Preface

The poetic transcriptions, translations, and music examples presented here are meant primarily for study and not as critical editions of the texts. Some basic editorial principles have been followed. In the Italian texts, most spellings have been modernized, as has the historical practice of capitalization of some nouns save in circumstances in which the meaning is ambiguous or obscured. Similarly, accents have also been omitted to follow modern practice except where they are necessary to clarify the presence of certain verb forms.

Many of the music examples, the pieces for solo voice in recitative style especially, do not have consistent bar lines in their original prints. The transcriptions given here follow bar lines present in the partbooks, if any, and otherwise provide them at the breve or semibreve to clarify the musical and poetic lines. Repeated accidentals are given just as they appear in the partbooks and where they are not, the convention of holding an accidental through the end of a bar applies. No *basso continuo* figures, other than those appearing in the original prints, have been added.

Prologue

Johannes Vermeer's 'The Love Letter' is remarkably small, a mere 44 cm by 38.5 cm, yet remarkably curious. The painting depicts a richly dressed woman and her maidservant in what appears to be a domestic space (Figure 1). The perspective is unusual. The viewer is not in the same room as the subjects, as the foreground of the painting is an open doorway with a drawn curtain revealing the brighter scene in the next room. To the right of the darkened doorway is a chair upon which rests crumpled sheets of music; to the left is a large map along the wall. The seated woman is holding a cittern in one hand, as if she were playing but a moment ago, and an unopened letter in the other. She looks up at her maidservant with an expression which could convey both relief and anticipation. The painted seascapes above her head suggest that the letter comes from afar and from someone very important to her. While the situation implies that the maidservant has just delivered the letter to her lady, the musical imagery in this painting may also suggest the opposite: that the women has just composed the letter and is reticently handing it over to be sent. Regardless, the viewers are not permitted to know the contents of the letter; we can only make assumptions based on the details of the scene that may come together as any number of epistolary circumstances.[1] There is certainly a story

[1] Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, p. 142.

Figure 1 Johannes Vermeer, 'The Love Letter' (*c*.1669–70), Rijksmuseum

here, but the curiousness of the image does not settle onto one interpretation alone.[2]

It was during the early modern period, the time of Vermeer's painting, that the groundwork for modern postal services was established, particularly in nations with distant territories that depended on timely correspondence for trade and economic prosperity.[3] The colonial expansion of such maritime powers as the Venetian, British, and Dutch empires made commercial and diplomatic

[2] Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, p. 196. 'The pictures depict the form that social intercourse took but serve as a device that permits the Dutch artist to avoid its narrative dimensions.'
[3] See Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post* and Garfield, *To the Letter*.

correspondence indispensable and, as a consequence, created the channels by which private correspondence too became ubiquitous in the domestic sphere.[4] Letters, amorous or otherwise, are especially prominent in Dutch painting at about mid century. The domestic scenes of Gerard ter Borch (1617–81) and Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) very often depict people, women especially, writing letters and reading them, with various others there to hear and overhear their contents. Musical instruments, recently played, are very often nearby in these paintings, as symbols of domesticity perhaps, but also of transience and the exchange of voices over distances great and small.

One rather devastating painting by Pieter Codde (1599–1678), 'A lady seated at a virginal holding a letter', depicts a woman in a black silk dress with her back turned to the viewer, seated at a virginal.[5] Her head is lowered towards the keyboard and her gleaming pearl earrings are just visible. Her right arm hangs listlessly by her side, while the other rests on the back of a chair, turned in front of the instrument. In her right hand is a recently read letter and nearby is a viola da gamba that leans against the table. The unsettling scene implies that her mournful gesture has something to do with the letter's contents, which are unknown to the viewer. The two musical instruments do not merely imply that music-making might occur in this space; the letter creates a discord because the viola da gamba remains, perhaps permanently, without a player. Countless other paintings of the period give similarly intriguing glimpses into the daily lives of men and women and unite, in mysteriously compelling ways, letters with music.

