Gaspar van Weerbeke

New Perspectives on his Life and Music

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Coat of arms of Ludovico Maria Sforza

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Gaspar Depicted?

Leonardo's Portrait of a Musician

Laure Fagnart

The city of Milan as ruled by the House of Sforza for half a century was not only a centre of music but was also attractive to other types of artists, including writers, painters, and sculptors. One of these figures was Leonardo da Vinci, who lived there for twenty-two non-consecutive years. In Milan he was involved in several diverse projects and was an active member of court life in organizing ceremonies and festivities.

Only one male portrait by Leonardo survives. Kept at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan, it depicts a young man who, in one of his hands, holds a folded sheet on which one can make out letters and musical notes (see Figure 4.1 and 4.2). Due to the poor conservation of this part of the picture, the music is now illegible, but it is definitely mensural notation and thus in all likelihood polyphonic music.[1] Presented as a three-quarter bust, the model, who is generally considered to be a musician, is shown in front of a black background. His hair, shoulder length and curly, sits under a red hat. He is wearing a black doublet under a brown stole.

Figure 4.1. Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of a Musician
Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana

Figure 4.2. Detail

1 David Fallows, *Josquin* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 135.

The portrait was made during Leonardo's first Lombard period (*c.*1482–99). The reasons for his relocation from Florence to Milan around 1482 remain unknown. Leonardo's first biographers state that Lorenzo de' Medici employed him to make a silver lyre for Ludovico Sforza. The reality is most likely different: a rough draft of a letter survives in which Leonardo addresses the Duke of Milan in order to offer him his services specifically in the field of military engineering. Such a request is unusual: princes ordinarily sought out artists and not vice versa. The first commission that Leonardo obtained in Milan did not come from Ludovico Sforza or a member of the Lombard court, but rather from the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception: this was for the *Virgin of the Rocks* now in the Louvre Museum, which he began after he accepted the commission in 1483. Due to stylistic connections between these two paintings, the portrait at the Ambrosiana must also date from these first years in Milan, specifically around 1485.[2] In fact, the two paintings show similar approaches to light and chiaroscuro and are still related to Leonardo's somewhat earlier works from Florence. More specifically, the portrait may have been made between 1486 and 1487. It must have been painted before the *Lady with an ermine (Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani)*, kept in Kraków and dated *c.*1489–90. This possesses a much more complex and dynamic approach; the details of the young man's face do not yet bear the advanced anatomical meticulousness that Leonardo produced starting in 1489, specifically on the structure of the human skull.[3]

The picture, in a poor state of conservation with the exception of the young man's face, has largely been repainted.[4] Originally, the doublet was dark red and not black as we see today; the stole was a bright yellow. For a long time, a layer of black paint covered the hand and sheet of music. It was only in 1905 when Luigi Cavenaghi and Antonio Grandi restored the painting that these two features reappeared. This important repainting was apparently quite old: in 1672, Pietro Paolo Bosca registered the painting at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana with the description 'the face of the Duke of Milan, with such elegance, that perhaps the living Duke would have wanted it for himself'.[5] There was no allusion to the sheet of music. The portrait was otherwise long considered to be of a Milanese duke. Finally, following his work habits, Leonardo seems to have hesitated numerous times: the underdrawing of the costume is different from the contour finally adopted, and the hand and the sheet of music were added at a later date, over pictorial layers defining the doublet and the stole, with pigments different from those used for the rest of the painting.[6]

In any event, it is likely to have been repainted by Leonardo himself.[7] The artist was able to incorporate the fingers and the sheet of music subsequently to clarify the general atti-

2 Pietro C. Marani, *Léonard de Vinci: Une carrière de peintre* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999), 163; Pietro C. Marani, 'Lo sguardo e la musica: Il Musico nell'opera di Leonardo a Milano', in *Leonardo da Vinci: Il Musico*, ed. Pietro C. Marani (Milan: Silvana Editore, 2010), 29, 44.

3 *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the court of Milan*, ed. Luke Syson and Larry Keith (London: National Gallery Company, 2011), cat. 5, 95 (notice by L. Syson).

4 Giulio Bora, *Due tavole leonardesche: Nuove indagini sul Musico e sul San Giovanni dell'Ambrosiana* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 1987), 12.

5 'vultum Mediolanensis Ducis tantà elegantià, quantam fortasse, cum viveret sibi illa Dux exoptaverat'. Pietro Paolo Bosca, *De origine et statu Bibliothecae Ambrosianae* (Milan, 1672), 117.

6 Bora, *Due tavole leonardesche*, 12, 14–15.

7 Marani, *Léonard de Vinci*, 163.

tude of the model, that of a young man captivated by the music he had just composed or sung. This helps us to understand the tension in his jaw and his fixed gaze. Above all, we notice the accumulation of lacrimal fluid shown by the flush of white paint in the lower part of the eyes.[8] Here, Leonardo tries to demonstrate his theory of 'motions of the mind': the model is so focused on his internal thoughts—on the music produced or deciphered—that his physical attitude is transformed and his natural reflexes altered, his eyes filling with tears.

