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*Introduction**

Luca Degl'Innocenti and Massimo Rospocher

This special issue focuses upon a central figure in the social, cultural, and aural landscape of Renaissance Europe: the singer of tales, or the street singer (known as *cantimbanco*, *canterino* or *cantastorie* in Italy, balladeer or mountebank in England, *Bänkelsänger* in Germany, *ciego coplero* in Spain, *chanteur de rue* in France, *guslar* in Bosnia or Serbia, and *Meddah* in the Ottoman world). At least since Peter Burke's seminal work on early modern popular culture, street singers have been recognized as a subject of pivotal importance, albeit inherently elusive and difficult to study.[1] These seemingly shadowy performers held a place at the epicentre of European Renaissance society and culture, whose 'hybridity' they epitomized.[2] Itinerant performers have been identified as crucial mediators in the dynamic continuum of learned and popular cultures and of orality and literacy that characterized early modern Europe. Despite these claims, precisely because of their liminal position and protean activity, in the following years these figures continued to count as an epiphenomenon of major social and cultural issues – pleasant curiosities to enrich greater narratives, perhaps, but almost irrelevant to the central tasks of the historian, the literary scholar or the musicologist.

In the last two decades, within the broader historiographical context of the rediscovery of the verbal, vocal, and aural dimensions of the past,[3] Renaissance

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[1] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978; 3rd edn., Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[2] Peter Burke, *Hybrid Renaissance: Culture, Language, Architecture* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015).

[3] Stefano Dall'Aglio, Brian Richardson and Massimo Rospocher (eds.), *Voices and Texts in Early Modern Italian Society* (London: Routledge, 2017); Luca Degl'Innocenti, Brian Richardson and Chiara Sbordoni (eds.), *Interactions between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016); Thomas V. Cohen and Lesley K. Twomey (eds.), *Spoken Word and Social Practice: Orality in Europe: 1400–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

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scholars from various disciplines have considered more thoroughly different facets of these peripatetic performers in several European geographical contexts. Cultural historians have used anthropological tools to analyse how some of their compositions contributed to spread anticlericalism, prophetic culture, and even heterodox ideas widely through European society.[4] Historians of communication have recognized the fundamental role played by street performers – and their texts or songs – within the early modern multimedia system in the formation of an ephemeral form of public sphere.[5] Early modern media historians have illuminated their capacity to act as oral proto-journalists by providing not only entertainment but also information and breaking news to wide publics and heterogeneous audiences.[6] Focusing on their mobility and their activity of travelling pedlars, book historians have increasingly highlighted their primary importance in the dissemination of print, not only from the commercial point of view, but also from that of editorial strategies.[7] Social historians have scrutinized their medical activity as charlatans or mountebanks, who used vocal and mimetic skills to draw a crowd around them and to advertise and sell their miraculous remedies.[8] Literary scholars have

[4] Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); *eadem*, *Rinascimento anticlericale* (Rome: Laterza, 2005); Tom Cheesman, *The Shocking Ballad Picture Show: German Popular Literature and Cultural History* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

[5] Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Rosa Salzberg and Massimo Rospocher, 'Street Singers in Italian Renaissance Urban Culture and Communication', *Cultural and Social History*, 9 (2012), 9–26; Tatiana Debbagi Baranova, *A coups de libelles. Une culture politique au temps des guerres de Religion (1562–1598)* (Genève: Droz, 2012); Massimo Rospocher, 'From Orality to Print: Revolution or Transition? Street Singers in the Renaissance Multi-Media System', in Paolo Pombeni (ed.), *The Historiography of Transition: Critical Phases in the Development of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 23–39.

[6] Jenni Hyde, *Singing the News. Ballads in Mid-Tudor England* (London: Routledge, 2018); Una McIlvenna, 'When the News was Sung. Ballads as News Media in Early Modern Europe', *Media History*, 22 (2016), 317–33; Abel Iglesias Castellano, 'Los ciegos: profesionales de la información. Invención, edición y difusión de la literatura de cordel (siglos XVI–XVIII)' in Giovanni Ciappelli and Valentina Nider (eds.), *La invención de las noticias. Las relaciones de sucesos entre la literatura y la información* (siglos XVI–XVIII) (Trento: Università degli Studi di Trento, 2017), 467–89; Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Massimo Rospocher, 'Songs of War. Historical and Literary Narratives in the 'Horrendous Italian Wars' (1494–1559)', in Marco Mondini and Massimo Rospocher (eds.), *Narrating War. Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives* (Bologna: il Mulino; Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2013), 79–97.

