

Leonardo's *Listener* (Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana): Power and Weakness of *la sorella della pittura*

Frank Fehrenbach
University of Hamburg

Scholarship on Leonardo's only male portrait (fig. 1) has focused on the complex questions of attribution and identification.¹ Similarities with the Louvre's *Virgin of the Rocks*, commissioned in 1483, confirm that it was executed at the beginning of Leonardo's stay in Milan. For the identification of the sitter, scholars have suggested, among others, Franchino Gaffurio and Josquin des Prez, both ducal court musicians at around the time the painting was created. Pietro C. Marani, on the other hand, argued for the musician, singer and actor Atalante Migliorotti, who accompanied Leonardo (if we follow the Anonimo Gaddiano) from Florence to Milan.² A portrait of the friend, born in 1466, is mentioned by Leonardo in a list of 1499 (Codex Atlanticus f. 888r), with the addition «che alzava la testa», which could refer to the man's gaze raised from the sheet of music. The painting is finished only in the area of the head; it has undergone profound changes of color on the torso and background; and the hand with the sheet of music was probably added somewhat later, presumably by Leonardo himself.

Let's take a closer look at the painting. The "rigid" orientation of the sitter has struck scholars because in Leonardo's other portraits (even in the earlier *Ginevra de' Benci*) he always follows what he himself later recommends in a well-known passage of the *Codex Urbinas*, namely to vary the direction of the gaze, face and chest in relation to each other in order to achieve «vivacità» (*Libro di Pittura* [LdP] § 357). But was the peculiarly "archaic" rigidity and therefore suppression of «vivacità» perhaps intended by Leonardo? The young man's gaze and face are turned toward a light source on the right outside the picture. He appears stern, lost in thought, melancholic. The eyes with their wide-open pupils, astonishingly

¹ For a detailed summary see P.C. Marani, *Lo sguardo e la musica. Il Musicista nell'opera di Leonardo a Milano*, in P.C. Marani (ed.), *Leonardo da Vinci. Il Musicista*, catalogo della mostra (Roma, Musei Capitolini), Cinisello Balsamo, Silvana Ed. 2010, pp. 15-45.

² P.C. Marani, *Leonardo. Una carriera di pittore*, Milano, Motta 1999, p. 165.

lustrous for Leonardo, seem to be filled with tears, as suggested by thin layers of lacrimal fluid at the lower eyelids. As in the Florentine portrait of *Ginevra de' Benci*, Leonardo elaborates on the inward-turned gaze that characterized fifteenth-century Flemish painting and that was particularly well known in Leonardo's time through the work of Hans Memling. In contrast to the attentive, insistent men portrayed by Antonello da Messina (who was courted by the duke of Milan in 1476),³ Leonardo's sitter appears absent-minded, even dreamy. Thus the painting provides an important bridge to the "lyrical" male portrait of Venice that will be developed after 1500, especially by Giorgione and his followers.⁴

However, Leonardo's sitter exhibits striking ambiguities. The pronounced softness of his skin, which is modeled by the warm light, and the minimally parted full lips⁵ correspond to the expression of "lyrical" absorption, but the bone structure of the face points at the same time to a strong and willful complexion. The emphatically tense *musculus masseter* on the cheek redoubles this impression. Leonardo's man is clenching his teeth.

In his extensive, masterful analysis of the painting published in 2010, Pietro Marani has situated the portrait in the context of Leonardo's Paragone debate. He attributes the sitter's melancholy to the transience of music and thus of human life itself.⁶ Marani's reference to Leonardo's texts on the Paragone opens up an interpretive perspective that I would like to expand further, even though the subject of the temporality of music can only be identified in Leonardo's extant manuscripts after 1500.⁷ However, Leonardo started to write down his reflections on the temporality of poetry and painting as early as 1490 ca. Moreover, as is well known, thoughts do not only emerge at the moment of their written formulation, and even less, one might expect, in the case of an exceptionally reflective painter like Leonardo.