Although epistolary communication fundamentally involves two parties – the writer and the recipient – letter paintings of early modernity tacitly serve to create a third perspective: that of the viewer, which complements and complicates the nature of the communication. Vermeer's paintings depict scenes of private intercourse, and letters may be assumed to contain the most private and revealing of thoughts. But letters were seldom private matters. The significance of music in these paintings is no doubt symbolic of voices exchanged in the absence of the other, but it may also be practical if, as this study shows, letters could themselves be sung to accompanying music. Not only was there a rich tradition of letter-writing manuals printed in Dutch during the seventeenth century, the poetic trope of the *Dichtbrief* – poetic letters – seems to have run in tandem with it.[6] The connection between music and letters is perhaps literal

[4] Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, p. 197.
[5] The painting is in a private collection; an image of it can be found on the Christie's listing found here: www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4684697. See also Sutton, Vergara, and Jensen Adams, *Love Letters*, pp. 84–85.
[6] See Sutton, Vergara, and Jensen Adams, *Love Letters*, pp. 27–41.

as well as symbolic. The cittern in Vermeer's painting has more to do with the letter than one might initially assume. Letters themselves, though seemingly silent, were also musical.

What Is a Musical Love Letter?

The musical love letter, or *lettera amorosa*, was a distinct subgenre of secular vocal music in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It coincided with the increase in personal epistolary exchange during this period. Its roots however extend back to antiquity, both in its form as poetry rather than prose and in its conspicuous play on representational ambiguity (see Section 1). The *lettera amorosa* transforms epistolary communication into a public performance. Not only does it deliberately confuse the *personae* of writer and recipient – who is it that performs the letter? – it also places the listener in an unusual position. Like the viewer of Vermeer's painting, the listener of a *lettera amorosa* is somehow implicated in the scene.

It is perhaps not surprising that the *lettera amorosa* is difficult to define. The musical performance of epistolary poetry by way of improvisation may have begun many centuries before the genre was circumscribed. Even after the first instances of notated musical letters at the turn of the sixteenth century, the large stylistic, textural, and formal variety of the genre suggests no clear musical parameters by which to define it. The epistolary cantatas of the mid eighteenth century are for instance a far cry from the *frottole* of the early 1500s (see Sections 5 and 2). Even the poetry itself, although epistolary in some way, betrays widely different approaches to style and signification. To make matters worse, or better depending on one's perspective, the history of *lettere amorose* seems to run parallel to the mangled story of the term *rappresentativo* when applied to music. The famous love letters of Claudio Monteverdi were given the designation *in genere rappresentativo* ('in the representative genre') but there is no consensus, historical or contemporary, on what that is supposed to mean.[7]

A consistent definition for or application of such terms is perhaps less important than the conceptual and performative issues that such a debate raises. To understand the conceptual underpinnings of the *lettera amorosa* is to see it as a mode of musical expression in which representation itself is the subject. The 'representative' genre is one in which time, place, and perspective are deliberately ambiguous.

The term *stile rappresentativo* originates in the theories of the most famous musical academy of the late sixteenth century: the Florentine Camerata. Pietro de'

[7] There has been significant scholarly interest in issues of voice and representation in musicological studies focused on Italian secular music; see, for example, Carter, 'Beyond Drama', 1–46; Calcagno, *From Madrigal to Opera*; Murata, 'Image and Eloquence', pp. 411–22. See also Tim Carter's *Monteverdi's Voices*.

Bardi, son of the Camerata's noble patron Giovanni de' Bardi, wrote that 'il canto in istile rappresentativo' was first proposed by Vincenzo Galilei (1520–91), the accomplished composer, music theorist, and father of Galileo Galilei.[8] The *stile rappresentativo* is sometimes translated as 'the theatrical style', though there is no scholarly consensus about how it should be defined. This concept seems to be closely related to the Camerata's most influential contribution – recitative or *stile recitativo* – a musically heighted oratory, somewhere between speech and song, in which the natural inflections of a text were conveyed by a melody. This is of course the basis for Florence's greatest musical invention of the period: opera.[9] Confusingly, the term was used to denote theatre music, music for solo voice in the recitative style, five-voice polyphony, or, even more nebulous, music that represents something, usually a text, in a particularly dramatic or expressive way. If the *stile rappresentativo* was not really a style at all, why call it one? Musicians of the early seventeenth century, notably the theorist Giovanni Battista Doni (1595–1647) and even Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), insisted that 'rappresentativo' was in fact a special category of music, that it used the magical properties of melody to represent human emotion to the greatest degree of vividness and immediacy. Through Monteverdi, the term was associated with this curious subgenre of Italian secular vocal music at the turn of the seventeenth century: the *lettera amorosa*.