[7] Jeroen Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press. Itinerant Distribution Networks in England and the Netherlands 1600–1850* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2014); Roland Harms, Joad Raymond and Jeroen Salman (eds.), *Not Dead Things. The Dissemination of Popular Print in England and Wales, Italy, and the Low Countries, 1500–1820* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2013); Rosa Salzberg, 'In the Mouth of Charlatans: Street Performers and the Dissemination of Pamphlets in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance Studies*, 24 (2010), 638–53, and *eadem*, *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Giancarlo Petrella, 'Ippolito Ferrarese, a Traveling "Cerretano" and Publisher in Sixteenth Century Italy', in Benito Rial Costas (ed.), *Print Culture and Peripheries in Early Modern Europe. A Contribution to the History of Printing and the Book Trade in Small European and Spanish Cities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2012), 201–26; Juan Gomis Coloma, *Menudencias de imprenta. Producción y circulación de la literatura popular (Valencia, siglo XVIII)* (Valencia: Institució Alfons el Magnànim, 2015); Pedro M. Catedra, *Invención, difusión y recepción de la literatura popular impresa (siglo XVI)* (Mérida: Editora Regional de Extremadura, 2002).

[8] David Gentilcore, *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Margaret A. Katritzky, *Women, Medicine and Theatre (1500–1750): Literary Mountebanks and Performing Quacks* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

explored texts and contexts of some of the favourite genres of the street singers, chivalric romances or laments, for instance.[9] Lately students of Renaissance literature have shed some light on the interactions between oral performances and written sources and records, reassessing the long-lasting influence of their poetic craft on the composition and circulation of both popular and learned poems.[10] Historians of theatre have investigated their performative dimension, examining the close connections of piazza entertainers with the birth and the developments of Renaissance comedy, and their direct involvement in the fortunes of the so-called *Commedia dell'Arte*.[11] Other scholars have used ballad singers' texts and performances as a tool to understand critical contemporary issues such as poverty, vagrancy, mendicancy, and inequality in early modern society.[12] Art historians have studied their presence within European iconographic tradition, examining the visual and social status of the street singer as he moves between different roles from vagabond to charlatan to poet and virtuoso.[13] Musicologists have examined the oral and aural dimension of the street singers' art, typically linked to non-written traditions and improvisational techniques.[14]

By analysing a variety of case-studies ranging from Amsterdam, Antwerp, Florence, London, Paris, Venice and Valencia, this collection of essays further investigates the composite persona of the street singer in Renaissance Europe. Both the category and the term 'street singer' are in fact culturally and socially elusive. The heirs of medieval minstrels and jesters, street singers were poets, performers and musicians who entertained, educated and informed their audiences with a repertoire of works that could belong to narrative, lyrical,

[9] Florence Alazard, *Le* lamento *dans l'Italie de la Renaissance: pleure, belle Italie, jardin du monde* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010); Marco Villoresi, *La fabbrica dei cavalieri. Cantari, poemi, romanzi in prosa fra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Rome: Salerno editrice, 2005).

[10] Abel Iglesias Castellano, 'El ciego callejero en la España Moderna: balance y propuestas', *LaborHistórico*, 2/1 (2016), 74–90; Luca Degl'Innocenti, *I 'Reali' dell'Altissimo: un ciclo di cantari fra oralità e scrittura* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2008); *idem*, 'The Singing Voice and the Printing Press: Itineraries of the Altissimo's Performed Texts in Renaissance Italy', *The Italianist*, 34 (2014), 318–35 and *idem «Al suon di questa cetra». Ricerche sulla poesia orale del Rinascimento* (Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2016); Marco Villoresi, 'La voce in piazza. Note e divagazioni sulla figura del canterino', *Paragone Letteratura*, 84–6 (2009), 41–72.

[11] Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the* Commedia dell'Arte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Margaret A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560–1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

[12] Tom Hitchcock, *Vagrancy in English Culture and Society, 1650–1750* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Rosa Salzberg, '"Poverty Makes Me Invisible": Street Singers and Hard Times in Italian Renaissance Cities', *Italian Studies,* 71/2 (2016), 212–24; Robert Henke, *Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theater and Performance* (Iowa City, IA: Iowa University Press, 2015).