Since the sheet of music was uncovered in 1905, researchers have tried to identify the 'musician' shown. The task is not an easy one: around 1485, there were many musicians and singers in Milan, both in the cathedral and in the court of Ludovico Sforza.[9] However, those with the social status and financial resources to order a personal portrait were much rarer.

In 1906, Luca Beltrami put forward the name of Franchinus Gaffurius (1451–1522), a contemporary of Leonardo: a meeting with the artist would have been possible since the musician and theorist both lived in Milan from January 1484, when Gaffurius became choirmaster at the cathedral. In addition, he suggested, the words 'Cant.' and 'Ang.' deciphered on the sheet of music could be abbreviations of the words 'Cantum' and 'Angelicum', allusions to *Angelicum ac divinum opus* published by Gaffurius in 1508.[10] This appealing hypothesis was long accepted, but no sufficient iconographic comparison confirms it.[11] The age of the model may also be an issue: around 1485, Gaffurius was probably too old to be depicted as the young man who appears in the picture at the Ambrosiana.

In 1972, Suzanne Clercx-Lejeune identified the model as Josquin des Prez (*c.*1450–1521), who was in Milan in 1484, 1485, and once again in 1489.[12] According to Suzanne Clercx-Lejeune, the abbreviations 'Cont.' and 'Catuz.' and the letters 'A Z', which she identified on the sheet of music, referred to the words 'Contratenor', 'Cantuz' and 'Altuz'.[13] They could be associated with a motet, a mass, or a song with a descending melodic line found frequently in the compositions of Josquin, for example in the motet *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix*, but also in all music of this period. Moreover, the notation is largely illegible. The model also appears to be younger than Josquin was at the time the portrait was painted.

Recently, Pietro C. Marani suggested linking the model depicted in the Ambrosian picture to the lute player, actor, and singer Atalante Migliorotti (1466–1535), who, according to Anonimo Gaddiano, one of Leonardo's first biographers, moved to Milan at the same time as the Florentine artist.[14] Around 1485, Migliorotti was in his twenties and is thus a more likely candidate to be the young man depicted in the Ambrosiana painting. In addition, in folio 888 recto (ex 324 recto) of the Codex Atlanticus, in a list of assets that Leonardo prepared in 1499 in advance of his departure from Milan, he mentions 'una testa ritratta d'Atalante che alzava

8 Jérémie Koering, *Léonard de Vinci: Dessins et peintures* (Paris: Hazan, 2007), 264.
9 Paul A. Merkley and Lora L. M. Merkley, *Music and Patronage in the Sforza Court* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999).
10 Luca Beltrami, 'Il Musicista di Leonardo da Vinci', *Raccolta Vinciana*, 2 (1906), 75–80.
11 Cf. figures 2, 3, and 4 in Suzanne Clercx-Lejeune, 'Fortuna Josquini: A proposito di un ritratto di Josquin des Prez', *Rivista musicale italiana*, 6 (1972), 315–37.
12 Fallows, *Josquin*, 359–61. Clercx-Le Jeune was still relying on the now discounted belief that the 'Josquin' at the Milanese court in the 1470s and later was Josquin des Prez.
13 Clercx-Lejeune, 'Fortuna Josquini'.
14 Marani, *Léonard de Vinci*, 165.

il volto' ('a portrait of Atalante with his upturned face'). The expression 'che alzava il volto' could refer to the Ambrosian portrait, although, as Fallows recently pointed out, the sheet of music should in this case be turned towards the model and not towards the viewer, as can be seen from the painting.[15]

Can we add Gaspar van Weerbeke to these three suggestions? Gaspar contributed to the cultural and musical life of the Lombard Duchy during the years in question. Attending the same court, the musician was familiar with Leonardo. This is documented in Henrico Boscano's *Isola beata*, a literary work in dialogue form today in private hands.[16] In this text, written around 1513 but which recounts recollections from the 1490s, the author declares that he was involved in an academy's meetings in Milan ('molti signori, conti e cavalieri, philosophi e poeti, e musici').[17] Among the painters and engineers, he mentions Leonardo, while Gaspar is cited alongside the musicians. In addition, under the reign of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Gaspar wore, as did other singers attached to the ducal court, a specific costume which could be the one depicted in the Ambrosiana portrait. This is shown by the many letters that Galeazzo Maria Sforza sent to Gotardo Panigarola concerning suits of clothes intended for singers at the court: 'Gotardo. To Gaspar, our singer, we would like to give a dark velvet robe, such as you have given to the Abbot [Antonio Guinati] and to Cordier, both of them also our singers. Milan, 22 April 1475.'[18] And: 'In addition to the material ordered at present for all of the singers, we want you to give to each of the Abbot, Cordero, and Gasparro [*sic*], our singers, black velvet for suits …'.[19] But if you look closely, these statements are too generic to be definitely related to the clothing depicted in the Ambrosiana painting. As already pointed out, the musician's doublet was originally dark red rather than black. In addition, in 1486/87, Gaspar, like Gaffurius and Josquin approximately thirty-five years old, was probably also too old to be depicted as the young man portrayed in the picture at the Ambrosiana.[20]

Ultimately, none of the identities put forward is completely satisfactory. And questions remain. Why face the sheet of music towards the outer portion of the tableau when the young man seems so focused on his internal thoughts? Why show it to the viewer? Why has the music been folded like a letter? Should it be considered, as is usually the case, to be an inset intended to identify a specific musician or composition? Could the sheet evoke the art of music in general, the work of Leonardo in this field, or the status held by music, in the eyes of the artist, among the different artistic disciplines?