As mentioned, there is no clear stylistic unity in the repertory of epistolary music examined here. Monteverdi's love letters are lengthy pieces for solo voice in a declamatory style, whereas *lettere* by others are madrigals for several voices, duets, and other *concertato* pieces (see Section 2). In his *Trattato della music scenica* of 1633–5, Doni's valiant effort to distinguish three musical styles – *recitativo*, *rappresentativo*, and *espressivo* – illustrates a fundamental problem: some of the characteristics he uses to define these terms have to do with musical technique, others concern the theatrical *mise-en-scène*, and still others have more to do with delivery than anything inherent to the composition itself. In a passage from the eleventh chapter, he writes:

> But for 'representative', we should understand that kind of melody which is truly proportionate to the stage, that is, for every kind of dramatic action that one wishes to represent (the Greeks say μιμεῖσθαι imitate) in song. … Therefore it pleases me better to call this style accommodated to the stage

[8] From Pietro de' Bardi's letter to Giovan Battista Doni; see Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, pp. 15–17.

[9] The practice of musical recitative was for the Florentines a revival of singing practices from antiquity. It was a way to recapture the transformative power of the ancient Greek modes that were said to have powerful ethical and moral consequences for listeners.

> *rappresentativo* or *scenico*, rather than *recitativo*, because the actors . . . did not recite but represent the actions and human manners.[10]

The representative or theatrical style seems, quite logically, to be music appropriate for the stage and for imitating as opposed to narrating action. It will not come as a surprise then that the earliest example of the term can be found on the title page of Guilio Caccini's opera *L'Euridice* of 1600. The slightly later but quintessential example of music composed in this style was, supposedly, Claudio Monteverdi's opera *L'Arianna*, performed in 1608 in Mantua for festivities following the wedding of Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy.[11]

Unfortunately, most musical pieces bearing this title have little to do with opera, and many have a tenuous connection to staged drama, if at all. The situation with letters is particularly complex, since they seem to sit at a juncture between performing contexts, artistic media, and interpretive strategies. In a print from 1623, Monteverdi published Arianna's lament alongside two madrigals that had originally appeared in his 1619 Seventh Book of madrigals: these are given as 'due lettere amorose in genere rappresentativo' ('two love letters in the representative genre'). The distinction between style and genre may be telling, but its consequences are by no means obvious. As Section 3 illustrates, the texts of love letters *in genere rappresentativo* are similar to operatic laments in their subject matter, musical disposition, and psychological pacing, but *lettere amorose* exploit the vividness and emotional potency of the *genere rappresentativo* to a non-dramatic end: they reorient the lamenting lover towards stylized perspectival play.

Doni's interest in the *stile rappresentativo* can be explained in part because it is, supposedly, a special category of that great Florentine development: the *stile recitativo*. Despite its oblique relationship to the theatre, *rappresentativo* is often seen as a particularly emotive class of music for solo voice and continuo in the recitative style: the affections of one person represented in a verisimilar manner by one singer. Monteverdi's love letters – and those of several other seventeenth-century composers – are in fact written in affective recitative that, in many cases, is used to embody or represent the emotions of a particular person (see Section 4). Later in his treatise Doni employs

[10] 'Ma per Rappresentativa intendere debbiamo quella sorte di melodìa, che è veramente proporzionata alla Scena, cioè per ogni sorte di azione Dramatica, che si voglia rappresentare (i Greci dicono μιμεῖσθαι imitare) col canto, che è quasi l'istesso, che l'odierno stile Recitativo, e non del tutto medesimo . . . Più dunque mi piace di chiamare questo stile accomodato alle Scene, Rappresentativo, o Scenico, che Recitativo; sì perché gli Attori . . . non recitano, ma rappresentano; imitando le azioni, e costume umani.' Doni, *Trattato della musica scenica* (1633–5), *cap.* XI, p. 30, *Lyra Barberina* (1763), ii; trans. Carter, in Fabbri, *Monteverdi*, pp. 166–67.

[11] Monteverdi wrote to Alessandro Striggio in 1620 about Arianna being in the 'genere di canto rappresentativo' (Venice, 4 April 1620; L. 53).

a different strategy. He defines 'rappresentativo' not by some purely musical characteristic, which does not really work, but instead bases his classification on the type of poetry:

> Those who 'recite' are only those who utter narrative poetry (that is, in which the poet speaks in his own voice without introducing other characters) . . . but not in imitations, in which the poet's own voice does not appear, but instead the represented characters speak directly, like in dramas . . . since, as I said above, this is not really reciting, or recounting; but representing or imitating.[12]

