

Zeitschrift:	Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel
Herausgeber:	Schola Cantorum Basiliensis
Band:	35-36 (2011-2012)
Artikel:	Singing the news: Lepanto, 1571
Autor:	Fenlon, Iain
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-868863

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

SINGING THE NEWS: LEPANTO, 1571

by IAIN FENLON

It may be safely stated that the surviving corpus of Renaissance polyphony, the repertoires of masses, motets, madrigals and related forms that have occupied musicological attention since the nineteenth century, represents only a small fraction of the listening experiences of the population of early modern Venice. Alongside pieces by Adriano Willaert, Claudio Merulo, and others there co-existed a now vanished repertory of monodic song which, despite its uncertain character in matters of detail, is nevertheless of enormous importance if, as historians, we are to have anything like a more complete picture of contemporary urban musical practices in the period. Redressing the balance inevitable involves consideration of the ritual traditions of public performance, a form of practice-oriented anthropology as might be familiar from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Implicit is the condition that ritual need not be religious in nature, and certainly need not be spectacular. On the contrary, the emphasis here is upon the complex inter-relationship of individual activity and the dominant culture or social structure in all its manifestations. As such, the objects of enquiry are not only the laws and formal institutions of any given society, but also the daily lives of its individual actors. In this sense my concern here is with the specifically Venetian strain of a common Italian tradition of street singing, which relies for its agency upon an identifiable repertory of familiar rhetorical tropes expressed to the accompaniment of familiar musical formulas. In other words, the result could be considered as an exercise in the re-enforcement of Venetian identity through public performance. Seen in this way, the rituals of public entertainment constitute an important part of politics, being in effect a symbolic statement about the Venetian social order. As such they contribute to the political process by binding together the community, providing legitimacy for the political order, inspiring the population to action, and fostering a very particular world-view. Seen in this way, politics is simply part of a wider culture which is conceived as a system of meanings and symbols both constructed out of and, in turn, organizing individual and collective practice. In this context, anthropological sensibilities and methods provide the only possible approach if we are to have any prospect of recuperating the music of the *calle* and the *campo*, the music which was much more likely to be heard by the vast majority of Venetians than the motets of Andrea Gabrieli and his contemporaries that were performed in the elite environment of St. Mark's Basilica and a handful of other churches in the city. What follows is an attempt to explore aspects of this largely unwritten body of song by considering its place in a reconstruction of the public, 'popular' reaction to what was a major political and military event in the everyday lives of ordinary Venetians, the victory of the Holy League over the Turks at the

battle of Lepanto on 7 October 1571. In this process the role of print was fundamental.¹

Many writers since Voltaire have categorized Lepanto as an empty achievement, a great spectacle that led nowhere.² Yet whatever the judgments of history, the authentic period voice should not be forgotten. For many contemporaries the victory seemed to mark a decisive moment in the fortunes of Christendom, a critical moment of enormous psychological importance in an historic struggle. No matter what occurred in the following years, as the Venetians reached a separate peace treaty with the Turks (to the disgust of Spain and the Papacy), compared with what had gone before, the victory at Lepanto marked the end of a genuine crisis of confidence. Since, for all Italians, the Turkish question had become one of perennial interest, news of the outcome of the battle reverberated throughout the whole of the peninsula. But nowhere in the whole of Italy was the sense of relief and achievement more keenly felt than in Venice. There the immediate celebrations lasted just a few weeks, but in that short time the victory at Lepanto was powerfully etched into the Venetian consciousness through characteristic transformations of local traditions of civic and religious display.³ The crucial fact is that, for many citizens of the Republic, Lepanto was no ordinary victory, but marked a crucial moment in its history equal in significance to the legendary defeat of Barbarossa, a parallel that was made explicit by Luigi Groto. Best known as a playwright, Groto became prominent in Venetian public life during the 1570s largely through the publication of his orations, a number of which had originally been composed for the coronations of doges; they continued to be re-issued well into the seventeenth century. His engagement with the Lepanto literature begins with an oration in praise of the victory,⁴ continues with a poem in praise of Agostino Barbarigo, the Venetian second-in-command who

¹ For a treatment of some of these themes see Iain Fenlon, „Sung Histories: The Battle of Lepanto between Orality and Print“, in: Philip V. Bohlman and Marcello Sorice Keller (eds.), *Musical Anthropology in Mediterranean Cultures. Interpretation, Performance, Identity*, Bologna: CLUEB 2009, 165–178; Iain Fenlon, „Orality and Print: Singing in the Streets in Early Modern Venice“, in: Luca degl’Innocenti, Brian Richardson and Chiara Sbordoni (eds.), *Interactions between Writing in Early Italian Culture*, London: Routledge 2016, 81–98.