[13] Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia*; Chriscinda Henry, 'Alter Orpheus: Masks of Virtuosity in Renaissance Portraits of Musical Improvisers', *Italian Studies,* 71/2 (2016), 238–58.

[14] Blake Wilson, 'Dominion of the Ear: Singing the Vernacular in Piazza San Martino', *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 16 (2013), 273–87, and *idem*, '*Canterino* and *Improvvisatore*: Oral Poetry and Performance', in Anna Maria Busse-Berger and Jesse Rodin (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 292–310; see also the results of the ERC funded project *Ioculator seu Mimus. Performing Music and Poetry in Medieval Iberia* (ERC-CoG-2017) coordinated by Anna Alberni at the University of Barcelona.

and dramatic genres, and could include historical, chivalric, comic, moral, religious, didactic, scientific, and fantastic verses, as well as songs about politics and current affairs. Their repertoires could draw upon both the popular tradition and the production of educated authors, and upon both Medieval and humanistic culture. Some performers were singing mostly the verses of other authors, others were oral poets who also sang their own works, and in some cases were able to adapt them and even to compose them during performance, by means of improvisational techniques. Although some itinerant performers also gained admittance and recognition in palaces and courts, their primary stages were in fact urban spaces, the streets and the piazzas where they captured the attention of a socially and culturally variegated public, from merchants to peasants, from artisans to nobles and men of letters. While their capacity to entrance broad audiences was founded on the attraction of their voices, they were often also musicians, sometimes excellent players of stringed instruments.

Their traditions in different geographical contexts have many features in common, but also some local peculiarities. In order for the cultural role of these multi-faceted figures to be fully understood in a pan-European and multidisciplinary perspective, we believe that there is a need to combine and compare all these diverse narratives. In the following pages, therefore, experts in different performative traditions in Europe will delineate an up-to-date portrait of the figure of the street singer in their respective area of expertise. The authors of this introduction sketch a portrait of the Italian *cantastorie* and their fundamental role in the aural landscape of Renaissance Italy. Juan Gomis investigates the role played by the blind as sellers of prints and reciters of ballads in early modern Spain, focusing on their professional organization in brotherhoods. Una McIlvenna outlines in detail the figure of the *chanteur de rue* in early modern Paris and France, analysing performative spaces, formats and types of songs and of singers. Angela McShane addressees the situation in early modern England, concentrating on seventeenth-century London in order to map the extent of the topical market of the balladeers. Jeroen Salman unravels the rich world of textual and visual representations of Dutch ballad singers in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Chriscinda Henry finally offers a broad iconographic survey of the Dutch and European visual tradition, focusing on social and visual representations of the street singer.

Each article has a specific approach to the topic, and allows to look deeper into the national context examined. By so doing, however, they also draw a series of outlines which can be connected together in a sketch of the European picture. Some of the essays, for instance, focus on one particular genre, such as English political ballads or Spanish religious songs and prayers, but all of them, nevertheless, stress the *wide and diverse range of topics* typically included in the repertoire of street singers all over Europe. The French songs gathered in cheap *recueils* could deal indifferently with 'news event, love ditty, bawdy

tale or religious lesson' (McIlvenna) and the famous Philippot le Savoyard performed drinking songs and love ballads as well as political ones; only in the eighteenth century there seems to emerge a specialization between singers of secular and of religious texts. A 'mixture of genres and themes' also characterizes the songs collected in the Antwerp Songbook (Henry), and the columns of one single black-letter broadsheet could contain several songs with a varied content (religious, amorous, historical etc.) (Salman). Likewise, Spanish *pliegos sueltos* cover a large variety of texts, including 'news, lives of saints, love stories, adventures, Christian doctrines, fragments of plays, religious pictures, penny prints' and *romances* (Gomis); blind singers themselves, albeit specializing in prayers and able to recite hundreds of them, were also among the successful authors of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *romances.* A similar variety of subjects and genres can be found in the repertoires of Italian *cantastorie*, and in the catalogues of ephemera and books sold – and often even published – by them; such a rich collection of thematic and stylistic components could also be blended together during the performance of their *cantari*, which combined narrative, lyrical, humorous, moral, historical, religious, and philosophical verses in the same oral text.