Doni seems to acknowledge that we do not need to have a coherent plot to represent the speech and actions of characters musically; the indispensable element is rather a singer embodying a character instead of narrating action. However, the central conceit of musical love letters is that the performer may not be 'speaking' in their own voice, but that they may actually be relating the words of another person to an audience who knows only part of the story. Indeed, this is precisely why Doni criticized Monteverdi's *lettera amorosa* 'Se i languidi miei sguardi' for being a piece for soprano on a text clearly written from the male perspective. While letters may 'speak', they almost never speak for themselves. Any attempt to define the term 'rappresentativo' through poetic mode – as mimesis and not diegesis – is ineffective not only for the *lettera amorosa* but also for probably the most famous piece to bear this designation. Monteverdi's *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* from his Eighth Book (1638) is a madrigal in *genere rappresentativo* that sets poetry in the epic mode, and thus comprises text almost entirely in narrative.[13]

As far as musical love letters are concerned, *rappresentativo* is not really a style but rather a mode, a manner, a genre – *genere rappresentativo* – that transcends technique and spills over into the realm of performance and

[12] 'Perciocchè recitano solo quelli, che proferiscono Poesìe narrative (che sono quelle, nelle quali parla sempre il Poeta in persona sua, senza introdurre altri, che favellino, come Lucrezio nel suo Poema) o al più le miste (quali sono i Poemi eroici, e Romanzi, l'Eneide, la Gerusalemme, il Furioso &c. dove alcuna volta parla il Poeta, e spesso anco introduce altri a favellare) e non già imitazioni, nelle quali non apparisce la persona del Poeta; ma direttamente parlano i personaggi rappresentati, come in tutte i Drami, e in questi Dialoghetti, che hanno introdotto; e per la maggior parte nell'Egloghe di Vergilio, e di Teocrito: imperocchè, come io diceva di sopra, ciò non è veramente recitare, o raccontare; ma rappresentare, o imitare.' Doni, *Trattato della musica scenica*, *cap*. XII, pp. 31–32.

[13] It may seem less surprising, then, that in 1608 Aquilino Coppini used the term to describe five-voice madrigals: 'The representative music [*musica rappresentativa*] of Signor Monteverdi's Fifth Book of madrigals, governed by the natural expression of the human voice in moving the affections, stealing into the ear in the sweetest manner and thereby making itself the most pleasant tyrant of souls, is indeed worthy of being sung and heard.' Coppini, *Il secondo libro della musica di Claudio Monteverdi . . . fatta spirituale*; transcribed by E. Vogel; trans. Carter in Fabbri, *Monteverdi*, p. 105.

psychology. Similarly, the epistolary 'mode' of the musical *lettera amorosa* is distinguished by its complex performativity and the way it implicates different perspectives in representational ambiguity. The *genere rappresentativo* is entirely appropriate for the *lettera amorosa* not because it tends to be emotionally charged recitative, but because it is, musically, poetically, and performatively, a representational conundrum. The closest Doni gets to capturing this fascinating nexus of words, tones, and delivery is in the *Annotazioni* to his musical compendium which he compiled 'per amore de gl'Idioti' finally to clarify what he means by *rappresentativo*, now given as a synonym for *espressivo*:[14]

> *Espressiva* [*rappresentativa*][15] then endeavours to express the affections; and in some places those natural accents of emotive speech: and it is this that has the greatest power over the human soul since, when it is accompanied by vivid actions, and by a speech proportionate to the subject, it marvellously provokes smiles, tears, distain, etc.[16]

[14] Doni had made a tripartite classification between *recitativo*, *espressivo*, and *rappresentativo* but here the latter two are conflated and the types of recitative (which he also calls 'lo stile monodico') are re-classified as *narrativo*, *speciale recitativo*, and *espressivo*.

[15] Doni, *Annotazioni sopra il compendio de' generi, e de' modi della musica*, p. 60; 'l'Espressivo, che altri dicono Rappresentativo'.

[16] Doni, *Annotazioni sopra il compendio de' generi, e de' modi della musica*, pp. 61–62; 'Nell'Espressiva dunque si fa professione di bene esprimere gli affetti; & in qualche parte quegl'accenti naturali del parlare patetico: e questa è quella ch'hà grandissima forza ne gl'animi humani: a segno che, quando è accompagnata d'una vivace attione, e d'un parlare proportionato al soggetto, maravigliosamente commuove il riso, il pianto, lo sdegno, &c.'

