Dominion of the Ear: Singing the Vernacular in Piazza San Martino

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IT IS PROBABLY SAFE to say that most Florentines of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries learned what they knew of the world by hearing about it. Outside of a small group of well-educated readers, most learned about history, theology, science, geography, mythology, literature, and even the breaking news of the hour by hearing it from preachers, orators, heralds, and the ceaseless chatter and storytelling that coursed through home, workshop, and public space. Even much of the material that found its way into the city’s countless literary scrapbooks (zibaldoni) bears the stamp of orality, having been either transcribed from live performance or intended for storage in memory as fodder for future oral delivery. It was a loquacious and sonorous world that increasingly demanded various kinds of rhetorical skill on both sides of the oral discourse, and this torrent of talk was born along by a Tuscan vernacular that was quickly coming of age as a vehicle of eloquence. But to the great extent that we study this discourse through its written residue, we receive a problematic and incomplete picture of Florentine oral culture and of the practice and development of Tuscan vernacular. One of the least-understood performers in this oral discourse was also one of its purest practitioners, the oral poet who for over a century delighted, instructed, and moved Florentines in song and verse at an unlikely location in the heart of the city.

During the course of the late fourteenth century, a relatively small piazza in the center of Florence, situated in the dense urban cluster between the Cathedral and the Palazzo Vecchio, emerged as the primary venue for the public performances of the city’s canterini (or improvvisatori). Sporadic references beginning...
in the thirteenth century suggest that similarly favored sites for public performance developed in other cities, but in fact Piazza San Martino is the only one for which there is clear evidence of a continuous use and well-established tradition.\textsuperscript{1} It is surprising, therefore, that no serious effort has been made to trace the history or significance of San Martino, which can begin only when we move beyond our anachronistic and largely negative perception of the phenomenon as the conjunction of an “unwritten” practice with an unbuilt space.

There is some confusion about the exact location of this piazza, as there were two adjacent piazzas that have borne the same name. The small piazza currently named San Martino is so named for the charitable confraternity, the Buonomini di San Martino, that opens on to it. The confraternity was founded in 1442 by Archbishop (and later Saint) Antoninus to serve the poveri vergognosi, the “shamed poor,” and one may wonder how these proud but temporarily impoverished Florentines would have felt about receiving food handouts in one of the most public places in the city, if indeed this piazza was the arena of the canterini.\textsuperscript{2} Just to the west is the currently named Piazza dei Cimatori, which earlier was called the Piazza San Martino del Vescovo, or Piazza del Convento di San Martino, after the ancient parish church of San Martino that faced this piazza (the other piazza bearing the name “seconda piazzuola di San Martino”).\textsuperscript{3} This in fact is the freestanding church depicted in the Codex Rustici compiled by Marco di Bartolomeo Rustici around 1444; the faint remains of its central arch are still visible on the eastern wall of this piazza.\textsuperscript{4} Its founding in 986 and subsequent donation to the monks of the nearby Florentine Badia were associated with the bishop of Fiesole (hence the name “dal vescovo”), and it continued to function as an important parish church until 1479, when the parish was sup-


\textsuperscript{3} Walther Limburger, Die Gebäude von Florenze: Architekten, Strassen und Plätze in alphabetischen Verzeichnissen (Leipzig, 1910), appendix. The Piazza had been renamed “dei Cimatori” by 1783.