Besides temporality and transience, to which I will return in a moment, Leonardo's painting anticipates at least two arguments of the Paragone. One is evident; the other is hidden in detail. The pronounced illumination of the figure from the right demonstrates how painting, unlike sculpture, is capable of producing its «own light» («porta per tutto [con] seco lume et ombra»; LdP § 38). The unfolded sheet, on the other hand, anticipates Leonardo's polemical reference

³ Cfr. M.T. Fiorio, «*Scrivi che cosa è anima...*». *Leonardo e Antonello a confronto*, in P.C. Marani (ed.), *Leonardo da Vinci. Il Musicista*, cit., pp. 47-59.

⁴ For this cfr. M. Koos, *Bildnisse des Begehrens. Das lyrische Männerporträt in der venezianischen Malerei des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts. Giorgione, Tizian und ihr Umkreis*, Emsdetten, Ed. Imorde 2006.

⁵ Cfr. P.C. Marani, *Lo sguardo e la musica*, cit., p. 45 («[...] nella bocca appena chiusa dopo il canto [...]»).

⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 22, 24.

⁷ E.g. Codex Atlanticus f. 382v-a. Cfr. Leonardo da Vinci, *Libro di pittura. Codice Urbinato Lat. 1270 nella Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, ed. by C. Pedretti, transcr. and comm. by C. Vecce, 2 voll., Firenze, Giunti 1995, 1, p. 153 (note to § 29).

to the fact that space must be fictitiously created by painting on a flat surface through perspective, whereas sculpture here receives help from nature («aiutata dalla natura»; LdP § 31): the sculptural body appears as what it is. Leonardo's addition that «l'altre cose invisibili artificiose» benefit from natural perspective as well (LdP § 37) is obviously aimed at music.⁸ Leonardo may have been referring to the acoustic effects created by the distribution of musicians in space.

The permanence of painting versus the transience of «la sventurata musica» (LdP § 29) is a central argument of the *Parte prima* of the *Libro di Pittura*.⁹ Upon closer examination, Leonardo's argument is multi-layered and complicated. When Leonardo talks about music, he refers to contemporary polyphonic music, which does not simply pass successively in time. Instead, within the flow of time, it constantly forms simultaneous chords that seem to linger in the air; Leonardo refers to them as «tempi armonici».¹⁰ He compares the temporal boundaries of these musical figurations to the contours of painted bodies (LdP § 29). Within its succession, music thus constantly creates simultaneous harmonies «in un medesimo tempo», which, like painting, are based on «proporzionalità» (here: of chords). Music – «sorella della pittura» (*ibid.*) – produces acoustic «corp[i] di molte membra» (LdP § 30) that are, however, always prey to the passage of time.

The sheet of music of the Milanese portrait has suffered greatly from overpainting and restoration. Various attempts to identify the musical composition have failed.¹¹ All that can be said is that the melody was written in white mensural notation and obviously indicates a change of rhythmic value in the lowest stave (note the abbreviation for *proportio tripla*). Whether the score includes one or more individual voices is difficult to say but it is certainly related to polyphonic music.

Temporality is already implied by the fragmentation of the melody on the small sheet of paper, and Leonardo's insistence on the sequence of successive «tempi armonici» could be reflected in the conspicuous folding of the paper. In Leonardo's *Paragone* texts, the paradigm of enduring painting is the beautiful countenance, the «angelico viso» (LdP § 21). Painted «divine bellezze» owe themselves to «divina proportione» (LdP § 27), and they are so overwhelmingly beautiful that the audience falls in love with paintings, not music (LdP § 23). This erotic criterion leads to a radical rejection of poetry: in his descriptions, the

⁸ Cfr. Ms L f. 79v; Windsor RL 19037v (Leonardo da Vinci, *Corpus degli studi anatomici*, a cura di Kenneth D. Keele e Carlo Pedretti, Firenze, Giunti Barbera 1983, f. 81v).