15 Fallows, *Josquin*, 135.

16 Jill Pederson, 'Henrico Boscano's "Isola beata": New Evidence for the Academia Leonardi Vinci in Renaissance Milan', *Renaissance Studies*, 22 (2008), 450–75.

17 Henrico Boscano, *Isola beata*, fol. 9^{v}, cited by Pederson, 'Henrico Boscano's "Isola beata"', 453.

18 'Gotardo. A Gaspar nostro cantore volemo daghi una veste de veluto morello ut como hay dato a l'Abbe [Antonio Guinati] et Cordier similiter nostri cantori. Mediolani 22 Aprilis 1475'. Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, cod. Triv. 1384, fol. 24^{v}, Galeazzo Maria Sforza to Gotardo Panigarola, Milan, 22 April 1475. Cited in Merkley and Merkley, *Music and Patronage*, 177, translated by Carlo Bosi.

19 'A l'Abbate, a. d. Cordero et a Gasparro nostri cantori volemo daghi el veluto negro per farse uno vestito per caduno qual gli donamo, ultra quello che hay commissione de dare a tuti li cantori de presente …'. Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, cod. Triv. 1384, fol. 70, Galeazzo Maria Sforza to Gotardo Panigarola, Cupago, 16 December 1475, cited and translated in Merkley and Merkley, *Music and Patronage*, 178.

20 On a recent estimation of Gaspar's year of birth see Klaus Pietschmann's contribution to this volume.

In one of the first sections of *Libro di pittura*, Leonardo famously gathers arguments in favour of the superiority of painting over poetry, music, and sculpture. On music he writes:

> How Music Ought to be Called the Sister and Junior to Painting. Music is to be regarded none other than the sister of painting since it is subject to hearing, a sense second to the eye, and since it composes harmony from the conjunction of its proportional parts operating at the same time. [These parts] are constrained to arise and to die in one or more harmonic tempos which surround a proportionality by its members; such a harmony is composed not differently from the circumferential lines which generate human beauty by its [respective] members. Yet painting excels and rules over music, because it does not immediately die after its creation the way unfortunately music does. To the contrary, painting stays in existence, and will show you as being alive what is, in fact, on a single surface. O marvellous science, you keep alive the transient beauties of mortals! [These beauties] are more permanent than the works of nature, which are continuously changed by time, which duly leads to old age. This science is in the same proportion to divine nature as are its works to the works of nature, and on this account it is revered.
>
> Come la musica si de' chiamare sorella e minore della pittura. La Musica non è da essere chiamata altro che sorella della pittura, con ciò sia ch'essa è subbietto dell'audito, secondo senso a l'occhio, e compone armonia con la congionzioni delle sue parte proporzionali operate nel medesimo tempo, constrette a nascere e morire in uno o più tempi armonici, li quali tempi circondano la proporzionalità de' membri di che tale armonia si compone, non altrimente che si faccia la linea circonferenziale le membra di che si genera la bellezza umana. Ma la pittura eccelle e signoreggia la musica perché essa non more immediate dopo la sua creazione, come fa la sventurata musica, anzi, resta in essere, e ti si dimostra in vita quel che in fatto è una sola superfizie. O maravigliosa scienza, tu riservi in vita le caduche bellezze de' mortali, le quali hanno più permanenzia che l'opere de natura, le quali al continuo sono variate dal tempo, che.lle conduce alla debita vecchiezza; e tale scienza ha tale proporzione con la divina natura, quale hanno le sue opere con le opere di essa natura, e per questo è adorata.[21]

This passage, dated *c*.1490–92, expresses a harsh attitude towards music: the ephemeral art of music cannot rival the eternal art of painting, especially since the harmonies of the former cannot be given simultaneously, as is the case for those of the latter. If the Ambrosian portrait were designed specifically to reflect Leonardo's ideas on the 'paragone', we might consider the melancholy on the face of the young man to be an echo of the predicted death of the unfortunate music.

21 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Codice Urbinate lat.1270, fol. 16$^{r–v}$; see *Leonardo da Vinci. Libro di pittura. Codice Urbinate lat. 1270 nella Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, ed. Carlo Pedretti with a critical transcription by Carlo Vecce (Florence: Giunti, 1995), vol. 1, p. 153. The English translation is taken from Claire Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 241–43.