\textsuperscript{4} For the Rustici image, see Giovanni Fanelli, Firenze architettura e città, 2 vols. (Florence, 1973), 2:65. There can be no certainty that Rustici’s image is an accurate depiction of San Martino; on the cultural context of his codex, see Kathleen Olive, “The Codex Rustici and the Fifteenth-Century Florentine Artisan,” Renaissance Studies 23 (2009): 593–608.
pressed and joined to that of San Procolo and its building divided into two sections, the western part given to the Buonomini, the eastern part to the Compagnia dei Sarti.⁵

It must have been this second piazza, with its ancient social anchoring in one of the primary parish churches of the late medieval city, that was the site of public singing.⁶ Performance activity at San Martino is datable to the late fourteenth century, if not earlier, well before the foundation of the Buonomini, making this other piazza a more obscure and less likely venue before 1442. The parish piazza was also at the center of the city’s most important wool-processing district, the Por San Piero district. The artisans of the many botteghe in this area were the primary producers and consumers of the popular poetry heard at San Martino, and the audiences, whom we know to have been a mix of artisans and patricians, no doubt included the wealthier patrons and buyers who had reason to visit this area regularly. The nearby workshops were an essential component of the San Martino phenomenon, and it is not difficult to imagine some of the improvisations made public in the piazza being given a first hearing among a small circle of friends in a nearby bottega.⁷

It is not clear where a canterino of the generation of Antonio Pucci (1310–88) would have performed. Pucci’s jab at public singers of verse who performed in various disreputable places suggests that in the midtrecento there was as yet no consensus.⁸ The earliest known reference to the performances at San Martino occurs in the commentary of Filippo Villani (1325–1407) to the first canto of Dante’s Inferno. When Virgil first speaks to Dante, he introduces himself as “poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto/ figliuol d’Anchise,” and it is Virgil’s “I sang” that drew forth Villani’s digression on the contrast between ancient song and the

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7. The most frequently recorded profession among the city’s public poets is that of barber: Antonio da Bacchereto recorded in 1459 that he gave up his trade as a barber to become a full-time canterino; Marco Villoresi, “Note e divagazioni sul canterino Antonio di Giovanni da Bacchereto (ca1425–90),” Medioevo e rinascimento 13 (1999): 231–47, 233–34. The city’s most notorious popular poet, Burchiello, was a barber, and its most famous canterino, Antonio di Guido, followed his father’s footsteps when he was inscribed in the Arte dei medici e speciali as a barber in 1441; Lorenze Böninger, “Ricerche sugli inizi della stampa fiorentina, 1471–1473,” La Bibliofilia 105 (2003): 225–48, 232.

8. Le Noie, lines 79–81, in Rimatori del Trecento, ed. Giuseppe Corsi (Turin, 1969), 883: “A noia m’ è che è dicitore / dica per rima in luogo disonesto / e chi nel priega li fa poco onore.”
“inhonesta” and “turpia” singing to be heard in “area Sancti Martini” (a proto-humanist trope on the decadence of modern culture in relation to antiquity). The commentary was probably composed near the end of Villani’s life, during circa 1391–1405 when he had assumed Boccaccio’s place as reader of Dante at the Florentine Studio, and seems to describe a practice that was already well established by this time. That he should take a negative view of the place is no surprise, given that the self-important old scholar was prime fodder for the savage caricatures that were part of the ritual of San Martino. In La Buca di Montemorello, a long terza rima poem almost certainly tied to the San Martino environment, Stefano Finiguerri (“Il Za”) created a series of such portraits, including a sketch of Villani as a bewildered and pedantic dotard.

The fifteenth century was the golden age of public performances at San Martino, when the venue acquired prestige, and an increasingly professionalized class of canterini were drawn to it. Scattered among letters, tax reports, and poetry rubrics are dozens of references to the poets/singers who “canta [no] in panca in San Martino” (who sing on the bench at San Martino). Andrea da Barberino, who was described in one source as “Maestro Andrea che chantò in Sa’ Martino,” probably began his poetic career there well before his death in 1431/3. Antonio di Guido, the most famous public singer of the time, made his debut there as a young singer in 1437 and was still performing there in the 1480s when Michele Verino heard him “singing the wars of Orlando” in “vico Martini.” The rubrics for his small but often-copied corpus of poems that survive in writing invariably refer to him as “Maestro Antonio che chanta in San Martino.”


