Marco Cerocchi. *Funzioni semantiche e metatestuali della musica in Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2010. Pp. 158. ISBN 978-222-5991-2. €19.

This is an attempt to explain the significance of references to music in the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio in the light of the surviving music repertory from the period and the writings of contemporary music theorists. Since the book is directed toward the general reader with a literary background rather than toward music specialists, the author provides short explanations of technical matters such as the notation system and compositional types, and describes the function of different types of compositions in medieval society as he pursues his goal.

The book is divided into four main chapters in chronological order. In the first chapter Cerocchi precedes his study of Dante with an examination of St. Francis of Assisi and Jacopone da Todi, whose works, *Il cantico delle creature* and *Donna de Paradiso* respectively, the author regards as models for the philosophical attitude found in Dante's writings. In the second chapter he concentrates on the *Divine Comedy* and three of Dante's canticles. In chapter three Petrarch is presented as the creator of a new union between words and music, and the last chapter looks at Boccaccio's *Decameron* in the light of cultural secularization in the fourteenth century.

The basic approach of the author is to examine the attitude of the authors toward sacred and secular music, and his broad conclusion is that within a few decades at the beginning of the fourteenth century, a radical transformation occurred: Dante followed the traditional teachings of the church that elevates sacred music and denigrates secular; Petrarch broke with that tradition by providing secular texts that inspired a new text-musical association that prefigured the rich text-musical relationship in the mid sixteenth-century madrigal; and Boccaccio moved the use of secular musical settings to a broader level by further infusing them with emotional content and using them as structural elements.

To support his thesis, Cerocchi calls upon both philosophical and music theoretical writings of the Middle Ages. He displays an impressive acquaintance with the early writings concerning music, both technical and the aesthetic, of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and Boethius, as well as with a number of music theorists from the period. He then elaborates his theory as to the way in which he believes these writings influenced the major works of the three authors.

Cerocchi is at his best in the consideration of Dante where he convincingly demonstrates a strong connection between St. Augustine's writings (including his *De musica*) and Dante's major works. His discussion of the song of Casella (*Purgatorio* II) is especially enlightening and lends much strength to his conclusion that Dante subscribed to the inherited attitude that secular music seduces and corrupts the virtue of all who perform or hear it; only sacred music purifies the spirit and makes it worthy for God.

The author is on less secure ground in his consideration of the music in Petrarch and Boccaccio, mainly due to a fundamental misunderstanding of secular music and its performance in the fourteenth century. He posits a rather abrupt

break with the past taking place in Italy during the third decade of the fourteenth century, in which there is a dramatic shift of focus from sacred to secular. Petrarch is singled out as one of the earliest and most important authors to adopt this new attitude, one that emphasized the human spirit which can be seen as a new musical – poetic relationship. Cerocchi calls this development ‘petrarchismo,’ and links it with the music theory of Philippe de Vitry as expressed in his treatise *Ars Nova*. The musical example presented as proof of this theory is Jacopo da Bologna’s two-part setting of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* LII, “Non al suo amante,” the only musical setting of a Petrarch text during the poet’s lifetime.

Unfortunately, an examination of the musical setting does not support this strong claim. Although Jacopo’s music is quite charming, there is no observable link between the notes of music and the text—either specific words or the general sentiment of the poetry. In fact, there is no observable link on the level of text expression between any fourteenth-century setting and its text. That was a concept that can first be seen in the very late fifteenth century. Cerocchi’s extension of this point to credit Petrarch with the beginning of what can later be seen in the intimate text-musical relationship of the sixteenth-century madrigal, as represented by an analysis of Claudio Monteverdi’s setting of Petrarch’s text “Zefiro torna,” (published in 1614), therefore, is without foundation.

The author’s point about the emotional link between the text and music for the canzone in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, is similarly based on an erroneous assumption. Although he readily admits that a large quantity of the poetic settings in Italy were improvised, and that the absence of written music for any of the canzone found in the *Decameron* probably indicates that the music was improvised, Cerocchi does not seem to understand the implications of the improvisatory tradition. An improvised musical setting of poetry did not consist of what we would today identify as a melody. Whether sung with or without instrumental accompaniment, the musical content was a simple melodic formula more closely resembling a psalm-tone than an aria. When an instrument was used it provided simple drones that added some sound variety and helped keep the singer on pitch. But there is no evidence that there was very much melodic content; the emphasis was on the poetry which is why the verb for ‘saying’ is found as often as that for ‘singing,’ in the literature when describing the performances. There is no doubt, however, that the emotional content of poetry was presented, but this was solely the result of the performing tradition which called for the performer to deliver the lines in a dramatic, rhetorical manner. The author is correct in claiming the relationship between the *Decameron* canzone and the presentation of poetry in the soon-to-arrive humanistic movement. But it was the performance style, not the music itself.

On a more positive note, Cerocchi’s analysis of the writings about music is very well done, and his detailed presentation of the music references in Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio provides an excellent base for further study of the values placed on music in late medieval literature.