Irrespective of the topic, almost all texts were not just recited, but actually sung. *Music* – either just vocal or also instrumental – was quintessential to the art of street singers. As McIlvenna points out, in Britain, Ireland, the German lands, and France, 'songs were usually set to a familiar tune, which would not only help to draw the attention of passers-by [...] but also allow listeners to join in', thus learning the new text and repeating it around the city. Melodies were often recycled in Dutch collections like the Antwerp Songbook, discussed by Henry. In Italy, on the other hand, although the *contrafactum* might have applied to up-tempo genres such as the *barzelletta*, the most common tunes associated with the popular metres of *ottava* and *terza rima* were improvised variations on traditional standards. Instrumental accompaniment could be provided by singers themselves, or by a companion. However, it was rather common for singers also to be skilled musicians: significantly, during their apprenticeship Spanish blind performers [*ciegos oracioneros*] could also be trained to play the guitar or the violin (and a performance with musical accompaniment cost twice as much as one without). Different instruments were associated with different periods, genres and also different ranks of street singers, as highlighted in the paintings analysed by Henry. Singers spread melodies old and new across the country, and they could bring, as in England, 'the popular musical productions of the metropolis to the provinces' (McShane).

The latter aspect was just one of the many that were combined together in the complex processes of *cultural mediation* which street singers carried on along their routes through space and time. Their songs were 'one of the most potent media for communication' (Gomis) in early modern times. They were 'communicator*s* of and commentator*s* upon' not only state affairs (McShane),

but also a rich and diverse set of historical facts and of fictional stories. Tales and poems could encapsulate manifold cultural ingredients from heterogeneous milieux and traditions, while their historical and political songs aimed not only at providing information about events, but also at judging them – thus influencing the formation of public opinions. Current affairs and crime news were promptly narrated in verse in front of very varied audiences – so promptly that it is not exceptional for their printed versions (of French execution ballads, or *complaintes*, as well as of Italian *cantari bellici*, on recent battles) to be published just a few days after the event. Reporting news to people eager to be informed could be in these instances a priority, but even more important was the street singers' ability to persuasively disseminate an opinion about the facts narrated (McShane). On account of their mobility and elusiveness (see below), and of their ability itself to convince people, 'travelling singers were often considered unreliable and dishonest purveyors of news and information' (Henry). Yet, their historical and political songs proliferated (and attracted the attention of authorities) especially on the occasion of major events or controversies – be it the War of the League of Cambrai in Italy, the Exclusion Crisis in England or the Dutch revolt in the Netherlands. Reliable or not, their accounts and commentaries were much sought after by listeners and readers.

Their sung news and opinions, their stories and various knowledge were widely disseminated thanks to street singers' relentless *mobility*. They moved within and around the city (McIlvenna, Gomis), but they also moved within larger circuits, travelling 'from town to town and market to market' in regions 'that could encompass the whole of the Northern and Southern Netherlands, parts of Germany and France, and points far beyond' (Henry), or the entire Italian peninsula, from Venice to Rome and from Florence to Naples (where singers both performed their texts and had them printed), or numerous 'cities in the south and west of England', where their singing tours could last no less than ten years (McShane).

Wherever they went, they mostly performed outdoors, 'in public *places* such as squares, bridges, locks and streets' (Salman), in noisy locations where their voice and music had to compete with many others itinerant performers and hawkers of various wares, from preachers to charlatans, and from toothpullers to ambulant sellers of food. Different cities and regions appear to have encouraged different habits: bridges, for instance, and most importantly the Pont-Neuf, were the most common stage for Parisian *chanteurs de rue*, who took advantage of the bottlenecks that frequently occurred in such places (McIlvenna); in Venice, instead, notwithstanding the importance of the Rialto bridge, it was the central square, Piazza San Marco, that teemed with the biggest number and the largest variety of street performers (Degl'Innocenti – Rospocher). Squares, and market squares in particular, were of primary importance also in Dutch cities (and paintings), as well as in Spanish ones,

where blind singers typically performed their prayers at church doors, unless they were invited, as was equally usual, to go 'to the homes of the faithful' and sing them (Gomis). Genres, of course, influenced the choice of a location, and so did bad weather: English singers of political ballads could even take up positions 'under the windows or at the doors of those they were balladıng', but it is no surprise if most of their performances happened indoors (and even in private rooms), so as to avoid not only the risk of rain but also, and most importantly – though often in vain – that of being overheard by hostile ears (McShane).