10. Antonio Lanza, Polemiche e berte letterarie nella Firenze del primo Rinascimento, 1375–1449 (Rome, 1989), 294–95: “Giunsevi de’ Villan tutto ismarrito / messer Filippo, ed era in pelliccione, / e dove era il mio Tier se ne fu ito, / dicendo:—Tier, tu sai mie condizione: / io sono stato un pezzo allo spedale; / E Tier li disse:—Predicar non vale, / ché se lasciai lo spedale e ’l letto / facesti bene, e questo sare’ male. / La buca vi guardà d’ogni difetto, / potrebbe’ esser ch’aresti due balle / d’oro massiccio, e anco vel prometto—/ Raddoppiogli la forza in sulle spalle, / e disse a Tieri:—I’ son tuo servidore / e seguoritelli per monte e per valle—“ (III 64–78).


12. For example, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (hereafter BML), Conventi soppressi 109, fol. 18v.
The Florentine most closely involved with San Martino was Michele di Nofri del Giogante (1387–1463), an accountant, poet, and close friend of the Medici who acted as a kind of teacher and impresario for the performances there. In 1435, shortly after the great canterino Niccolò Cieco d’Arezzo moved to Florence with Michele’s help, the two had a falling out when Michele made unauthorized transcriptions of some poems Niccolò recently “cantava in San Martino.” In 1454, Michele wrote to Cosimo’s son Piero de’ Medici requesting assistance for the family of a teenaged boy, one Simone di Grazia, whom he had “already put to singing improvisations on the bench at San Martino.” He went on to remind Piero of the boy’s performances at a private dinner party, when the latter had brought with him “a pleasing little book I had made for him, and he had sung a good part of the material written in it at San Martino, including a little work maestro Niccolò Cieco performed as a motet at San Martino.”

The venue and its poetic material were well known to Michele’s Medici patrons; Michele prepared a collection that he “made at the behest of my more than superior Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici,” which contained “certain additions which you will see that I found over time, and we know where: from that source from which these things always spring, and known to all the crowd.”

The last professional canterino to make San Martino his primary venue was Cristoforo Fiorentino, “L’Altissimo,” who performed there during ca. 1480–1515. Two works from this period are explicitly tied to San Martino, his Rotta di Ravenna (following a battle that took place in 1512), which was “sung in San Martino of Florence all’improviso by the Florentine poet Altissimo, poet laureate, copied from live performance by various persons while he sang,” and his much longer Primo libro de’ Reali, a cantare that occasioned ninety-four appearances at San Martino spread across a year (1514–15), according to a more or less regular calendar.

We hear little about San Martino after Cristoforo departed for Venice in 1515, and his great popularity may have sustained the site through the waning days of

15. These verses are part of Michele’s dedicatory poem; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (hereafter BNC), Mgl. XXV, 650, 1r (flyleaf); trans. and discussed in ibid., 73, and Dale Kent, “Michele del Giogante’s House of Memory,” in Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence, ed. William Connell (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 110–36, 118–19: “fatto . . . con certe agiunte qual vedrai ch’i’ piglio / col tempo aute donde noi sapiamo, / là dove sempre germinò tal fonte, / palese all’universo.”
the Florentine republic and during a period when print had begun to change the
way poetry was disseminated in Italy. But for nearly a century and a half, this
unique physical space was the focal point of a vital popular literary culture, one
recorded in an enormous body of poetry and prose but that was quintessentially
oral and expressed through performance at this site. What we know about it
suggests a scene quite different from what most might imagine today. The best
performers aspired to and prepared for their appearances there, and benches ar-
rayed in the piazza could probably accommodate a crowd of one to two hundred
(including standing room). The performer mounted a bench, or panca, which
might have been either a stone bench built into the wall near the entrance to the
church of San Martino or a freestanding platform or a combination of the two.
A Florentine woodcut originally produced as the frontispiece for the first edition
of Luigi Pulci’s Morgante depicts an attentive crowd on rows of benches, with a
well-dressed canterino, lira da braccio in hand, seated well above the heads of
his audience (see fig. 1).17 We know the San Martino audiences were similarly
arrayed on benches, and in fact it is difficult to imagine any Florentine space but
San Martino that could have inspired this image.18 The acoustics of the small
piazza, completely surrounded on all sides as it was, would have worked both
to shut out the noise from without and to amplify a performer’s voice and in-
strument. However, any extraneous noise from the audience or adjacent streets
could easily disrupt the performance, but a performer surely commanded the at-
tention (and subsequent payments) of his audience by the skill and charisma of
his performance. The audience in the Morgante woodcut does not look like a
group that suffered fools or mediocre performers lightly, and one would expect
no less from a tough-minded and sharp-witted Florentine borghese.