² F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. London: Fontana 1976, vol. 2, 661–669.

³ Ernst H. Gombrich, „Celebrations in Venice of the Holy League and of the Victory of Lepanto“, in: *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art Presented to Anthony Blunt on his Sixtieth Birthday*, London: Phaidon Press 1967, 62–68; Carlo Dionisotti, „Lepanto nella cultura italiana del tempo“, in: Gino Benzoni (ed.), *Il mediterraneo nella seconda metà del '500 nella luce di Lepanto*, Florence: Olschki 1974, 127–51; Iain Fenlon, „Lepanto: The Arts of Celebration in Renaissance Venice“, in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 83 (1987), 201–236; Iain Fenlon, *The Ceremonial City. History, Memory and Myth in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2007, particularly 153–191.

⁴ Luigi Groto, *Orazione fatta in Vinegia, per l’allegrezza della vittoria ottenuta contra Turchi dalla Serenissima Lega*, Venice: Francesco Rocca 1571.

died from his injuries two days after the battle,⁵ and reaches a climax with the *Trofeo della vittoria sacra*, a poetic miscellany that contains a mixture of dialect verses, some Latin poems, a plan of the battle, and an engraving of the captured standard of the Turkish fleet with a Kufic inscription which reads ‚There is no God but Allah and Mahomet is his prophet‘.⁶ The *Trofeo* is not only the most substantial of the Lepanto anthologies, but also one of the most informative about the motives guiding the process of editorial selection, and in consequence about its intended audience. Grotto, who had evidently been criticized for having included poems in the *Trofeo* that were in neither Tuscan nor Latin, replied that God could be praised in all languages, and ideas expressed as successfully in the Bergamasque or Friulian dialect as in Italian or Latin.⁷ In other words, his anthology was directed at a wide audience, including the communities of dialect speakers and readers who constituted a notable section of the local readership of the Lepanto celebratory literature.⁸ In practice, Grotto assembled his book from many sources, some of which had an independent existence as short pamphlets and broadsides.

A population which had been kept in touch with the progress of the war through broadsheets, and who so strongly identified with the struggle, now celebrated the news in print.⁹ From the presses of Venice poured a torrent of poetic anthologies, paraphrases of the psalms, accounts of the action, prophesies of future developments, recommendations for further action, and prints showing the battle at its height or the disposition of the opposing fleets. Most of these genres and sub-genres were not new, but taken together they constitute a collective response to a single historical event that is without parallel in sixteenth-century literature. Not even the Sack of Rome seems to have moved the hearts and minds of writers, printers, and publishers to the same extent.¹⁰ Every conceivable ingenuity was deployed to attract the buying public. Acrostics, Latin epigrams, parodies of popular devotional texts, and trivial stanzas based on simple word-play (‘Selin, es nil, nil es, Selin’) filled up the bookshops and the trays of itinerant broadside sellers.

⁵ Luigi Grotto, *Canzone nella morte del Clarissimo M. Agostin Barbarigo*, Venice: Onofrio Farri 1572.

⁶ Luigi Grotto, *Trofeo della vittoria sacra ottenuta dalla christianissima Lega contra Turchi nell'anno MDLXXI*, Venice: Sigismondo Bordogna & Francesco Patriani 1572.

⁷ See Carlo Dionisotti, „La guerra d'Oriente nella letteratura veneziana del Cinquecento“, in: *Lettere italiane* 16 (1964), 233–250, reprinted in his *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*, Turin: Einaudi 1967, 163–182.

⁸ Manilo Cortelazzo, „Plurilinguismo celebrativo“, in: Benzoni (ed.), *Il mediterraneo nella seconda metà del '500* (see n. 3), 121–126.

⁹ Antonio Medin, *La storia della Repubblica di Venezia nella poesia*, Milan: Hoepli 1904; Guido A. Quarti, *La battaglia di Lepanto nei canti popolari dell'epoca*, Milan: Istituto ed. avio-navale 1930; Dionisotti, „Lepanto nella cultura italiana“, (see n. 3).

¹⁰ Dionisotti, „La guerra da' Oriente“ (see n. 7). For the reaction to the Sack of Rome see André Chastel, *The Sack of Rome, 1527*, trans. Beth Archer Princeton, Princeton: University Press 1983, especially 123–129; Iain Fenlon, „Music and Crisis in Florence and Rome, 1527–30“, in: Christine Shaw (ed.), *Italy and the European Powers: The Impact of War, 1500–1530*, Leiden: Brill 2006, 279–298.

