

# Competition for Court Musicians: The Recruitment Scandal of 1473

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Late in 1472, Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza set about to assemble a choir of singers and composers from the Low Countries, France and Burgundy that he knew would be the envy of the world. His actions were not without political motivation, for at this time he was occupied with the creation of a sovereign state and he believed that the musical institution he would create, along with an uniquely Milanese repertorial style, would provide him with adornments matching those of the King of France. He told members of his court that he wanted only the best singers, those who were already perfect<sup>1</sup>. Because of his French education he knew that court and its customs firsthand, and by establishing for himself a chapel of the finest Franco-Flemish singers, he was sure to gain the admiration of any visitor, especially those from the royal court. Singing in Latin and in French, the choir would allow him to distinguish himself from the manners of a local ruler and to take his place in the international arena<sup>2</sup>.

That the musical establishment became an instrument for statecraft was hardly unique; however it is not to be underestimated because it forms a corollary to Ianziti's identification of the Milanese network of patronage as the principal factor in the inception of humanistic historiography in Milan<sup>3</sup>. Alongside this examination of emergent humanistic elements during the latter part of the fifteenth century in Milan, there is a growing interest in recent scholarship on the government of Milan in this period in which the issues of sovereignty and suzerainty are explored<sup>4</sup>. The presence of the foreign musicians at court and their importance in Galeazzo's scheme form an important 'dynamic' in the context of both patronage (and clientage) as the social rationale of the court and his developing style of government<sup>5</sup>. He sought imperial investiture but was ultimately unable to get it and certainly we know from his correspondence with the Burgundian court that he held enormous territorial ambitions. He cultivated the performances of his chapel, their observance of the liturgy, as the central ceremonial of the court, and this too elevated his position in statecraft and diplomacy.

The integration of the Northerners into court life had inauspicious beginnings thanks to the recruitment policies of the duke, which impacted on the duchy at the level of diplomatic relations with other Italian courts<sup>6</sup>. Certainly one of the most salient incidents

involving musicians was the recruitment scandal of 1473, in which Giovanni Arcimboldo, Bishop of Novara, was caught raiding the chapel of the King of Naples to bring the most famous of his singers into Milanese service. The rival recruiting efforts have been described elsewhere but now newly recovered documentary evidence shows just how far Galeazzo went in jeopardizing the otherwise friendly relations with the King of Naples and how serious the situation became<sup>7</sup>. Despite the duke's vehement denials, his own correspondence shows that he targeted the Neapolitan chapel early in the process of establishing his own. On 6 November 1472 he wrote to Francesco Maletta, his ambassador to Naples, instructing him to assist the Milanese recruiters in their efforts. Maletta was told by Galeazzo to take care not to give the appearance that the duke was the cause of removing singers from Naples<sup>8</sup>.

Francesco, havendo nuy deliberato de havere alcuni cantarini, per far una capella, mandaremo in quelle parte li presenti exhibitori per condurne certi alli nostri servitii: como da loro più chiaramente intenderay. Et ad ciò che questo nostro desiderio più facilmente sortisca ad effecto, volemo con bon modo, et como da ti, in modo non payrà ne habii commisione da nuy, parli con quilli tali te dicano essi exhibitori, et li conforti ad venire alli nostri servitii, promettendoli como da ti secondo havemo dicto, che li faremo degno partito, con provederli de boni beneficii, et boni salarii. Alli soprascripti exhibitori havemo dato el modo del dinaro per condurne essi cantarini. Sopra tutto haveray bona advertentia ad ciò che la Maestate de quello Serenissimo Re né altri possino imaginare che nuy siamo stati cagione de levare essi cantarini da quelle parte.

Although there are no Milanese records, it is clear that the duke was openly accused somewhere between November and late January. In a letter of 28 January 1473 the duke writes to Antonio Cincinello, Ferrante's envoy in Milan, in a feeble attempt at diversion, that a great error has been made; he has not tried to steal Neapolitan singers for his chapel. He would have no need of them because he is expecting new singers from Normandy<sup>9</sup>. While documentary evidence supports the latter contention, it is also true that Galeazzo persists in looking for singers in Naples. Apparently the precautions for secrecy were insufficient; less than a week later, on 3 February 1473 Maletta wrote to Galeazzo from Naples that the king knew of the raid on his chapel and was prepared to give him proof<sup>10</sup>. In the

middle of a state dinner the king informed the ambassador that letters had fallen into his hands from someone in the household of the Bishop of Novara who was trying to recruit singers from the Neapolitan royal chapel, at the instance of the duke:

Me rencrese troppo ch'el signor Duca mio cognato et fratello dagli materia al signor Re de corozarse. Ce sono capitate littere a le mane de uno che sta o pratica in casa del Vescovo de Novara in Roma che cerca desviare alcune cantori del signor Re ad instantia del signor Duca per la capella sua.