⁹ E.g. LdP §§ 23, 29, 30, 31b. Cfr. E. Winternitz, *La musica nel "Paragone" di Leonardo da Vinci*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Ed. 1972, *passim*.

¹⁰ Cfr. A. Marinoni, «Tempo armonico» o «musicale» in *Leonardo da Vinci*, «Lingua nostra» 1955 (16/2), pp. 45-48; P. Macey, *Some thoughts on Josquin's "Illibata dei virgo nutrix" and Galeazzo Maria Sforza*, in A. Clement and E. Jas (eds.), *From Ciconia to Sweelinck. Donum natalicium Eillem Elders*, Amsterdam, Editions Rodopi B.V. 1994, pp. 111-124.

¹¹ Cfr. esp. S. Clercx-Lejeune, *Fortuna Josquini. A proposito di un ritratto di Josquin des Prez*, «Rivista musicale italiana» 1972 (VI/3), pp. 315-337.



1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Ritratto di Musico*. Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana. © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Paolo Manusardi/Mondadori Portfolio

poet proceeds like a painter who successively shows only one single detail of a portrait at a time; or like *music*, in which one would sing each voice separately, and one *after* the other (LdP §§ 32, 21)!

In his peculiar ambivalence between permanent, immobile absorption (the unidirectionality of torso and head, the resting gaze, the clenched teeth) and

transient moments (the gleam of the eyes, the minimally parted lips, the slit on the robe indicating breath, the delicately presented score), the young man in Leonardo's painting appears not as an interpreter but rather as a recipient of music similar to the one notated on the paper. Is he contemplating the music that has just faded away? Or is he shown, literally "enlightened", at the moment of musical inspiration, evoking the composition written down on the sheet of music in his *fantasia*?

In two places in the *Codex Urbinas*, Leonardo confesses his admiration for the power of music. It makes its listeners completely powerless, rendering them "half dead" («semivivi»), overwhelmed by admiration («con stupente ammirazione»; LdP § 21). Unlike poetry, the «suavi melodie», the «dolcezza of music» have a power comparable to that of painting to enchain the audience: «[...] essa divina armonia d'esso congiunto di membra, che spesso tolgono la libertà posseduta a chi vede. E la musica ancora fa nel suo tempo armonico le suavi melodie composte delle sue varie voci [...]» (LdP § 32).

In the young man's expression, power and weakness, impetus and fugacity of music are manifested at the same time. This corresponds to the ambivalent evaluation of music in the *Libro di Pittura*. The absorption of the sitter is equally an expression of a reflection on the transience of music as it is an expression of an aesthetic *raptus* through music. In this perspective, the man's melancholy is also an effect of music itself; note the *descending* melodic line in the lowest staff! The man struggles for composure: he clenches his teeth, his lips are about to part, his eyes fill with tears. More adequately, he should be identified as a "listener", rather than a "musician". Precisely because of its ambiguity and its rigidity, the painting qualifies as an early masterpiece of Leonardo's in the way it renders complex «moti mentali» visible.

The affective power of music, alas, makes its transience all the more painfully apparent. Still, music is able, as the painting confirms, to move its listeners to tears. Painting fails to cause this «maggior accidente», as Leonardo will state in an enigmatic passage around 1500 (LdP § 25).¹² Leonardo's practice as a painter will have to measure itself against this effective power of the sister art, with the promise to overcome the short life of music, its inclination to death. The goal is clear, and it is difficult: to create a non-vanishing, overwhelmingly beautiful, visible polyphony.

I would like to thank Jasmin Mersmann, Klaus Pietschmann and Ivana Rentsch for their invaluable advice and Matthew Vollgraff for the correction of the English text.

¹² «Ma il pittore moverà a riso, ma non a pianto, perché 'l pianto è maggior accidente che non è 'l riso». Cfr. Leonardo's early project to study the psycho-physiology of tears, Windsor RL 19038.