and seemingly comprehensive scope, forces us into a highly anachronistic reading practice, because nobody in Renaissance Italy ever purchased every book printed in 1501, *only* 1501, then read them all cover-to-cover. Lots of texts that have plenty to say about music, and went through many printed editions around 1500, happened not to be printed in 1501 – Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, for example, or Pier Paolo Vergerio's *De ingenuis moribus ac liberalibus studiis*, or Savonarola's works. Such texts will only appear in our findings piecemeal, helping to flesh out a wider context for the 1501 books that are our main focus, and this represents an obvious distortion of the 'everyday musical knowledge' we are seeking to chart. Conversely, a handful of texts printed in 1501 that have a particular wealth of musical content were never printed before or since, suggesting that they found few readers – Giorgio Valla's *De expetendis, et fugiendis rebus opus*, with a long section on ancient Greek music theory, is a good example. In a study of humanist responses to music, Valla's work would be centrally important; but in a study of 'everyday musical knowledge' the book seems of limited interest. In our work we are careful to resist, or at least to moderate, the lure of texts that are exceptionally musically productive, but probably unrepresentative.

Our project work to date has begun to suggest a way in which our 1501 corpus, although far from perfect, may at least be good enough to achieve our objectives. Everyday musical knowledge seems to inhabit several discrete and approximately coherent discourses, each shared across numerous similar texts. So, for example, there is a musical discourse associated with the poet-musician, which turns up in newly written poetry and literary criticism; and a musical discourse associated with the impact of foodstuffs on the voice, which turns up in books on diet; and a musical discourse associated with the therapeutic benefits of music as a leisure activity, which turns up in books on health, well-being and conduct; and a musical discourse concerning the soundscape of heaven, which turns up in books of theology and saints' lives; and a musical discourse concerning the nature and use of ancient Roman instruments, which turns up in classical literature and its associated commentaries; and a musical (or at least, musically relevant) discourse concerning the anatomy and operation of the sense of hearing, which turns up in medical textbooks; and so forth. Within each of these musical discourses, there is a reasonably consistent repertoire of

pertinent things one can say, including illustrative examples. Thus, for our 1501 corpus to produce a representative picture of ‘everyday musical knowledge’ in print, it need not contain every book than in circulation, and we need not presume that every Italian had read every book in the corpus; it is sufficient that a selection of books representing (some of) the range of musical discourses is present, both in our corpus, and in the awareness of a period reader.

These discrete musical discourses are, of course, not unrelated to each other. There are significant alignments and overlaps between them, for example, concerning music’s effects on individuals and society (moving the emotions; persuading; bringing to accord), the concepts through which musical sounds are evaluated (variety; sweetness; harmony; joy), and the underlying mechanisms assumed to drive its effective capacities (humouralism and the qualities; *spiritus*; harmonics), among other elements. However, for all their shared assumptions, these distinct musical discourses are also misaligned, contradictory or at the very least speaking at cross-purposes, as an inevitable result of the different objectives, the different origins (e.g. Greek, Roman, Arabic, medieval, recent), and the different rhetorical and intellectual traditions characterising the larger discourses of which they form a small part (such as that of poetics, or that of Galenic medicine, or that of Aristotelian commentary). It is interesting to think about the impacts these discontinuities may have had as the different musical discourses rubbed up against each other within the musical worldview of an individual in 1501 – the creatively anachronistic accommodations of old ideas to new musical practices, the degree of segmentation or integration attempted between incompatible musical perspectives, the conceptual fudging considered acceptable and necessary to a somewhat coherent total understanding. These possibilities are thematised, in a preliminary and experimental way, in Shephard and Hancock’s contribution to this special issue.

1501 is celebrated by musicologists as the year in which Ottaviano Petrucci published his first songbook, *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton A*, regarded rather approximately but tenaciously as marking the inception of ‘proper’ music printing. The same year also saw Petrucci’s sequel, *Canti B numero Cinquanta*, as well as the first edition of Bonaventura da Brescia’s *Regula musicae plane*, a short vernacular singing tutor, written by a Franciscan primarily for other religious, which is the only ‘music theory’ book that can rightly be regarded as a print bestseller in Italy in the first decades of the 16th century, reaching 13 editions by 1527. By now, it will come as no surprise to learn that, of the 358 books in our corpus, these are the three of which our project will take least note: musicology has them covered already. What we hope to contribute is not a new analysis of familiar books, but rather a dramatic expansion in the range of books considered relevant to the circulation of musical knowledge in the period around 1500. Musicologists working on Italy around 1500 have,

understandably and inevitably, developed a distinct canon of roughly contemporary excerpts that are used when contextualising musical sounds and practices: Johannes Tinctoris’ *De inventione et usu musicae* (especially the passage on the ‘effects’ of music); the first few sections of Franchino Gafori’s *Practica musicae*; Vincenzo Colli’s brief biography of the famous singer-songwriter Serafino dall’Aquila; the excerpt from Paolo Cortesi’s *De Cardinalatu* published by Nino Pirrotta; and a few pages from Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* – at a stretch, also two or three musical episodes and images from the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and both the overall *mise-en-scene* and a few specific passages from Jacopo Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* and Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani*. We have arrived at this canon not after an exhaustive survey of musical discussions circulating in the period, but by collecting things encountered serendipitously because they seem particularly interesting and relevant to the point we want to make. There is no question that these sources are valuable and important, but equally, it is clear that using a handful of passages assembled more-or-less by accident and because they fit our interests as a complete characterisation of a musical context is not wholly satisfactory. Our project, we hope, will take a big step towards a more rigorous study of the textual circulation of musical thinking beyond the specialist discourse of music theory in Italy around 1500.

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Abstract

The essays included here present case studies prepared within the project ‘Sounding the Bookshelf 1501: Music in a Year of Italian Printed Books’, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and hosted at the University of Sheffield. The project asks a simple question: standing in a Venetian bookshop towards the end of the year 1501, what information about music might you encounter as you browse the new printed titles available for purchase? Very few of the books printed in Italy in 1501 were ‘about’ music, but almost all of them mention music in passing, and sometimes at length, whilst discussing something else. These kinds of casual, fragmentary comments on music were surely read by many more people than specialist music theory, the audience for which was probably quite small. To recover these comments, and characterise the contradictory and incoherent field of everyday musical knowledge they comprise, we are reading every book printed in Italy in 1501 cover-to-cover, excerpting every passage mentioning music, sound or hearing. The final product of our project—a co-authored book, yet to be written—will present our findings in synoptic fashion. The essays presented here take a different approach, offering detailed case-studies on particular books within our 1501 corpus.