The public performances at San Martino, along with other manifestations of
Florentine public life like the sacre rappresentazioni, outdoor preaching, and the
city’s many feste, might also be understood as the result of transformations of the
city’s late medieval politics and urban fabric. During much of the twelfth and thir-
teenth centuries, the old center was a cluster of wooden houses, parish churches,
and the towers of the feudal nobility who dominated the neighborhoods and whose
need for security and enclosure had shaped these areas into twisted labyrinths
of narrow passageways, blind alleys, and tiny piazzas.19 By circa 1300 most of

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17. Among the many reproductions of this woodcut, see James Haar, Essays on Italian Poetry and
18. Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici, 44; Rodolfo Renier, ed., Strambotti e sonetti dell’Altissimo (Turin,
1886), xi: “ma lo havere io di voi le banche piene.”
19. The character of these neighborhoods at this time rendered them utterly unsuitable for public
gatherings; see Paula Lois Spilner, ”Ut Civitas Amplietur: Studies in Florentine Urban Development,
the wooden structures had been destroyed by fire and civil war, the towers symbolically cut back to fifty braccie (26.5 meters), and civic building was underway throughout the city on an astonishing scale: the fourteenth-century city was transformed by the construction of a new cathedral, two large palaces to house the civic government, a new prison, the guild palaces, the huge convents of the mendicant orders, the Orsanmichele grain market and oratory, and a new set of city walls that expanded its area from 200 to 1,500 acres. Integral to the new urban planning were piazzas that, like those of the new cathedral and the Palazzo Vecchio, were carved out at the great expense and effort of the communal government to raze and relocate the property of citizens and churches. In particular, the construction of the civic government complex (the Palazzo Pubblico, Loggia de’ Lanzi, and Piazza della Signoria), removed as it was from the city’s centers of commerce (the Mercato Vecchio) and religion (the cathedral), constituted an especially bold formulation of the city’s new corporate and institutional order, and it has compelled scholars to view the piazza as a quintessentially communal space within this re-

1282–1400,” 2 vols. (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1987), 1:26: “The advantages of free circulation and accessibility inherent in the original Roman plan were eschewed in favor of the security afforded by enclosure, by the frustration of continuous passage, and by the isolation of clusters of buildings focused inward on protected spaces.”
mapped urban setting. Deliberations of the priorate regarding the piazza reveal practical reasons for such a space: an appropriate setting for civic ceremonies like the handing over of the banners of the civic militia to its gonfaloniers, for the occasional public parlamento (or concio), and for the swearing in of civic officials like the Podestà, Captain of the People, the Priors, and the Gonfalonier of Justice but also a space adequate to the mustering of the civic militia during periods of civic unrest. Trachtenberg has argued for the piazza as part of the “architectural apparatus for the spatiovisual production of power” by the regime (a “dominion of the eye”), but Milner has taken issue with the passivity imputed to the piazza occupants by this argument and posited a more dynamic “intersection of communication, knowledge, and power” mediated through the ringhiera, the raised platform constructed on the exterior of the Palazzo and opening onto the piazza.