Of course the king gave Maletta ample opportunity to deny everything, which he did as best as he could, even though he fell into old the trap of repeating some of Galeazzo's instructions. The king countered that Antonio Cincinello, was shocked («*admirato et alterato*»), to learn of this matter (even though there is some suggestion that he too was working for the Duke of Milan), and had claimed that Galeazzo must have been jealous of the king's pleasure in his musicians. Maletta tried to think of something inventive to say on behalf of the duke, in so far as this was possible in those awkward moments:

Et io respondendogli che may se poria trovare questo col vero et dicendogli quello che altre volte vostra Excellentia me instrusse per littere sue, et ch'ella disse a don Antonio Cincinello sopra de ciò, disse lo prefato Duca: «Già el Re se era repossato de quella novella per quanto tu gli dicesti, et che Messer Antonio scrisse a sua Maestà ma mo' vedendo queste littere...», parendo ad luy ch'el signor Duca habia despiacere de li piaceri de sua Maestà. Io me inzegnay levare questa opinione de mente al Duca<sup>11</sup> et iustificare la parte de vostra Excellentia per quanto me fu possibile.

Next the king sent his secretary to show Maletta the original letters, which he then made copies of and sent to Milan. Obviously the King of Naples had intercepted Milanese correspondence on this matter, and probably the very letter that offers specific terms of employment (salary, expenses, horses, benefices, time off) to singers that are named<sup>12</sup>. The king was thinking of releasing the singers involved for ingratitude, and told Maletta that the Duke of Milan was emphatically not to accept these singers into his service.

On an astonishingly serious note, King Ferrante promised to hold up two important diplomatic documents, the documents for Bona of Savoy which established her lineage in the Aragonese house, and letters for the *Signore* of Forlì, a Milanese ally, until the matter of the singers was resolved. Ferrante was showing the measure of anger and the seriousness of his resolve.

Hora el Re me [to Maletta] ha mandato el secretario ad monstrarne dicte littere le quale ho viste in originale et hone facto cavare copie quale mando qui alligate a vostra Celsitudine, et afirma pur la Maestà sua essere sdignata assay de questa novella, parlandome in quella

medesima sententia che me parlòe il Duca. Et iniungendo che la Maestà del Re sta in pensiero licentiar dicti cantori et prega vostra Sublimità non li voglia accettare, et che l'ha facte fare quelle littere de le nominatione de Madama de Savoya et del Signor de Forli, secondo vostra Excellentia le ha requeste ma non le vole mandare finché non vede il fine de questi cantori.

Maletta reported that he told the king that it was not necessary to hold up the papers, because the duke «would rather die than displease the king in such a great matter and all the more in this frivolous matter». The soon-to-be Cardinal of Novara, Arcimboldo, who acted as the 'bagman' in these underhanded dealings, was also informed, probably so that he did not send along the money.

Et io ho dicto: non bixogna che sua Maestà guardi ad questo, perché vostra Signoria prima voria morire che despiacere ad sua Maestà in omne grandissima cosa, nonché in questa frivola; finalmente ha determinato fare cossì et ne scrive oportunamente a don Antonio Cincinello che ne sia cum vostra Sublimità ala quale so che non bixogna recordi ad fare la scusa sua gagliarda, perché saperà meglio ymaginare et dire che io recordare. Ben dico questo che al parlare de li prenominati el Re sta de questo cum la bocca molto amara. Io de tuto ho avisato Monsignore de Novare.

It is remarkable that the scandal of the singers so quickly became an affair of state, and that it was debated at such a high level of diplomacy. A great diplomatic effort went into the recruitment and even more was needed for the consequences of its discovery by the angry Neapolitan monarch, who was so displeased that he delayed the matter of the territories of the *Signore* of Forli, which were a vexed question throughout the peninsula, and his agreement to establish the family relationship of Bona of Savoy that was meant to cement the strategic alliance between these two Italian powers. From the Milanese standpoint, it would have hindered them in withstanding the Venetian threat, and only together could Milan and Naples credibly oppose the persistent threat of French invasion. One may wonder also at the clandestine activities of the Milanese ambassadors, especially at Arcimboldo, orator to the pope, for whom the pursuit of singers for Galeazzo in both Rome and Naples was at once a risky and serious task.