This brings us into contact with two overlapping categories of labour. The first were the urban vendors who paced the *calle* and *campi* of Venice, shouting out the headlines of the news-sheets that they had on offer, or enumerating the attention-seeking contents of their pamphlets dealing with medical cures, astrological predictions, and details of monsters, abnormal births, and other sensational happenings. Singing the song texts which they also had for sale was similarly part of their pitch, being in practice being a form of advertisement. In this sense peddling cheap literature and singing the texts of inexpensive broadsheets were complementary aspects of these street traders. Descriptions of them tell of their baskets overflowing with almanacs, romances, stories of strange apparitions, and the latest intelligence from foreign parts. Pietro Aretino gives a particularly colourful picture of one of these familiar figures of Venetian street-life hawking:

,Pretty tales, tales, tales, the Turkish war in Hungary, Father Martin's sermons, the Council, tales, tales, the facts of England, the festivities of the Pope and the Emperor, the circumcision of the Voivoda, the Sack of Rome, the Siege of Florence, the battle at Marseilles and its conclusion, tales, tales ...'¹¹

This brings us close to the world of the strolling players, the *cantastorie* and *cantimpanchi* who, standing on benches and improvised staging, entertained the crowds gathered outdoors.¹² The wide range of names used for these performers betrays a considerable variety of activity, from those who specialized in the singing of epic verse to itinerant street singers who were close to vagrancy. In this context the category of 'singer' has rather untidy boundaries, since in practice there was a rather thin dividing line between these performers and the charlatans and mountebanks who used music as part of their pitch. The portmanteau term 'charlatan' itself covers a wide variety of activities and competences, ranging from peddlers of dubious elixirs to properly qualified doctors and experienced tooth-pullers who combined healing and entertainment in the form of a public, social drama with its own long-standing rituals.¹³ They were boisterously present even in St. Mark's Square, alongside

¹¹ Cited in David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print, 1470–1550*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1994, 359.

¹² For the tradition see F. Novati, „Contributo alla storia della lirica musicale italiana popolare e popolareggianta nei secoli XV, XVI, XVII“, in: *Scritti varii di erudizione e di critica in onore di Rodolfo Renier*, Turin: Bocca 1912, 900–980; Ezio Levi, *I cantari leggendari del popolo italiano nei secoli XIV e XV*, Turin: E. Loescher 1914; James Haar, „Arie per cantar stanze ariostesche“, in: Maria Antonella Balsano (ed.), *L'Ariosto, la musica i musicisti: quattro studi e sette madrigali ariosteschi*, Florence: Olschki 1981, 31–46; James Haar, *Essays on Italian Poetry and Music in the Renaissance*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1986, 82–99; Ivano Cavallini, „Sugli improvvisatori del Cinque-Seicento: persistenze, nuovi repertorie qualche riconoscimento“, in: *Recercare* 1 (1989), 23–39.

¹³ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd. rev. ed., Aldershot Scolar Press 1994, 95; Katharine Park, „Country Medicine in the City Marketplace: Snakehandlers as Itinerant Healers“, in: *Renaissance Studies* 15 (2001), 104–120.

cheesemakers, tavernkeepers, and other 'undesirable' occupations that official historiography and iconography have tended to obscure in their determination to freeze the image of the Piazza as the *locus* of patrician ritual, and in the process to make it both inactive and silent. In reality, throughout the early modern period, Piazza San Marco was more akin to an Arab souk than to the forecourt of Versailles, despite periodic attempts by the Procurators to sanitize it.¹⁴ The characteristics which united these often overlapping medical or pseudo-medical functions are that the practitioners were itinerant, operating from temporary staging in the square, and that their performances were essentially theatrical.¹⁵ The texts that were sung by the *cantastorie*, usually anonymous, were sometimes published in modest pamphlets of a few pages to be sold to those who gathered round to listen. This could sometimes lead to legal difficulties. In 1545, the *Executori contra la bestemmia* prosecuted and fined two printers and Francescino Faencino, 'canta in banco', for having sold copies of a work with the title 'Il dio Priapo'.¹⁶ The details of the case emphasise the close professional contacts between small-scale printers of this kind and outdoor entertainers.