Piazza San Martino was no such place of deliberate public planning, civic contestations of power, and formalized rhetoric. Its character, in fact, derived from both its proximity to such gathering places and its sufficient distance from these more regulated environments of official religious and governmental business. Even when the bustle of construction was not underway in the large piazzas, they were noisy, open spaces ill-suited to the more intimate species of vernacular oratory being practiced in San Martino. And this was probably no less true of some of the older public sites, like the Mercato Vecchio and the Orsanmichele grain market.

San Martino was nevertheless the beneficiary of urban transformations that altered the entire center of the late medieval city. It was originally inhabited by two of the most fractious families in the city, the Cerchi (the remnant of whose tower is still to be seen on the south side of the piazza) and the Donati, whose legendary rivalry and clashes led, according to Dino Compagni, to the civil war between the Whites and Blacks in which Dante became embroiled. The area was a cluster of wooden houses, eventually destroyed by fire during the feuding.


21. Marvin Trachtenberg, Dominion of the Eye: Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence (Cambridge, 1997); Stephen J. Milner, “Citing the Ringhiera: The Politics of Place and Public Address in Trecento Florence,” Italian Studies 55 (2000): 53–82, 79. It was Trachtenberg’s compelling thesis in Dominion of the Eye that not only suggested the title of my article but helped me to theorize the early modern piazza as a deliberate cultural space and to understand the unique quality of San Martino as a public space resistant to usurpation by an elite special interest, where dominion of a different and more traditionally Florentine sort obtained.

22. On the location of the Cerchi and Donati enclaves, see Loris Macci and Valeria Orgera, Architettura e civiltà delle torri: Torri e famiglie nella Firenze medievale (Florence, 1994), 60.
and it was a warren of narrow passages intended to frustrate easy passage and favor inward-facing clusters of buildings that afforded the security of enclosure. It was, in other words, a most unlikely site of public gatherings of any kind.

By the early fourteenth century, the guild-based government had dealt with the area aggressively: the towers had been cut off at twenty-nine meters, and new streets were punched right through the middle of the Cerchi compound toward the palace of the podesta (the Bargello), with the intention of opening the area up to access by communal militia. Nonconforming families were literally attacked, and in his chronicle Dino Compagni describes having led a militia to destroy the Galigai enclave in the neighborhood. During the fourteenth century, the area was transformed into the most prestigious and profitable of the city’s four districts devoted to the production and sale of wool, the Por San Piero district. This area alone was licensed by the Wool Guild to process fine English wool into the expensive luxury cloth that came to be known as “San Martino,” named for the parish church that faced this piazza. This made the area the richest commercial and artisan district in the city, and at the heart of the Wool Guild’s carefully controlled itinerary by which foreign buyers were conducted among the many workshops here was the Piazza di San Martino del Vescovo, as it had been called for centuries by this time. The ancient parish church of San Martino del Vescovo was one of the most important in the medieval city, so by 1400 the church and its piazza stood at the center of a thriving commercial and parish district.

No great monuments of civic or religious authority impinged on the area, and it was untouched by the wave of fifteenth-century palace building that transformed streets like Via de’ Ginori (behind the Medici palace) and Borgo degli’ Albizzi and that completely displaced the workshops of the wool district across the river. A 1525 census of the area shows that the streets feeding onto this piazza were still crammed with workshops whose artisans, proprietors, and customers had for over a century been the primary producers and consumers not only of wool but of the poetry heard at San Martino. With the pacification of the neighborhood, and its transformation into a center of Florentine artisan culture, it became a prime site for attracting a citizenry that was increasingly ha-

25. BNC, Nuove accessioni 987, fols. 98r–98v; here the piazza is called “la piazza del convento di san martino maggiore con cinque bocche,” while that of the Buonomini is “la piazza di San Martino con quattro bocche.”
bituated to the communal life of its piazzas and more closely identified with its political life.

