

Giuseppe Gerbino. 2009. *Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy*. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Reviewed by Brooke Bryant**

In *Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy*, Giuseppe Gerbino situates the pastoral as a vital and influential genre in the cultural fabric of sixteenth-century Italy, countering a scholarly tradition that has traditionally minimized its importance. This book offers the first comprehensive investigation of pastoral music in sixteenth-century Italy, reclaiming it as a complex subject worthy of in-depth exploration. It is the most recent work in Cambridge University Press's New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism series, edited by Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcome, and Ruth Solie. Works in this series approach music and its history from innovative points of view, often challenging dominant narratives and discourses.

Although the Italian Renaissance pastoral was both a popular and enduring genre, surprisingly little scholarship has been written on the topic. David Alan Nutter's dissertation, completed in 1978, is one of the few book-length volumes addressing this subject.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of Arcadia was an integral component of the cultural fabric of the late sixteenth century, pastoral music has seldom been considered with much seriousness by modern musicologists. Its characters and themes—nymphs, shepherds, and their melancholic love relationships—are traditionally viewed as trivial in comparison with loftier contemporary movements such as Petrarchism and Neoplatonism. The politics of musicological taste have not favored this mythical place. Alfred Einstein describes pastoral music of the late sixteenth century as “the disease that had attacked the taste of the time,” a response that marks this “inferior” repertoire as a threat to a superior tradition (1949:613). Gerbino explains the impact of such sentiments, noting that pastoral music has become “something we do not like but that we must endure with patience, the virus seizing a once healthy body, the body of Renaissance aesthetics” (15).

Gerbino's main goal is to trace the history of pastoral music in this period, focusing on two seeming anomalies: (1) although the humanistic revival of pastoral peaked near the end of the 1400s and this trend flourished in literature and the visual arts throughout the following century, settings of pastoral verse did not appear in the polyphonic madrigal repertoire until the 1570s; and (2) while early operas evolved as an attempt to recreate ancient

Greek tragedy, their themes were pastoral, an archetype which antiquity failed to provide. In tracing this history, Gerbino refashions the pastoral as a forum in which late-Renaissance elites represented themselves as ideal members of a society that prized the ability to communicate and form social bonds via musical and poetic activity. Music played a significant role in Arcadia; the shepherds of Theocritus and Virgil expressed and managed their emotions through music, a practice that aligned with the values of Renaissance court culture. Gerbino suggests that through assuming the characters of unsophisticated shepherds in rural settings, the aristocracy displayed signs of superior sensitivity, representing themselves as men and women positioned at the apex of civilization.

The book is divided into three parts, each addressing an issue in the history of sixteenth-century pastoral music. To narrate this history, Gerbino relies on a variety of sources. In addition to madrigals by Phillipe Verdelot, Giaches de Wert, Orazio Vecchi, Luca Marenzio, and Claudio Monteverdi, the author discusses artworks (paintings, woodcuts, and tapestries), ancient and Renaissance poetic and dramatic texts (by such writers as Theocritus, Virgil, Agostino Beccari, Niccolò da Correggio, and Battista Guarini), and contemporary descriptions of and reactions to pastoral music and theater (Giason De Nores, Lodovico Zuccolo, and others). Gerbino's inclusion of sources from a variety of fields is related to the growing trend of interdisciplinary approaches to early modern musical scholarship; Bonnie Gordon's work on women's voices in Monteverdi's madrigals (2004) and Fiona Kisby's collection of essays on music making in Renaissance urban centers (2001) provide other examples of such work.<sup>2</sup> Gerbino's use of visual art, theater, and literary sources is effective, illustrating the prevalence of music in the pastoral as fashioned through a variety of media. His argument ultimately posits the imagined landscape of Arcadia as inherently musical, problematizing pastoral music's absence from modern scholarship.

Part I addresses the problem of the absence of pastoral themes from Cinquecento music. It fills the chronological gap that exists between the rebirth of Arcadian poetry in the late 1400s and the pastoral's first widespread appearance in madrigals of the 1570s and 1580s. Gerbino begins by explaining Arcadia's allure in the court at Ferrara and in cities such as Florence and Rome. The genre provided a formula for self-representation, using allegory to promote social bonding among those privy to the terms of its exclusive system. He stresses music's role in relaying this Arcadian "code"; pastoral poetry constantly references and describes music making, reinforcing its importance. Song plays a central role in eclogues, where shepherds translate their experiences with love and loss into music. For Arcadians and the court culture that replicated their practices, singing had a singular "power" to impact both performers and listeners, healing melancholy and love-induced suffering with a pleasurable remedy.

