

Josquin Des Prez and His ‘Erotic’ Cricket

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Short Communication

The first decade of the new millennium witnessed the publication of three studies on *El grillo*, generally considered to be Josquin's most popular song. These are, in chronological order, by David Fallows, What happened to *El grillo*, in EM 31 [1]; by Marianne Hund, Fresh light on Josquin Dascanio's enigmatic *El grillo*, in TVNM 56 [2]; and by Grantley McDonald, Josquin's musical cricket: *El grillo* as humanist parody, in AcM 81 [3]. While Fallows' article was intended as a preparatory study for his edition of the song in vol. 28 (Secular Works for four voices) of the New Josquin Edition, my contribution made some serious critical comments on both of Fallows' editions, the one in Early Music and that in the NJE, offered a new transcription of the piece, and tried, at the same time, to propose a new interpretation of the song's meaning, suggesting among other things that the Italian verb 'bere' (to drink) should be read as 'breve' (short). Three years later, rejecting my argumentation, McDonald went into some detail to show influences of ancient Greek poetry that would prove that crickets indeed do drink, and that the piece should be understood as 'a parody of the seriousness of humanist scholarship' (p. 42). However, as I will show below, his arguments do not convince, and it is therefore my intention to once more argue in favor of my own interpretation, passing over, this time, the question of the best transcription of the music itself.

McDonald's quotations from Greek poems including 'a strongly erotic component' (p.42) are invalidated by several misinterpretations of the texts. For example, $\theta\eta\lambda\upsilon\varsigma \ \acute{\epsilon}\acute{\epsilon}\rho\sigma\eta$ (pp. 43-4) is an Homeric epithet meaning 'nurturing dew'. Since in the ancient world crickets were supposed to feed on dew, the translation 'feminine dew' does not make any sense. Another, more serious objection is that most of the humanist scholars of the late 15th century were unlikely to have had access to the sources mentioned in the article. Pseudo-Hesiod's *Shield* was published as late as 1496, and the Planudes selection of the so-called Greek Anthology only existed in a single copy at the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice. McDonald's other sources were not available at all. Moreover, before 1500, knowledge of the Greek language was very limited, as it only became part of the scholarly curriculum in the course of the 16th century. The writings of Theocritus, Aesop, Aristotle (*Historia animalium*) and Plato were only known in Latin translations.

The answer to the question as to whether crickets drink cannot but be negative. None of the sources in Latin sources ever uses the verb 'bibere'. Instead, they all say that crickets 'feed on dew' (*rorem lambunt*, or *rore pascentur*), which they 'lap up through a little tongue-like extension attached to their chest' (Pliny the Elder XI.32, 92-5). So the image of a licentious drinking cricket does not exist. This explains why, in the Italian poetry examples, no reference whatsoever is made to crickets drinking and/or being licentious.

In the version of my article referred to above, I considered the possible cultural context of our song. Usually, the *frottola* is nothing

more than a rather sentimental pop-song in which the poet deploras his own bad luck in love or muses over some truth of life. The text of *El grillo*, however, is put in the third person narrative, and speaks of animal instead of human behaviour, in a witty, though cryptic way. Differing as such from the regular *frottola*, it is conceivable that it could have been written for a special purpose, as were the Florentine *canti carnavaleschi*, a genre of which many texts are similar in structure to the *frottola*. Generally speaking, during a feast of any substance in the early 16th century, there would be outdoor activities (parades, tournaments etc.) and indoor activities (banquets, stage performances, masquerades and balls). We know that such feasts were livened up with music and poetry, and our song would fit perfectly into either of the two categories.

Amongst the many feasts that took place in Renaissance Italy, there is one that particularly draws our attention: The *Festa del Grillo*. The origin of this feast, held in Florence the Sunday after Ascension Day, is probably the *Calendimaggio* tradition, a fertility feast that goes back to Antiquity. Since crickets could form a serious danger to the harvest, the peasants used to capture as many of them as possible in spring. However, killing a cricket was supposed to bring bad luck. So the animals were put in elegant little boxes, and at the day of the *Festa del Grillo* they were sold to the ardent young Florentine gentry who would give them as a present to their beloved ladies. Since, as we will see below, the word 'grillo' has a double meaning; this gift was certainly not to be without sexual connotation.

In order to arrive at a plausible interpretation of *El grillo*, we now will look at the poem as it is printed in Ottaviano Petrucci's *Frottolo libro tertio* (Venice 1504 [= 1505]), its unique source. Of the current translations, I quote the one by Paul Hillier and Peter James:

Section 1

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. El grillo e bon cantore | The cricket is a good singer |
| 2. Che tiene longo verso | Who holds a long note. |
| 3. Dale beve grillo canta | Go ahead, drink and sing, cricket. |
| 4. El grillo e bon cantore | The cricket is a good singer. |

Section 2

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 5. Ma non fa como gli altri ocelli | But he is not like the other birds, |
| 6. Come li han cantato un poco | Who sing a little |
| 7. Van de fatto in altro loco | And then go elsewhere, |
| 8. Sempre el grillo sta pur saldo | The cricket always stands firm. |

Section 3

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| 9. Quando la magior el caldo | When it is hottest, |
|------------------------------|---------------------|

10. Alhor canta sol per amore He sings alone for love.

With regard to the subject of the poem, the cricket, the following details are useful to know.