The vast and varied literary repertory in which Florentines of all kinds engaged San Martino can thus be viewed not simply as a vague manifestation of a vital “popular culture.” Rather it forms a speculum of a shared discourse on a range of topics that reinforced Florentine identity on a variety of fronts and reveals the dynamic processes by which information and stories of all kinds were shaped, reshaped, and transmitted.\(^\text{26}\) Although often conservative and nostalgic, the literary practice at San Martino was hardly unreflective. The cantari are exemplary in this respect: Florentines, like citizens in many Italian cities, seemed never to tire of hearing about the deeds of the Carolingian paladins, a fascination manifested as well in both the Latin and volgare versions of Donato Acciaiuoli’s *Vita Karoli*, Ugolino Verino’s Latin poem *Carliade*, and the burlesque treatment of these stories in Pulci’s *Morgante*. The allure of these tales was, however, derived also from the capacity of the canterini and their audiences to “read” into them narratives of a particularly Florentine sort: the struggle against foreign usurpers of liberty, a fascination with the trappings of feudal culture as a traditional language of power, and even a belief in Charlemagne as one of the legendary founders of the city.\(^\text{27}\) The cantare thus proved to be remarkably adaptable, capable of absorbing an endless variety of new material through rifacimento and digression and, thus, of developing its own oral version of an intertextual practice. The pin-

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nacle (and perhaps limit) of the oral practice at San Martino was reached by Cristoforo “L’Altissimo.” Near the end of his Florentine career, between June 1514 and July 1515, he appeared in Piazza San Martino on ninety-four occasions, singing and re-creating from memory the 3,700 stanzas of his Primo libro de’ Reali. In this chivalric cantare, Cristoforo included some remarkable digressions, of the kind Florentine audiences had come to expect from their star performers; in this case, Cristoforo drew on elements from, among other sources, Leonardo da Vinci’s writings on hydraulics, an early theological treatise by Marsilio Ficino (Di Dio et Anima), and Johann Ketham’s well-known medical treatise, Fasciculus medicinae.28

As Antonio Lanza pointed out some time ago, one of the two misconceptions regarding the practice at San Martino is that the repertory was strictly “cavalleresco, amoroso, classico,” the other being the assumption that the piazza was frequented only by lowbrow illiterates.29 The images that linger in modern imagination are those put forward by early humanist scholars, whose own critical stances toward “texts” were diametrically opposed to the textual promiscuities of the oral poets and who were perhaps particularly defensive about the precarious status of Italian as a written literary language. During a visit to Treviso in 1304, the Paduan protohumanist Lovato de’ Lovati encountered a canterino in a piazza “roaring about Carolingian battle order and Gallic deeds.” In polished Latin verse Lovati described hearing “songs consigned to the Frank’s tongue, ruined with barbaric interruptions everywhere, songs with no plot, dependent on no thread . . . but the mob seemed to like them.”30

In a letter to Boccaccio written around 1364, Petrarch attacked both the trade and the character of these singer-poets: “You know this vulgar and banal breed that makes a living on words not its own; they have spread among us to the point of nausea. They are men of no great talent, but great memory and great drive and even greater effrontery, who frequent the palaces of rulers and powerful men, devoid of anything of their own, yet dressed in others’ verses. Whatever someone else has neatly said, especially in the vernacular, they declaim with inordinate

emphasize, seeking the nobility’s favor, money, clothing, and gifts.” Early quattrocento Florentine humanists were no kinder in their views of both the performers and their gullible audiences. In his Facezie, Poggio Bracciolini recounts the story of a man from Milan who, after hearing “one of those singers who sing the deeds of heroes recounting the death of Orlando,” returned home to his wife in tears and inconsolable to report: “Orlando is dead, the sole defender of Christians.” The next fable recounts a canterino who is heard performing the Trojan Wars, and when the singer announces at the end of his performance that he will return the next day to deliver the Mortem Hectoris, a transfixed listener offers to pay the canterino if he will agree to delay the death of such a great hero as Hector. The canterino delays the famous death until the poor fool runs out of money, whereupon Hector is promptly killed off and the fellow is left in a desperate state.