Even Ippolita Sforza, wife of the Duke of Calabria, who was involved in many musical exchanges with her brother, along with the Bishop of Aversa (the *capellano maggiore* of the King of Naples) attempted to smoothe out the rift. In his account of 20 March 1473 Maletta wrote that she suggested to Ferrante that if only he would inquire into the matter diligently he would find that Galeazzo was not at fault in the issue of the singers. At this point it must have been discovered that some of Ferrante's singers were entertaining thoughts of going to Milan because of

the inducements, or other more attractive surroundings<sup>13</sup>. Galeazzo appeared to be co-operative in that he agreed not to accept certain singers from Naples, for which purpose Maletta supplied the names, Cornelio Picardo, Aloe de Barbanto, and Gregorio de Fiandra. To make a demonstration, Ferrante dismissed these singers, and they were to return home. On the next day Maletta reported that Ippolita had pleased Ferrante by repeating some of Galeazzo's own words, that he «had to deal with two kings: one who was prudent and very wise, and the other, who was the King of France»<sup>14</sup>. While Ferrante did not believe Galeazzo, he appeared to allow his anger to be tempered by the others who spoke on his behalf<sup>15</sup>.

Preterea feci intendere alla Maestà del signore Re quanto novamente me scrive vostra Sublimità per una sua de XV de questo in risposta et excusatione de li cantori: et tuta quella parte lesse gli de verbo ad verbum. Di che remase molto satisfacta, et disse sé primeramente dede fede ad questa cosa, non se mosse se non per lo testimonio de quelle littere che furono mandate a vostra Excellentia ala quale dice sua Maestà omne persona haveria prestata fede, ma che le debito più debia credere à le parole de V.I.S. como certamente crede, che ad altri: et chel rengratia vostra Excellentia in non havere acceptati quelli suoy conducteri de cantori che se offerivano...

Documents show there was concern for their declining relations both within the courts and without; the diplomatic impasse between the two states had effectively blocked the Italian peninsula, and this had significant implications for normal diplomatic relations among the other states. These issues did not even begin to be resolved until late in the next year.

The intensity of the recruitment scandal and the pre-occupation of the rulers with their chapels resurfaced with even greater acrimony in May of 1474 shown in a document from Antonio Cincinello to the King of Naples, intercepted by a Milanese spy<sup>16</sup>. Cincinello reported that Antonio Ponzio and 'Allexandro', two former Neapolitan singers, each of whom had already been hired in Milan for a second time, told him that the Duke of Milan was offering Cordier, Ferrante's singer, an annual income of one thousand ducats. The report was confirmed by Cincinello's chancellor. In addition it was rumored that the duke would hire the singers accompanying the Neapolitan tenorist.

Allexandro et Antonio Ponzio heri sera vennero da Pavia: et hannome dicto commo quisto Signor ha mandato un fronzoso de la sua capella verso lo Monte di San Bernardo ad scontrare Cordiere, et offerirli mille ducati de provisione l'anno. Et ad l'altri cantori che mena seco darli tanto quanto esso Cordier vorrà. Lo fratello del quale Cordiere dicono essere passato per venire alla Maestà vostra. Et questa medesima informatione mi portò heri el mio cancellero, haverli dicto messer Johannes Olzinà, quale ionse a Pavia mercordi passato.

How much was Galeazzo willing to risk to succeed in luring these singers away from Naples and why would he continue create discontent with such serious ramifications? Despite the damage to Milanese diplomacy he pursued and acquired Jean Cordier, the premier tenorist of the Neapolitan chapel for his court. Cordier soon received a title, many gifts and benefices, including a huge *commendà* on an abbey. His departure caused great consternation in the Neapolitan court, and one of his former companions (probably another singer in the chapel) wrote to him, upbraiding him for ingratitude and warning of the consequences to follow if he did not return<sup>17</sup>. The King of Naples contested his singer's departure until the issue was finally submitted for arbitration to the Duke of Burgundy, who found in favor of Milan<sup>18</sup>. We are told in documents that Galeazzo was rumored to have paid Cordier one thousand ducats per year, and as we recover more and more records of his activities in the duchy it is evident that, while this figure was formerly thought to have been a literary exaggeration, Cordier earned a extremely large income and was given a social standing that would have been inconceivable a generation earlier in Milan.

Cincinello realized that the Milanese were intercepting his communiqés from Naples, and the King of Naples decided to use this to his advantage to strike back at Galeazzo. The former let it be known that Ferrante would be sending letters of familiarty (a great privilege) to his departed singers Antonio and Allexandro. It is evident that he planned for Galeazzo to find this out, knowing that the duke would have reacted in only one way. It is not entirely clear, but we may surmise from the above that the two singers had asked to return to Naples (perhaps because they were jealous of Cordier). When confronted by Galeazzo, Allexandro tried to cover it all up by explaining that they simply wished to use the letters when visiting their families in Naples, and that they would value them since King Alfonso had been their first patron<sup>19</sup>.