Gerbino suggests that music's role in pastoral poetry was similar to its position in the lives of the Renaissance elite: in both environments, expressing and reacting to pain through music provided a cathartic experience and signified belonging to a community of kindred minds. He offers a variety of well-chosen examples that support this connection, analyzing evidence from pastoral texts as well as letters by Bernardino de' Prosperi describing dramatizations of eclogues by Correggio (1505) and Ercole Pio (1508). In Pio's work, unrequited love causes melancholia, which cripples an enamored young shepherd; through participating in athletic events and music making—activities similar to those in which the aristocracy was accustomed to participating—the lovesick shepherd's malady is cured. Gerbino notes that Pio adapts the social code of the ancient pastoral (where rustic scenes forge social and emotional bonds) into an early modern court context (64).

The most groundbreaking work in Part I is in chapter 5, "Musical Eclipses." Here, Gerbino challenges the idea that pastoral poetry and music simply went out of fashion as the Petrarchan lyric poetry of Pietro Bembo and his followers gained favor among the cultural elite. The chapter displays Gerbino's comprehensive knowledge of pastoral repertoire, both poetic and musical, and offers interpretations of a variety of sources in order to give voice to a forgotten tradition. Gerbino discusses anti-Bembist poetry, which he suggests is a continuation of the pastoral, pointing to publications by Lodovico Paterno, Bernardo Tasso, and Antonio Brocardo, poets who embraced bucolic themes and forms. Pastoral works by Gian Giorgio Trissino, Luigi Alamanni, and Ludovico Martelli were published in Florence, including eclogues in memory of their patrons. Gerbino reads Verdelot's madrigal "Trista Amarilli mia" and *ballata*-madrigal "Igno soave" as allegories for a political event and a love lament, "the two most important expressions of grief inherited from ancient bucolic poetry" (85). He locates several references to *la pastorella* (the shepherdess, who is often beautiful, erotic, and cruel) in manuscripts and prints from the 1520s and 1530s, as well as in poems by Strozzi set by Marenzio and Monteverdi. Gerbino proposes that pastoral themes populated the oral tradition throughout the Cinquecento, pointing to *Opera nuova nella quale si contiene una incatenatura di più villanelle* (1629), a collection of works by "Camillo detto il Bianchino," a blind singer from Florence. This publication documents popular tunes of the previous century, four of which boast pastoral texts. Gerbino also locates pastoral melodies in religious *contrafacta* such as Serafino Razzi's collections of *laudae*. Although much of the pastoral tradition escaped musical notation during this period, Gerbino makes a plausible case for its continued existence as a cultural trope. The wealth of information provided by Gerbino makes the lack of attention devoted to the pastoral in modern musical scholarship all the more surprising.

Part II centers on pastoral theater, the realm in which Arcadia thrived even as it apparently disappeared from the musical record. Gerbino challenges the notion that pastoral theater was simply bucolic; instead he suggests that it should be classified as tragicomedy. Examining evidence from several sixteenth-century pastoral dramas, Gerbino identifies two problems faced by its creators: (1) there was no classical precedent for pastoral theater and (2) the prevalence of music in pastoral theater disobeyed Aristotle's charge that theater should be naturalistic, undermining verisimilitude.

The book's treatment of verisimilitude is particularly interesting in light of the development of opera—a genre often associated with the emulation of ancient tragedy. In chapter 6, Gerbino outlines the paradox of the pervasiveness of music in sixteenth-century pastoral theater. Although music making was an integral component of classical Arcadia, music as a narrative device violates the law of verisimilitude in the system of Aristotelian classicism. Drawing on Nino Pirrotta's work on music in Renaissance theater, Gerbino offers a convincing account of the development of musical drama, which is supported by evidence in the form of contemporary descriptions of productions. As practitioners of sixteenth-century theater became increasingly interested in imitating classical models, music gradually lost its narrative function and was relegated to *intermedi*. Not so with the pastoral. Until the 1540s, pastoral theater remained more or less independent from ancient drama; its autonomy provided an excuse for music to play a significant role. In addition, Guarini challenged the idea that the use of music in the pastoral violated the law of verisimilitude; he argued that singing was a "verisimilar" practice for Arcadian shepherds, who were trained in music and used it as a tool for relaying and managing their emotions. Gerbino observes a distinction between "true" and "real" behavior in sixteenth-century thought. Within this frame of reference, music making in pastoral settings was a "credible" behavior, especially given that the contemporary court culture valued it as a discursive practice (121). By the time pastoral elements infiltrated the madrigal, music had become a signifier of classicism; as such, music's presence was acceptable in theater regardless of the fact that it played no role in ancient drama.

Gerbino revisits opera's complex relationship to classical models in his Epilogue, which draws connections between ambiguities regarding classifications and justifications of pastoral theater and debates surrounding the validity of opera. He insightfully proposes that although early opera composers attempted to restore the musicality of ancient tragedy, the means of this attempt were contemporary in origin (278–79). He suggests that composers employed a fusion of Aristotelian goals and Petrarchist sensibilities; the focus of the first operas became "the healing power of poetry against the afflictions of love" (380). The author supports his interpretation with early

descriptions and defenses of musical drama. He also provides an overview of contemporary debates surrounding the origins of opera, illuminating the difficulty of categorizing a genre which, like pastoral drama, lacked a classical precedent. Gerbino concludes that the very possibility of opera arose from music's important role in pastoral rather than ancient tragedy, the latter of which is traditionally cited as its progenitor. His persuasive argument offers an alternate version of opera's origin story, which should have an impact on how the emergence of the genre is perceived and explained.