But this can hardly be taken as a widespread view, even among well-educated Florentines. Cristoforo described his audiences at San Martino as composed of “tante nobil persone,” and a particular fan of San Martino was the promising young humanist scholar Michele Verino, who sometime in the early 1480s was dazzled there by a performance of the “wars of Orlando” delivered by an aging Antonio di Guido. Among the most active patrons of the San Martino poets and performers were the Medici themselves, and Lorenzo not only practiced the canterino’s art but in his rare leisure moments sought out the company of Antonio di Guido and his lira da braccio.

The full breadth of the letteratura canterina heard at San Martino overlapped with that performed in the more specialized environments of the Palazzo Pub-

33. Ibid., 202. Although not Bracciolini’s intention, these stories also testify to the performative abilities of these canterini. It also bears emphasizing here that the Latin text refers quite clearly to the performers as singers (cantor) and what they do as both decantare and recitare, underscoring an important point: while at times these performers may have simply recited rather than sang, there is rarely a clear distinction, suggesting that what they did most often, if not always, was pitched singing with a flexible verbal rhythm that gave the impression of recitation (vs. “song”).
blico (especially during the mensa) and in private homes, and its expressive range, rhetorical strategies, functional variety, and social context constitute one of the most significant manifestations of civic culture in the city. As a “literature” inextricably linked to the personalities and performances of individual singers and to the immediate oral context of those performances, it is best approached as a component in what Zumthor called the “totalizing function” of oral performance: the performer, his “text,” the occasion, and the audience are so intertwined as to be inseparable.

It was the public dimension of San Martino as a piazza, a space controlled by no special interests, which guaranteed that the materia and the performers heard there would undergo a much broader dissemination. After Cristoforo’s Rotta di Ravenna was transcribed by hearers from live performances at San Martino, it was eventually printed (in 1516), as was his Primo libro de’ Reali, and the last chapter of his career unfolded in Venice, where a new generation of canterini would find new life in the interactive, hybrid world of oral performance and print. Antonio di Guido performed at San Martino throughout his nearly half-century career, but he was also to be found in the intimate circles of three generations of Medici from Cosimo to Lorenzo, and in the 1470s he was involved in the early Florentine book trade, specifically with the financing and sale of the first printed edition of Boccaccio’s Decameron. Most of the surviving poetry of Niccolò Cieco was composed before he moved to Florence around 1435, but redactions into manuscript of the blind canterino’s works appear to have taken place almost entirely in Florence. The fame of his San Martino performances was known to Giovanni Pontano in Naples long after Niccolo’s death in the 1440s, and his poetry flowed from San Martino transcriptions into the personal anthologies and zibaldoni of countless Florentines. The humanist poet and notary Alessandro Braccesi (1445–1503) recorded a sonnet “in laude Nicolo Ciecho,” and the well-known library of Giovanni Mazzuoli (Padre Stradino; ca. 1480–1549) included a book of “canzoni di maestro Niccolo Cieco.” Michele del Giogante was a veritable conduit of poetry and performers between San Martino and his

36. On the singers of the mensa, see Timothy J. McGee, The Ceremonial Musicians of Late Medieval Florence (Bloomington, IN, 2009), 92–97, 133–37.
wide circle of friends and patrons. That circle included Leon Battista Alberti and Piero de’ Medici, the cosponsors of the 1441 Certame Coronario in which Michele was a participant. The Certame was a juried competition among a select group of poets whose submissions on the topic of amicitia were to demonstrate the capability of Italian vernacular to rival Latin with respect to specific parameters such as invention, ornament, and the use of sentenzie. Notwithstanding the uncertain results of the competition, the event was a landmark in the history of the volgare. By the 1460s, the efforts of a new generation of Florentine literati to revitalize Italian as a language of culture had grown in intensity and sophistication; a product of this environment was the Raccolta Aragonese, an anthology of Tuscan poetry compiled under Poliziano’s supervision and delivered by Lorenzo de’ Medici to Federico d’Aragona around 1477. The collection included works by Niccolò Cieco, Michele del Giogante, and their contemporaries and signaled a broadened view of Tuscan literary achievement.