Many popular printed poems cast in *ottava rima* were clearly intended to be sung.¹⁷ In its blend of direct expression and lack of pretension, as well as its deployment of an initial rhetorical gesture revealing the presence of listeners, the following is typical of the genre:

Per dar diletto et infinito piacere
 A tutti quelli che stanno aspettare
 Ma prima voglio fare il mio dovere
 Inanzi ch'io voglia comincare ...

And so on for a grand total of 115 verses, which in performance would have been sung to simple melodic formulas, embellished and modified in response to changes of mood. Both in the Piazza, the Piazzetta, and in the larger squares of Venice, these raconteurs performed daily on improvised stages up until the end of the Republic. In the sixteenth century, when the *cantimpanchi* were engraved by Giacomo Franco and described by Tommaso Garzoni in *La piazza universale* there was a thin line between the professionals in the square and the amateurs in the *calle* such as Caravia's swashbuckling hero, Naspo Bizarro:

¹⁴ Iain Fenlon, „Noise in the Square: St. Mark's in the Sixteenth Century“, in: Franco Bernabei and Antonio Lovato (eds.), *Sine musica nulla disciplina... Studi in onore di Giulio Cattin*, Padua: Il Poligrafo 2006, 221–234

¹⁵ Margaret A. Katsitsky, „Marketing Medicine: The Image of the Early Modern Mountebank“, in: *Renaissance Studies* 18 (2001), 121–153.

¹⁶ Giuliano Pesenti, „Libri censuratio Venezia nei secoli XVI–XVII“, in: *La bibliofilia* 58 (1956), 17.

¹⁷ Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and the People*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, 12.

Canterò per passer mia fantasia
 Quel che no suol cantar che canta in piazza
 Che sempre dise calche gran busia
 Perché altramente balotte i no spazza
 Zaratan mi no son da dar balotte
 Nianche ortolan da vendarve carotte
 Imprestemne Zan Polo el vostro agiuto
 Che impaintar possa d'amor versi in rima
 In mezzo al cuor sonando mio lauto¹⁸

The repertoires which the *cantastorie* sang can be divided into various sub-genres, but they are unified by being mostly written in *ottava rima*, which since the time of Boccaccio had been established as the principal narrative metre of Italian poetry; its continuing success is evident from the rapidity with which it was taken up by street singers.¹⁹ Although it cannot be assumed that all *ottave* were always sung (some may have been read, perhaps silently), the majority were, particularly those that recount heroic deeds or tales of war, and which characteristically begin with an invitation to the listeners:

Almi signori io vi voglio pregare
 Che tutti quanti mi state ad ascoltare.
 Che una gran battaglia son venuto per narrare,
 La più famosa che mai sia stata in mare...²⁰

The tradition of printed texts recounting the events of famous wars and battles begins at the very outset of the history of print with the fall of Constantinople, and was well established by the time of Lepanto.²¹ It is not surprising to find that many of the cheaply produced pamphlets that narrate the most important events from the fall of Famagosta to the victory itself were designed to be sung to the stock formulas of tradition, either publicly by the *cantastorie*, or more privately before smaller groups of listeners. Other Lepanto pieces, that are also cast in *ottava rima*, readily fit into various subgenres such as that of the lament, an obvious example being the *Lamento de Selin* and its many relatives.²² Often issued as separate pamphlets of just a few pages, the repertory of Lepanto laments were an adaption of an established feature of popular literature. Cheaply produced to be sold in the squares and streets of the city by ballad-mongers, they were usually topical, prompted by recent political events or natural disasters, and as such were related in thematic material

¹⁸ Alessandro Caravia, *Naspo bizaro*, Venice: Domenico Niccolini, 1565, 8.

¹⁹ Jane. E. Everson, *The Italian Romance Epic in the Age of Humanism: The Matter of Italy and the World of Rome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, 113.

²⁰ *La cronica della guerra successa tra Christiani e'l Turco*, Venice: Bonfadino 1619.

²¹ For the tradition, see Rolando Bussi (ed.), *Guerre in ottava rima* 4. vols., Modena: Panini 1989.