The 'song' of the male cricket can be transcribed as 'zri-zri, bre-bre, or gri-gri'. The sound is produced when the cricket rubs one forewing against the other. It can only vary in speed, not in tone. The speed depends on the temperature: the hotter it is, the faster it goes. The cricket can sing for hours, and it uses its song to attract females. The cricket does not drink, but lives on plant material and tiny insects. Since the poem talks about the cricket's behaviour, in contrast to that of a songbird, it is most likely that several of the above mentioned elements will come into our story at some point.

The first section talks about the length of the cricket's song: 'longo verso'. In the music it is symbolized by a very long note: a longa with fermata in the two outer voices. In the next line, 'beve' seems to be out of place for the above mentioned reason that crickets do not drink. No wonder that such free translations have been offered as 'The cricket sings just for fun' (Bruno Turner) or 'Sing of good times, cricket!' (Michael Freeman and others). Apart from this there also is a grammatical anomaly: why should there suddenly be an imperative in this line, the rest of the poem having been put in the third person narrative? Moreover, 'beve', if used as an imperative, is grammatically incorrect, it should be 'bevi'.

The answer may be found in the music. At this point, we see that the breves have been cut up into ever smaller note values. So, rhythmically, there is an enormous contrast between the longas in the line before ('longo verso') and the cut up breves in the next line ('dale beve'). The music thus creates a contrast between long and short. This contrast is most likely the answer to our problem with 'beve': the line would make more sense if 'beve' were read as 'breve'. A typesetter's mistake like this can easily be made when one knows that the 'br' is often abbreviated in handwritten texts – as it may have been in Petrucci's exemplar – as a 'b' with a tiny stroke through the stem.

In sum, section 1 describes the cricket's long-lasting song in contrast to the very short notes it performs it with. The emendation of 'dale beve' to 'dala breve' (in modern Italian dalla breve meaning 'starting from the brevis') is far less speculative, and brings us closer to the intention of the song: to imitate and make fun of the cricket's behaviour, which is characterized by his endless chirping. It moreover reinforces the onomatopoeic character of the music (bre-gri) and, besides, introduces one more tongue-twister for the singers.

The text of line 3 and its translation therefore should more probably read:

dala breve grillo canta and the cricket sings from the brevis

The second section deals with the difference between songbirds and crickets. While both animals were equally beloved for their ability to produce a pure sound, there are, as we already saw above, differences: the cricket can only vary its rhythm. The songbird can vary its pitch as well. Of course, for that reason the bird was considered the better singer of the two, which, incidentally, leads us to the argument in the poem. So, more likely, section 2 hints, when talking about the change of place, at the fact that birds can vary their pitch, and crickets cannot, rather than at a physical change of place. For birds and crickets are equally mobile, both in nature and in captivity. Thus, 'van de fatto in altro loco' could also be understood as 'they immediately change their pitch'.

Section 3, the volta, provides the answer why crickets are nevertheless considered equally good or maybe even better singers than birds: they go on and on with their song at the hottest part of the day, and that is where they beat the songbird, which, when it is hottest, tends to fall silent. The Ferrarese poet Ludovico Ariosto described the song of the cricket in more or less the same way, some ten years after El grillo was published in Venice.

Ariosto, Orlando furioso (1516), Canto VIII, 20

Percuote il sole ardente il vicin colle;

E del calor che si riflette a dietro,

In modo l'aria e l'arena ne bolle,

Che saria troppo a far liquido il vetro.

Stassi cheto ogni augello all'ombra molle:

Sol la cicala col noioso metro [= canto]

Fra i densi rami del fronzuto stelo [= albero]

I valli e i monti assorda, e il mare e il cielo.

(After the edition of Garzanti Editore, 1982).

(The burning sun lashed down upon the surrounding hills;

And such was the heat reflected,

That air and sand were boiling,

And glass almost made liquid.

Every bird stayed silently in the mild shade:

Only the cricket, with its monotonous song,

Hidden amongst the dense bushes,

Deafened the valleys, the mountains, the sea and the air).

The following conclusion can be drawn: The meaning of our poem is that, although the cricket is considered to have lesser vocal abilities, it triumphs over the birds by the perseverance of its song. Or putting it differently: in matters of love, sweet fanciful talk is worth less than endurance and fidelity. This aspect places the song into the old chivalric tradition which, incidentally, had not died out by 1500.

As for the possible double meaning, to which Claudio Gallico has alluded, since in popular Italian the word 'grillo' means the male sexual organ in erection, it is not too difficult to imagine that this may be as follows: The cricket is a good singer: this ardent little creature makes many a member of the opposite sex happy with his quickly moving and long-lasting organ.

Bearing in mind what has been said above, an appropriate translation of the poem could be

- The cricket is a good singer, because, although he holds his song for the time.
- He sings it from the Brevis.
- The cricket is a good singer,
- but he behaves unlike the other birds
- who, after having started singing,
- immediately change their pitch,
- The cricket always stays on one note.
- When the heat is at its greatest,

- Then only the cricket sings on for love.

Finally, if there would have been question of a parody of humanist scholarship, this is to be found in the intelligent and witty use of rhetoric, which is one of the principal aspects of humanism. Indeed the song offers a nice example of the musical elaboration of a speech, with a beginning (bb. 1-5), a middle (bb. 5-28), and an end (bb. 29-36), in which several rhetorical figures can be detected: Noema (bb. 1-3), Antitheton (bb. 7-17), Polypoton (bb. 12-5), Pallilogia (bb. 16-7), Abruptio (bb. 32 and 34), Hypotyposis (bb. 7-11, 16-7 and 34-8).

References

1. Fallows D (2003) What happened to "El Grillo". *Early Music* 31: 391-399.
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