Public places could be very crowded and noisy, and yet, at the very first strokes of their bows on the *viola*, the masters of the art of street singing, like the Italian Jacopo Coppa, were able to attract, mesmerise, and keep quiet, close and focused a very large – and socially and culturally differentiated – *audience*. As a testament to the enthralling power associated with these performers all over Europe across many centuries, it is revealing that the same half-serious comparison between a street singer and no less than Orpheus, which seemed fitting in early seventeenth-century England (McShane), can already be found in early fourteenth-century Italy.[15] The urban crowds gathered around the singer were usually extremely heterogeneous, 'including male and female adults of various ages and classes, as well as children' (Henry), but could also be differentiated according to the genre, the style and even the corresponding typographical quality of the text, as in the case of English white- and black-letter ballads (McShane). In special cases, like the prayers of Spanish blind singers, the audience could be made up of just one single customer or a small group of regular listeners (Gomis). No matter how numerous, the audience could (and usually would) interact with the performer and react to the performance, either favourably or not: respectable British citizens were expected to publically reprove dubious ballads (McShane), for instance, but most of the time the public would enjoy the song, and even join in, and the persuasive power of the performance could be so exciting as to provoke real riots, like the one that devastated a covered market in Amiens in 1465 (McIlvenna).

Given such variety of topics, of media, of cultural ingredients, of spaces, of publics and of audience's reactions, it is only natural for street singers to appear as extremely *multifaceted figures*. They are undeniably fascinating, and yet so protean as to be an almost 'untraceable and intangible phenomenon' (Salman), difficult to grasp in texts and to trace in archives. This is particularly evident if one tries to focus on their social and cultural profiles, which usually prove rather elusive, both as a group and as individuals. On the one hand, singing in the street could be an activity carried on by many different kinds of people, either regularly or occasionally. On the other hand, one and the same street singer could be engaged in many other different activities, at once in

[15] See the passage by Lovato Lovati in Degl'Innocenti, *«Al suon di questa cetra»*, 80.

the same place, or elsewhere in different moments, so as to appear under many different identities. As a group, for instance, English ballad singers could include both 'men and women who sung for a living' and 'scholars, churchmen and members of the ruling elites'. The former could be 'directly employed by ballad publishers' but also 'patronized by the local elites', among the latter one might have found young scholars for whom 'writing witty, satirical ballads was a common university exercise, and the ability to sing them in an entertaining way was a social virtue' (McShane) – a case that was rather common also in Italy, and involved even a soon-to-be very famous poet, Torquato Tasso, who got into trouble with the law as a student at the University of Padua for singing satirical verse in public.[16] The involvement of the social and political élites was also not uncommon in France, where even the duchesse de Montpensier could promote the dissemination of political songs distributed by *colporteurs* (McIlvenna). French street singers and sellers of songs, however, seem to mostly belong to lower classes, like the other ambulant peddlers with whom they were grouped together in documents and in visual sources such as the 'cris de Paris'. Even among those for whom singing in the street was an habitual job, of course, cultural and social status could vary remarkably: from beggars to *virtuosi*, as Henry's title goes, they could be just travelling singers, intermingled with other marginalized figures asking for charity; they could be also entrepreneurial vendors of various wares, and first of all booksellers; they could be simply performers or also poets; they could be just singers or both singers and musicians. Even among the *ciegos oracioneros*, although their disability would associate them with beggars and other social outsiders, there were not only talented singers and musicians, but also successful authors of songs and *romances* (Gomis). Thanks to their special mnemonic and musical skills, blind poet-performers were common also in Italy, and particularly successful as *canterini* improvisers; the special link between blindness and oral poetry, after all, was well established since Homer's time, and it is not uncommon to spot other blind performers begging in the background of Dutch paintings or singing near the Pont-Neuf in Paris, like the 'celebrity' *chanteur* Philippot le Savoyard. Although most street singers were adult males, age and sex were also variable: children apprentices and performers (either solos or in groups) are recorded all over Europe, and being balladed by them 'heightened a victim's ignominy' (McShane); women are also not uncommon among street singers of every country, included the Spanish brotherhoods of blind *oracioneros*, with the sole exception, apparently, of Italy, were female *cantastorie* can hardly be found, if at all. Even more than the category itself, however, it was each individual street singer that could be (and typically was) extremely many-sided. Shakespeare's Autolycus has been rightly mentioned as archetypal of the ambiguous street performer, a 'socially complicated