However, the Raccolta was but a precursor to one of the most significant chapters in the history of Tuscan lyric poetry, during which Lorenzo, Poliziano, and the other poets in Laurentian circles fused in their own poetry elements drawn from both the aulic and popular traditions represented in the Raccolta. The dissemination of this poesia strambottistica (or poesia rispettistica, named for the central role the ottava played in this tradition) within and beyond Florence was the work of Baccio Ugolini, Jacopo Corsi, and other Florentine poeti performativi. However much these humanist improvisers would claim ancient models for their practice of improvised and instrumentally accompanied performance of poetry, that practice descended directly from the oral practices of the San Martino environment. In a similar manner, Luigi Pulci’s Morgante constitutes a critical link between the oral cantari performed at San Martino, from which Pulci drew direct inspiration, and the literary exaltation of Carolingian epic in the works of Boiardo and Tasso.

42. Giovanni Bronzini, Tradizione di stile aedico dai cantari al “Furioso” (Florence, 1966). Wilson, “Canterino and Improvisatori.”
44. This was true, as well, of the primary accompanying instrument of the improvisatori, the nomenclature of which shifted gradually from “viuola” to the classically-inspired “lira da braccio,” although the instrument remained a product of local, vernacular culture without ancient precedent.
45. On the relationship of Morgante to Florentine canterino culture, including the role of Antonio di Guido in Pulci’s work, see Luca Degl’Innocenti, “Il poeta, la viola e l’incanto: Note sull’iconografia del canterino nel primo Cinquecento,” Paragone Letteratura 93–95 (2011): 141–56; and Orvieto, Pulci
As Peter Howard has observed with respect to the “aural space of the sacred,” fifteenth-century Florentines were accustomed to moving about their city, seeking out its public spaces, and having their visual imaginations stimulated by hearing the live voice, whether from preachers, heralds, political leaders, merchants, or a variety of public performers. San Martino was the manifestation of a Florentine oral environment that was at once local, vernacular, and reflective of the city’s social values and attitudes, in which “performers” of various kinds brought their own brands of eloquence to bear on audiences they were particularly adept at gauging. But unlike the piazzas fronting large churches, administrative buildings, or private palazzi, San Martino was not a “practiced place” where a dominant group sought to impose its symbols of authority, and it certainly was not a site where one could be tempted to speak of passive and politically disenfranchised crowds subject to a “dominion of the eye” that piazzas potentially afforded. The communal practice at San Martino was socially heterogeneous and intensely interactive, and whereas the Tuscan vernacular was the tool of eloquence elsewhere, it was singularly on display here, as a poetic language continually being forged and reforged, tried on a vast array of subjects, and dispersed through the operations of memory and transcription into writing. As Lorenzo de’ Medici and Poliziano tacitly acknowledged in the Raccolta Aragonese, if one wanted to hear the language at the wellsprings of its emergence, one could no better than visit “we know where, that source from which these things always spring, and known to all the crowd.”

medievale, 178–86. These works by Pulci, Boiardo, and Tasso were all printed while yet retaining their connection to the oral world of the improvvisatori, which suggests something of the complex relationship between oral and written dissemination that surrounded the cantari, a situation that drew some canterini into the print business; see James Haar, “From Cantimbanco to Court: the Musical Fortunes of Ariosto in Florentine Society,” in L’arme e gli amori: Ariosto, Tasso and Guarini in Late Renaissance Florence, ed. Massimiliano Rossi and Fiorella GiovanniSmeri Superbi (Florence, 2004), 179–97; and Marco Villoresi, “Zanobi della Barba, canterino ed editore del rinascimento,” in Picone and Rubini, Il cantare italiano fra folklore e letteratura, 461–73.