In chapters 7 and 8, Gerbino addresses pastoral theater's portrayal of rustic naturalism. Sieneese plays such as Marcello Roncaglia's *Commedia di Maggio* (1540) establish a dichotomy between peasants, rude creatures interested in concrete subjects, and shepherds, erudite poets who revel in abstractions. Gerbino explores the musical soundscape of both peasants and shepherds, focusing on pieces presented by actors like Angelo Beolco, a Paduan performer known for portraying the peasant character Ruzante. Several of this actor's poems survive, including one set by Willaert as "Canzona di Ruzante." Chapter 9 examines Ferrarese pastoral theater of the 1540s and 1550s. The creators of these works attempted to redefine the genre of pastoral drama in terms dictated by Aristotlian classicism. Giraldi's *Egle* (1545) is one such example; this play was described by its author as a reconstruction of the ancient "satyr-drama," an obscure form of classical theater. The play uses a five-act organization, eleven-syllable lines, and a Petrarchist agenda to tame a genre "with no proportions, rules, models, and cathartic ends" (163).

In chapter 10, Gerbino investigates women's participation in pastoral displays of court sociability, including banquets, masquerades, dances, choreographed ballets, and dramatizations. He explores the issue of idealized self-representation in these performances. Arcadia provided an environment in which elite women could showcase their virtue, assuming the characters of nymphs who sang and recited poetry in order to manage excessive passions. Nymphs who denied shepherds access to their bodies were distinct from sexually-available shepherdesses. Pastoral entertainments allowed young women to perform in a safe context, maintaining their virtue while displaying their artistic talents. Gerbino notes the extraordinary level of female agency involved in these events, with such women as Vittoria Doria (the wife of Ferrante II Gonzaga) having significant involvement in the staging of plays.

Part III describes the return of pastoral themes to the madrigal repertoire. Gerbino suggests that the version of the pastoral that emerged in the 1580s incorporated Petrarchism, relocating the subjectivity of the isolated lover in a collective context. Self-reflection was situated in Arcadia, a realm in which sharing sorrow through musical activities alleviated suffering

and formed communal bonds. Gerbino uncovers two themes of pastoral madrigals: amorous suffering and erotic bliss. Chapter 12 challenges the common assumption that the Renaissance pastoral was essentially an idyllic genre, addressing madrigals centered on unfulfilled desire and the painful separation of lovers. For example, Wert's "Io non son però morto" (a madrigal from *I lieti amanti*) links the absence of reciprocal love with death. Gerbino situates readings of such pieces in the context of contemporary philosophies of love—*ragionar d'amore*—by Bembo and Marsilio Ficino. Chapter 13 concentrates on music that transports the listener to a world where men and women have never been troubled by unfulfilled desire. The author investigates the incorporation of pastoral themes into lighthearted *canzonetti* and *villanelle*. He explores Marenzio's musical constructions of pastoral bliss in Renaissance villas, including the estate of his employer Luigi d'Este. D'Este's villa housed gatherings where pastoral poetry and music were enjoyed, allowing practitioners to live out Arcadian fantasies in a rural paradise. Through juxtaposing pieces that focus on love suffering and utopia, Gerbino complicates traditional narratives of the pastoral. He highlights the variety inherent in the genre, challenging the notion that it is merely a vision of idyllic simplicity.

*Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy* displays its author's impressive knowledge of sixteenth-century pastoral repertoire and the circumstances that defined it. Gerbino discusses a rich variety of musical, verbal, and visual sources in vivid detail; his interdisciplinary approach provides a wealth of information about the culture in which the sixteenth-century pastoral flourished. In addition to musicologists, scholars of literature, theater, history, philosophy, and even visual art may be interested in the book. Gerbino's musical analyses make clear and compelling connections among music, text, and context. Discussions of music are complex and thorough, but written in a lucid style that incorporates textual analysis and remains accessible and engaging. Gerbino's knowledge of secondary literature is extensive, situating his original ideas in the larger context of Renaissance scholarship. His book is a remarkable, meticulous effort that will undoubtedly reshape the way pastoral music is viewed in the scheme of music history.

### Notes

1. Nutter's work focuses on sixteenth-century madrigals, comparing pastoral dialogues with Petrarchan conversations between a poet and his own heart, soul, and eyes. Pastoral music created in other geographical locations has received more attention (Brooks 2006).
2. Gordon supplements her feminist investigation of music with medical treatises, while articles in Kisby's volume connect music, place, and culture.

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