[16] See Brian Richardson, *Manuscript Culture in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230.

character', who plays the part of a rogue but 'is, in fact, both a courtier and an actor' (McShane). If English ballad singers could hold that occupation 'in conjunction with numerous other trades', Italian *cantastorie* were probably the most protean of all, as they typically mastered not only the arts of singing verse, playing music, composing poems, selling books and (many) other wares, including soaps and quack remedies, but also those of acting, of juggling, of conjuring and of toothpulling, as well as printing and publishing books – as we shall see below. Such an elusive and potentially deceptive combination of different skills and activities is reflected in the 'vein of early sixteenth-century imagery' – led by Hieronymus Bosch – which rendered 'public entertainers as vagabonds and charlatans' and portrayed 'the itinerant musician as an outcast "other", or untrustworthy fool, trickster, and thief' (Henry). According to McIlvenna, however, France is an exception to this rule: although *chanteurs de rue* (singers of songs) could be confused with *colporteurs* (sellers of their printed versions), as the two activities were usually carried out by one and the same person, and although locations such as the Pont-Neuf gathered together 'street singers, charlatans, teeth-pullers, and pickpockets', nevertheless there does not seem to be any 'evidence, textual or pictorial, for *chanteurs des rues* doing anything other than singing songs and selling songsheets' (and yet there seems to be some exceptions to the exception, such as the 'celebrity' street singers Tabarin, who was also a 'charlatan and theatrical performer').

However that may be, selling songsheets, booklets, and books in general was in all evidence the activity that most typically complemented that of street-singing. To make a living out of one's performances, it was particularly profitable to sell printed copies of the texts one was singing – or might have sung. The interactions between *performance and print*, unprecedented until the invention of the press, are a particular aspect of the general problem of the relationships between orality and writing, and one in which the two media were linked by a mutually beneficial alliance rather than a destructive antagonism. It is true that printed songs could circulate even without a performer, but it was also true that a performer was necessary for such printed songs to actually fulfil their entire communicative potential. Logbooks of printers and archival documents of all countries record street singers who bought printed songs wholesale in order to perform them for sale (McIlvenna): in Italy, this happened already in the late fifteenth century, in the famous *Diario* of the Ripoli printing press; Dutch singers were able to purchase – and therefore to sell – thousands of copies of some songs (Salman); in Spain, peddling *pliegos sueltos* was a specialty of street performers, and in certain cities it eventually became, in the seventeenth century, a monopoly of the blind ones; in France, printer-booksellers and singer-*colporteurs* had very tight relationships; in England, ballad publishers 'directly employed singers to disseminate new songs' and supported them in case of troubles with the authorities (McShane). When singers were also authors of the songs, it was normal for them to directly

commission printed editions of their texts. However, the case seems to be unparalleled elsewhere – although rather common in Italy – of street singers like Zoppino and Coppa, who were not just in direct contact with printers and publishers, but in fact became – to various degrees – entrepreneurial publishers themselves, and not only of broadsheets and other ephemera, but also of much more substantial books. Notwithstanding the higher price, also the latter could be sold to their audiences. Generally speaking, however, the thinner the printing format, the more likely a direct connection with performance: broadside was the undisputed standard format of English ballads, and the same could be said of the Spanish *pliegos sueltos*, and of Dutch black-letter ballads, whose comparative rarity in public collections today is due to the 'ephemeral character' (Salman) of the single-sheet format – not only fragile in itself, but also subject to a much heavier and more careless usage. Conservation could be the key to better understanding the French situation, where 'the majority of extant songs from the sixteenth century' survives in printed collections known as *recueils*, rather than in the single-sheet pamphlets, and yet the latter –which regularly appear in pictorial evidence – have sometimes been preserved by collectors who privately bound them together in volumes, like Pierre de L'Estoile (similarly to cardinal Ippolito d'Este in Italy).[17] Regardless of the format, many songs feature direct addresses to the audience, advertising the text and its performance, and other hallmarks of oral delivery. Yet, in most of these cases printed versions presumably pre-existed orally-delivered ones, although the latter could freely vary the text of the former. Through their graphics and material presence, especially when illustrated, broadside sheets, could, 'even unsung, [...] perform politically in the street' (McShane) as well as in private spaces, where (in Germany and Britain) they would often be pasted on walls, windows, and furniture (McIlvenna). It was also possible, nevertheless, for printed texts to be based on orally-performed ones, especially when improvised: the Florentine *cantimpanca* Altissimo, in fact, not only published both single-sheet editions (folded *in quarto*) and large collections of his moral and amorous songs, but also performed long series of extemporaneous narrative poems which were published only posthumously, thanks to the live transcriptions written down by his listeners. The importance of performance should never be underestimated, and it is significant that in England 'the "publication" of a song included its "exposure" through singing and selling as well as by printing' (McShane).