Aviso vostra Maestà commo prima che io havesse riceputo la littera di familiarità che essa vostra Maestà manda ad Allexandro et Antonio Ponzio, quisto Signore [Galeazzo] ne haveva havuto aviso, et feceli a demandare perché volevano questa littera. Et Allexandro li rispose, andando ad casa sua con licentia de sua Excellentia, essendo creato in corte de Re Alfonso, et de la Maestà vostra per loro honore havevano caro questa littera, de che li fé pigliare, et mettere in presone. Et de poi li fé liberare dandoli licentia, et commandandoli mai dovessero andare dove fosse sua Excellentia et cusì sono rimasti li povereti senza partito con carrico de moglie et fioli ciascuno. Et una de loro moglie sta per figliare de di in di, et non hanno da vivere, che è una compassione perché quello li donava quisto Signore era solum abastanza de loro vita alla giornata. Unde supplicava[no]

per Dio la Maestà vostra se degnasse accettarli ad soi servitti, et farli gratia de alcuni denari in prestito perché se potessero condurre ad Napoli. De la qual cosa tanto ne supplico la prefata Maestà vostra quanto li volesse per me, per essere vera elimosina, et anche per honore de essa Maestà vostra per lo nome de la quale havendo havuto questo male, se veda esserli ritornato ad bene. Supplicando vostra Maestà che la informatione data per li sopradicti Allexandro et Antonio Ponzio non siano nominati, perché quisto Signore io dubito li faria mettere in un fondo di torre. Recomandome sempre in gratia d'essa.

Predictably Galeazzo threw them in jail, dismissed them, and commanded them «never to go where he was». It should be noted that Cincinello reported that the singers and their families were poorly off, having been paid only enough to live day to day, a description at odds with what we know from other

documents of the singers' provisions. Naturally the singers asked Cincinello to supplicate the king to allow them to return. If the King of Naples had wished to take revenge on his errant singers and anger the Duke of Milan he could have found no better way. However for himself, it seems that Cincinello was uncomfortable in having deceived them, and seeing their misfortune continue, and did not want to see them again «at the bottom of a tower».

In the records presented here it is evident that Galeazzo valued his chapel greatly and employed it to demonstrate his position as a sovereign. The choir quickly attained a position of some prominence in his court; in some cases the personnel became subjects of diplomatic concern and the objects of espionage. For the newly recovered documents, the precise value and significance of their content for court studies

is easily seen — it is important not to overlook certain kinds of documentary evidence such as that found in the diplomatic correspondence or the private letters of individual court members. Nor would the full context of the diplomatic crisis surrounding the «desviare» of the singers have emerged in this case without the recovery of the document from Maletta to Galeazzo. We have become used to the idea that the court is an extension of the persona of the ruler, and it is evident that this is especially true for the singers of Italian rulers; their chapels were part of the daily routine of court, and their performances were an important ceremonial expression of the ruler and the state. In the case of Galeazzo, a suzerain trying to be a sovereign, the chapel took on a great meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Archivio di Stato di Milano (ASMi), *Potenze estere Roma, Sforzesco*, 72, Giovanni Arcimboldo to Galeazzo Sforza: «Illustrissimo Signore mio. Per exequire quanto Vostra Excellencia per più sue littere m'ha commesso, in cercare cantori per la capella sua, ho facto cercare da diverse persone s'el se ne trovasse de quelli che facessero al proposito de Vostra Excellencia che fosseno perfecti, como so quella li voria».

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion see *Music and Patronage in the Sforza Court*, book in progress with Prof. Paul A. Merkley to be published by the Fondazione Pietro Locatelli, Cremona. Research on this project has been carried out with the help of funds from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

<sup>3</sup> G. IANZITI, *Humanistic Historiography under the Sforzas: Politics and Propaganda in Fifteenth-Century Milan*, New York 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Concerning justice under Galeazzo see the excellent monograph by Franca LEVEROTTI, «Governare a modo e stillo de' Signori...». *Osservazioni in margine all'amministrazione della giustizia al tempo di Galeazzo Maria Sforza duca di Milano (1466-76)*, Firenze 1994. Leverotti regards the duke's abrogation of the civil institutions of justice in favor of himself as part of his quest for sovereignty: «Il caso oggetto di questa ricerca vede invero nel ducato sforzesco al tempo di Galeazzo Maria l'applicazione di una giustizia arbitraria, intrisa perciò di profonde ingiustizie, sottratta alle sue magistrature naturali (Consiglio Segreto e Consiglio di Giustizia), [...] nella sostanza affidata all'arbitrio del signore, il quale si era proposto di fare della giustizia un'altra fonte di entrata» (p. 5).