1 Voices of Antiquity

The answer to your question is that nothing is more useful than this art that has no usefulness.[17]
—Ovid

In a comedy by Antiphanes from the fourth century BCE the poet Sappho begins with a riddle. 'What creature is it', she asks her companions, 'that is female in nature and hides in its womb unborn children who, although they are voiceless, speak to people far away?'[18] When no one provides the correct response, Sappho answers the riddle herself: the creature is a letter. Its children – the alphabetic letters contained within – remain silent to those close by and yet communicate with those who are distant.[19] Sappho's riddle suggests that letters can be paradoxes of communication. They 'speak' and yet their words seem to defy both physical distance and sensory medium. They belong, presumably, to the writer but depend on a reader. Lying at the heart of Sappho's riddle is the curious suggestion that orality, or, more specifically, vocality, is both inherently absent from and necessarily present in epistolary communication. The writer in this case effectively 'borrows' the voice of the reader, while the reader 'hears' that of the writer. Although more recent times, our own perhaps more than ever, have given almost exclusive rights to silent reading, letters – in all their various forms – reveal that the historical predominance of reading aloud was not merely a matter of practicality or convenience. The performance of letters, their transformation from something seen to something heard, had remarkable consequences for the way they mediated human connections.

The diversity of epistolary genres – from actual correspondence, through fictional letters, to epistolary novels – testifies to the intricate and reciprocal channels of communication that letters could create. Letters did not simply convey practical information, although that was certainly one of their functions. The history of letters, love letters in particular, is also one of ambiguity,

[17] 'Cum bene quaesieris quid agam, magis utile nil est artibus his, quae nil utilitatis habent'. From Ovid's letter to his friend Aurelius Cotta Maximus Massalinus (*Epistulae ex Ponto*, I. V. 53–54), quoted and translated in Ordine, *The Usefulness of the Useless*, p. 47. See also Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto, Book 1*, pp. 70–71.

[18] Sappho, Kassel–Austen fr. 194; trans. in Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 98; alternative translation in *Fragmenta Comica* (Göttingen, 2021), pp. 12–13. See also Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, p. 96.

[19] 'The female creature is the letter (epistle). The unborn children are the letters (of the alphabet) it carries. And the letters, although they have no voices, speak to people far away, whomever they wish. But if some other person happens to be standing right beside the one who is reading, he will not hear'; trans. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, pp. 96–97.

performativity, and even musicality. A personal letter in the twenty-first century may, upon initial consideration, appear as a relic of the past: a form of communication that was once ubiquitous but is now, for most intents and purposes, dead as a doornail. There may have been a time when emails were simply letters in electronic format, and text messages voicemails transcribed, but it did not take long for what was simply a method of transmission – electronic versus physical – to alter fundamentally the mode of expression.

Still, some have pushed back against the narrative that letters, paper correspondence, and mails, in general, are in terminal decline. Sociologist Liz Stanley has argued that while new technologies have perennially transformed the mechanisms of communication, a certain 'letterness' in written communications curiously endures, what she calls 'epistolary intent'.[20] For many historians, letters are still the primary windows into the activities of men and women of the past, and their obsolescence as a medium somehow makes them even more seductive. Without a clear practical function, letters can be romanticized simply as beautiful vestiges of a time wholly distant and unfamiliar. But their complicated relationship to time, place, and identity may help to explain their appeal and unwillingness to die completely. To write them now is to isolate and revel in their aesthetic facets, or to find the usefulness of the useless. This idea was one Nuccio Ordine found enduring in the work of artists and thinkers from Ovid to Victor Hugo.[21]

Letters, especially personal or amorous ones, involve a particular kind of distillation of the human experience. Unlike telephone calls or text messages which hold the promise of real-time communication, letters are more overtly mediated. They contain a kind of humanized synthesis of information that is by definition 'out of time' and sent to someone who is not there. They can provide biased accounts, analyses of emotions, and relate past events to present thoughts through the filter of hindsight. Letters tell stories of actions and reactions to events which may have changed over time and allow the past to simmer cerebrally with the present until the two are potentially indistinguishable. The early modern period, during which literacy rates began modestly to increase, witnessed the publication of countless manuals on letter writing, including detailed instructions on modes of address, practical conventions, and rhetorical strategies.[22] This should hardly come as a surprise considering that written

[20] Stanley, 'The Death of the Letter?' pp. 240–54. Stanley defines epistolary intent as something 'which involves the intention to communicate, in writing or a cognate representational medium, to another person who is "not there" because removed in time/space from the writer, and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response', p. 242.

[21] Ordine points out passages from such authors as Ovid (quoted at the outset of this section), Dante, Kant, Hugo, and David Foster Wallace, all of which find that utilitarian 'usefulness' is the surest poison for artistic expression.

[22] See Jensen, *Writing Love* and Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France*.