Civic and religious *authorities* strove to control these oral and written forms of publication. The songs that from Amsterdam to Naples, from London to Valencia, street singers performed in central public spaces in front of wide and heterogeneous urban publics often dealt with political, historical, religious or moral topics. It was only natural, then, for authorities to feel the

[17] Massimo Rospocher, 'La miscellanea del cardinale: La battaglia della Polesella tra manoscritto, stampa e oralità', in *La invención de las noticias*, 31–50.

need to monitor and regulate street singing, and even more so during particularly delicate moments, such as after the explosion of the Dutch revolt in the Netherlands, during the Wars of Religion in France, or at the time of the Reformation in England, or of the Council of Trent in Italy. Being considered suspect and blamed for various kinds of misdeed, from theft to revolt, was almost unavoidable for ambulant street singers, who were usually far from wealthy and were often associated with beggars, vagrants and other marginalized elements of society – including treacherous ones like thieves and cutpurses, due to the performers' ability to entice passers-by. Blind singers were even more at risk of poverty than others, and the first aim of the brotherhoods they created was protecting and promoting their members; as Gomis shows, however, they also acted as intermediaries with authorities. By controlling access to the activity of singing prayers in public, which was reserved to their members, and by regulating which texts could be recited, these organisations did ultimately supervise the conduct of street performers, repressed any violation, and possibly propagated orthodoxy and consensus. Ballad singers and sellers could be powerful mouthpieces of rulers, but might also pose a threat to them, as 'being balladed on the street could be devastating for governing authorities' (McShane). In almost every country, therefore, these powers tried to impose systems of licenses or of enrolments in guilds in order to be authorised to perform and sell songs, and restrictions about places and times, as well as censorship of their texts. In late-sixteenth century Paris, for instance, there were only twelve authorised *colporteurs*, in six designated areas, all of them not far from the Palais de Justice, so as to better surveil them. It is true that these efforts were often futile and 'restrictions were routinely ignored' (McIlvenna), so that a Venetian patrician such as Girolamo Priuli just like l'Estoile in Paris would complain about defamatory and subversive songs being sung all over the city. Also in the Netherlands 'the actions of urban elites, city officials, and princes and their armies' (Henry) were often targeted by ballad singers, whose protean figures blended together the 'apparently contradicting roles' of public entertainer and of 'political rebel' (Salman). Nevertheless, the 'ephemeral and transient nature of singing' did not always allow singers to 'appear and disappear, with only a catchy refrain left on the wind' (McIlvenna). Actually, judging from the articles collected in this volume, archives all over Europe abound with cases of ballad singers who were arrested, punished and even executed for singing and disseminating controversial songs or prints. At times, as in the case of the publisher-performer Zoppino, arrested in Venice for a song performed and sold in Ferrara, one could even be detained for something done in a distant and rival city (Degl'Innocenti – Rospocher).

This is yet another proof of what a powerful communicative medium was embodied by early-modern European street singers, on whose neglected but

crucially important activity the following essays, both individually and as a collection, will shed new light – a light that might illuminate many interesting aspects of Renaissance culture and society.

Università di Firenze (Luca Degl'Innocenti)
Istituto storico italo-germanico, Trento (Massimo Rospocher)