²² Antonio Medin and Lodovico Frati, *Lamenti storici dei secoli XIV, XV e XVI*, 4 vols., Bologna: Romagnoli Dall'Acqua 1897–1894, vol. 4, 210.

to the news-sheets which gave out brief accounts of important happenings abroad. Lepanto gave fresh impetus to this tradition, encouraging both anonymous rhymesters and established poets to contribute to a growing body of laments for the loss of the Turkish fleet. The language of many of these short pieces, some no more than a couple of stanzas in length, presents a colourful picture of the passions, rancour, and hostility that the Venetians felt for the Turks. Faced with the wave of rejoicing which had gripped the city, the Turkish community which lived in the palace of Marcantonio Barbaro, bailo in Constantinople, in Cannaregio, took refuge. Fearful of being stoned in the streets by gangs of youths, they locked themselves away for four days.²³ Hostility towards the Turkish residents had been growing in intensity ever since the start of the War of Cyprus, and many of the shopkeepers who now closed their businesses to join in the celebrations put up the simple explanation, 'For the death of the Turks', in ironic parody of the practices normally followed by bereaved families. The following short piece in dialect, characteristic in what it reveals of popular attitudes, makes play with Sultan Selim I's reputed fondness for wine, despite the dictates of his religion:

Canzon va da Selim,
 Pregalo ch'el no beva tanto vin,
 Ma che'cognossa Christo per suo Dio,
 Giusto, clemente e pio,
 Che lui solo e quel chel puol salvar
 In ste ruine da terra, e da mar.²⁴

Many of these anti-Turkish verses were also intended to be sung, as were pieces in more sophisticated poetic metres such as Blessi's 'Barzeletta contra Mustafà Bassa', composed in the classic form of a six-line stanza and a four-line refrain.²⁵ The texts themselves, usually of a few pages, crudely produced by jobbing printers and often adorned with simple woodcuts to attract the curious, could have been bought by all but the most economically hard-pressed. Interestingly, some composers of madrigals and canzonette that celebrate Lepanto sometimes drew on the often tawdry verse produced in such quantity by amateur poets and pretentious sonneteers (one commentator, perhaps too enthusiastically in view of the low standard of much Lepanto verse, claimed that the latter-day equivalents of Apollo and Orpheus could be heard on all sides).²⁶ A good example is provided by the following, set as to music by Giovanni Ferretti:

²³ Rocco Benedetti, *Raggagliio delle allegrezze, solennita, e feste, fatte in Venezia per la felice vittoria*, Venice: Gratioso Perchaccino 1571, f.[A3]v; Venice: Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, MS. It. VII. (8265) 73, f. 394–394v.

²⁴ *Canzon a Selim imperator de Turchi* (n.p., n.d.).

²⁵ Manoli Blessi [Antonio Molino], *Dialogo de Selin con Giossuf Hebreo*, Venice: Giovanni Griffio [?] 1572.

²⁶ Benedetti, *Raggagliio* (see n. 23), f. B1v.

'Quae pars est, o selim salamelech
De l'Uniu del Hic, & Hec, & Hoc?
Sessanta mille de quei to Tarloc
Co tresident Galer son stag a stech.

E g'anime t'aspetta ilo a Lamech
D'Ali, Priali, Caracossa, e Siroc,
Perque in Bisanz, ne in Algier, o Maroc
Te si segur da sti gran Scanderbech.

Pensavet fors havi a fa co merlot,
Con Zent co ti e ti usag al bif?
Despresiador del Santo Saboat.

L'Aquila co'l Lio, co'l bech e grif,
Te Squarzara ol cur fo del maggot;
Sta mo a senti et tof, el taf, e'l tif.

The text, a spirited denunciation of the sultan in Bergamasque dialect, makes reference to some of the major figures of the battle including Ali Pascia, the commander of the Ottoman fleet at Lepanto, and Jorge Castriota (Scanderbech), an Albanian patriot who was killed defending his country against the Turks. It finishes with praise for the power of the forces of the Holy League the members of which had become familiar in the popular literature through the images of the Lion (Venice), the Eagle (Spain), and the Lamb (the Papacy).²⁷ The music, in effect a six-voiced *villanella*, was published by Ferretti, who was then living and working in Ancona on the Atlantic coast of the Papal States (and so vulnerable to attacks from the Turkish fleet), in his *Canzoni alla napolitana* which appeared in 1573.²⁸ But such survivals represent only a small and atypical corner of the total soundscape of Venetian engagement with the war of Cyprus and the victory of Lepanto. To round out the picture, and to invest our imaginative re-creation of the squares and courtyards of the city with more characteristic music, it is necessary to look elsewhere.

²⁷ For an explication of all the textual references, see Fenlon, *The Ceremonial City* (see n. 3), 378.

²⁸ The text alone appears, among other places, in Groto, *Trofeo della vittoria sacra* (see n. 6), f. 114. Ferretti's music was published in his *Il primo libro delle canzoni alla napolitana*, Venice: Girolamo Scotto 1573.