<sup>5</sup> R. J. W. EVANS, «The Court: a Protean Institution and an Elusive Subject», in *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: the Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age ca. 1450-1650*, edd. R. G. Asch and A. M. Birke, London

1991, writes on the system of patronage as «the social rationale of the court», and for more on 'clientage' see *Klientensysteme im Europa der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. A. Maczak, Munich 1988.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions on the stealing of singers and the rivalry between the courts of Milan, Ferrara, and Naples, see for example E. MOTTA, «Musici alla corte degli Sforza. Ricerche e documenti milanesi», *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, XIV (1887), 29-64, 278-340, and 514-561, rpt. Geneva 1977, 303; A. W. ATLAS, *Music at the Aragonese Court of Naples*, Cambridge 1985, 41; G. LUBKIN, *A Renaissance Court: Milan under Galeazzo Maria Sforza*, Berkeley 1994, 188-189; L. LOCKWOOD, *Strategies of Music Patronage in the Fifteenth Century: the Cappella of Ercole I d'Este*, in *Music in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. I. Fenlon, Cambridge 1981, 227-245.

<sup>7</sup> LUBKIN, 1994, 188-189, describes the rivalry and takes note of the jailing of the singers, but does not cite or discuss certain of the key documents that fully reveal how far diplomatic relations declined between the two courts on account of the recruitment practices.

<sup>8</sup> ASMi, *Potenze sovrane (non Sforzesco)*, 124, n. 67. Cited in MOTTA, 1887, 307.

<sup>9</sup> ASMi, *Potenze estere Napoli, Sforzesco*, 223. The singers expected from Normandy were no doubt recruited by Cardino Bosco, *Registri ducali*, 175, f. 98v, who went to France in November of 1472 with Tomaso Leporis. Both were recommended to the ducal chapel by Branda Castiglione, count and bishop of Como. Leporis, who had been a singer in the choir of four popes, was a cleric of Rouen and held a canonry there. Bosco was a Norman, who sang in the Duomo prior to becoming a ducal singer. He remained in Milan for most of his life.

<sup>10</sup> ASMi, *Potenze estere Napoli, Sforzesco*, 223. Newly recovered.

<sup>11</sup> Although it is a bit confusing, Maletta is referring here to the Duke of Calabria, who was also at the dinner. If he could not persuade Ferrante, Maletta hoped at least to convince the Duke of Calabria of Galeazzo's innocence.

<sup>12</sup> See P. A. MERKLEY, «Patronage and Clientage in Galeazzo's Court», *Musica e Storia*, IV (1996), 134-135. The singers named are Eligius, Cornelio and Petrus. It seems likely that the document found in Milan (ASMi, *Potenze sovrane (non Sforzesco)*, 124, n. 58) is a copy of one of the letters read to Maletta at the formal dinner in Naples, copied at his behest, and sent back to Galeazzo. Records do not always link together so well.

<sup>13</sup> ASMi, *Potenze estere Napoli, Sforzesco*, 223. Not in MOTTA, 1887.

<sup>14</sup> ASMi, *Potenze estere Napoli, Sforzesco*, 223.

<sup>15</sup> ASMi, *Potenze estere Napoli, Sforzesco*, 223, 26 March 1473, Maletta to Galeazzo.

<sup>16</sup> ASMi, *Carteggio interno Milano Città e Ducato, Sforzesco*, 923. Referred to in LUBKIN, 1994, 344, note 15. Both ATLAS, 1985, 41 and LUBKIN, 1994 after MOTTA, 1887, 532 say that Alessandro was the composer Agricola. However, there are no records for his last name other than the designation «Alamania». On 10 June 1474, Alessandro de Alamania was given an honourable release (*Sforzesco*, 890).

<sup>17</sup> The letter (ASMi, *Potenze sovrane*, 124, n. 72) is published in MERKLEY, 1996, 138.

<sup>18</sup> On the arbitration see R. WALSH, «Music and Quattrocento Diplomacy: the Singer Jean Cordier between Milan, Naples, and Burgundy in 1475», *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, LX (1978), 439-442. No doubt Charles the Bold believed that Milan would be a more strategic ally in a war with France.

<sup>19</sup> ASMi, *Carteggio interno Milano Città e Ducato, Sforzesco*, 923.