EARLY MODERN ANGELIC SONG
IN FRANCESCO PATRIZI’S *L’AMOROSA FILOSOFIA* (1577)*

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Introduction

When after years of frantic efforts the Italian Renaissance philosopher Francesco Patrizi (1529–1597) was finally appointed professor in Neoplatonic studies at the University of Ferrara, he found himself in one of the most prominent musical centres of Italy: the Ferrarese court. Here he got acquainted with the famous singer Tarquinia Molza, who was affiliated with this court as a professional musician. The story of her exceptional performance practice was recorded in Patrizi’s *L’Amorosa Filosofia* (1577), a philosophical treatise in the tradition of love treatises inspired by Plato’s *Symposium*. Given that Patrizi, contrary to Plato’s philosophy of love, assigned a prominent place to cosmic harmony as well as earthly music, *L’Amorosa Filosofia* can best be studied against the backdrop of another Neoplatonic tradition, the theory of the harmony of the spheres.

In this article, I will argue that the way in which Patrizi deals with cosmic harmony and earthly music in *L’Amorosa Filosofia* exemplifies a major transformation in the tradition of the harmony of the spheres. This tradition was an important component of the world picture in the Middle Ages as well as in early modern times, two historical periods which both determined Patrizi’s mind to a large extent. From Pythagoras in the sixth century BC, philosophers, scientists and musicians believed the universe was a stately, ordered, mathematical and

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1 One of the best introductions to Francesco Patrizi’s philosophy is given by Paul Oskar Kristeller in the seventh chapter of his *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: 1964) 110–126.
2 The first dialogue of the treatise reports a gathering in the style of Plato’s *Symposium* held at the house of Patrizio Patrizi in Rome, probably in autumn 1576. For background information on the dialogue as well as on the relationship between Francesco Patrizi and Tarquinia Molza, see the ‘Introduzione’ of J.C. Nelson’s edition of Patrizi’s *L’Amorosa Filosofia*, cod. Pal. 418, Biblioteca Palatina Parma (1577) v–xvi.
musical mechanism. The smooth operation of the cosmos created a
divine harmony which they sought to capture. Angelic song was the
main contribution of the Christian Middle Ages to the Pythagorean
doctrine of cosmic harmony.

Patrizi, who was acquainted with the majority of sources from this
tradition, used its vocabulary in his ode to his muse, Tarquinia Molza
(1542–1617). In fact, much of what is known of Tarquinia’s heavenly
musical performances is drawn from Patrizi, who taught her philoso-
phy and Greek. L’Amorosa Filosofia consists of four dialogues all con-
cerning la Molza, who acts as Patrizi’s muse for the exposition of a
new philosophy of love and cosmic harmony. The first dialogue is a
series of nine orations from a group of musicians, poets, clerics and
gentlemen praising Tarquinia’s many virtues and skills. Patrizi’s new
theory of the expressive capacity of the human voice to communi-
cate a kind of nonverbal knowledge about the harmonic structure of
the universe emerges in the first dialogue. Each of the interlocutors
compares Tarquinia Molza to one of the nine traditional Muses, pre-
senting her as a kind of exemplary intelligent, musical and beautiful
human being, who is familiar with the Classics and learned in all the
liberal arts, the mathematical disciplines and the physical sciences.
Patrizi expresses himself in the first part of his book in a conserva-
tive oration in which he sings the praises of Tarquinia’s intellect. His
speech addresses the influence of Saturn on the character of his muse,
which is so overwhelming that she is characterized as a rare example
of heavenly harmony on earth:

When we consider these things [i.e. the marvellous world order] as well
as the excellence of our Muse [Tarquinia Molza], we can truly say that
she is a perfect little world, adorned with all celestial, supra-celestial, and
even elemental harmonies, which, being a concord within her and being
offered to others as concordant, create a harmony that is unlike the one
that these gentlemen [in the eight preceding orations] have described,