

8.4. ARTE DELLA MEMORIA AND RHETORIC, SHORT VERSION¹

From where is coming this practice and how our colleagues in the Middle Ages and the *canterini* in 14th and 15th centuries and through them also the humanist *cantori ad lyram* learned this art?

[Canguilhem] The creative function of memory has been inspired by several ancient authors speaking about rhetoric, like Aristotle's book *De Anima*, Cicero's *De oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, and above all the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

Anna Maria Busse Berger and Angela Mariani wrote that improvisation and *inventio* are part of the process that is medieval music performance practice², and in order to do that, one must have a storehouse of memorized musical vocabulary, techniques, and repertoire on which to draw.

Thomas E. Binley writing about rhetoric says that ... the basic of the art have remained almost the same for centuries, ... they have been constantly improved, remodelled, expanded and renewed to meet many needs, including the communication in the creative arts, specially composing prose and poetry, and perhaps music.

[Mariani] Memory is most like a library of texts, made accessible and useful through various consciously applied heuristic schemes." Carruthers³ also points out that a commonly used metaphor for the "educated memory" was the Latin word *thesaurus*, which translates as "storage room," and that "the image of the memorial storehouse is a rich model of pre-modern mnemonic practice."...

[Mariani] The act of improvisation can also include some elements of preplanning. ... music theorist Steve Larson pointed out that separating the process of improvisation from the process of composition because of the supposed "instantaneous" aspect of improvisation is misleading.

Anna Maria Busse Berger refers to the memory storehouse as a memorial archive, drawing on the connection between composition and memory articulated by rhetoric scholar Mary Carruthers:

A scholar built up a memorial archive throughout his life from which he would draw in the process of composition. ... "Composition is not an act of writing," Carruthers says, "it is rumination, cogitation, dictation, a listening and a dialogue, a 'gathering' (*collectio*) of voices from several places in memory." But perhaps most importantly, [Carruthers] demonstrates that the same techniques that were used to memorize existing texts were also used to create new works.

[Mariani] The *Rhetorica's* author further divides the art of *inventio* into the "six parts" of a discourse. These are based on the art of persuasion, and at first glance they may seem to be

¹ This short concise version is based on paragraph 6.3.3 *Canterini, cantori ad lyram, arte della memoria* and rhetoric from 6th Chapter of my Compendium "ALL' IMPROVVISO".

² Also during the Renaissance and baroque periods.

³ Carruthers, Mary: *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1990).

more applicable to a lawyer's closing arguments than a musical composition. However, I have suggested a few analogies.

1. The *exordium*, or introduction, which prepares the listener, gets his or her attention, and provides a beginning
2. The *narratio*, in which the facts of the issue are stated, or the narration of events is given
3. The *divisio*, in which the speaker outlines the different views on the issue at hand or the main points that he or she is going to present
4. The *confirmatio*, in which the speaker builds his or her argument and bolsters it with convincing corroboration
5. The *confutatio*, in which the speaker refutes all opposing arguments
6. The *conclusio* or *peroratio*, which provides an artful end to the discourse, or, in our case, to the song or instrumental piece

Exordium, *narratio*, and *conclusio* have straightforward musical analogues.

We can compare the *exordium* to a prelude, or any introductory verse, stanza, or section. The *narratio* can be the stanzas that provide the background, topic, or theme of the lyric, ... The musical *conclusio* can take many forms; in medieval music, we often get a cadence that is very typical of the song's mode, a consonant fifth or octave cadence, or a lyric "punch line," such as the two-line *tornada* that ends a troubadour *canço*.

It is a bit more challenging to assign musical analogues to the *divisio*, *confirmatio*, and *confutatio*; the resulting interpretations can be highly subjective, although in later music it is tempting to draw parallels with certain aspects of functional harmony ...

In her book *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates⁴ gives an extensive discussion of the *Rhetorica*, explaining that the treatise names two kinds of memory, natural and artificial. Artificial memory is extremely important, ... This artificial memory can be developed by way of specific techniques, including the skill of establishing mental "places," or *loci*, and mental "images." A mental place can be defined as "a place easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an intercolumnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like."

Images, on the other hand, are "forms, marks or *simulacra* (simulations)" of what we wish to remember." This is not entirely separate from the act of learning something through the action of reading: "The places are very much like wax tablets or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of the images like the script, and the delivery is like the reading."

...

[Mariani] These mentally constructed loci can be created in any number of different ways and can be as diverse as the individuals creating them. The more personal they are, the

⁴ Yates, Frances A.: *The Art of Memory* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966)

more effective they will be for the individual using them. Mary Carruthers compares them to computer icons that “set in motion” a task:

A locational memory system is any scheme that establishes a set of ordered, clearly articulated, and readily recoverable background locations into which memory “images” are consciously placed. These images, often called agent images for they are active, function like the icons in a computer program in that they set in motion a task, the associative procedures of recollection. Within each background, discrete images can be grouped together in scenes, their number limited only by short-term memory. The images provide the associative cues to particular material; their “places” provide the relationship of their matters to one another. The power of this elementary technique is that it provides immediate access to whatever piece of stored material one may want, and it also provides the means to construct any number of cross-referencing, associational links among the elements in such schemes. It provides one with a random access memory [RAM] as well as schematics or templates upon which to construct any number of additional collations and concordances of material. ...

German musicologist Johannes Menke⁵ about rules of classical rhetoric, which flourished in the 16th century with the Renaissance and humanism. Rhetoric was ubiquitous in culture; every educated person knew her basic concepts.

Let's review the five stages in which a speech is constructed:

1. *Inventio* (Latin: invention or discovery). The topic is reflected upon, and argumentative strategies are developed, using the categorical system of *Topoi*, which provides specific search formulas for arguments, characteristics, and evidence.

2. *Dispositio* (Latin: arrangement, organization). The content and arguments of the speech are logically and purposefully arranged.

3. *Elocutio* (Latin: expression, formulation). This is the actual elaboration of the speech in detail and includes the ornate embellishment (Latin: ornatus) using figures (various linguistic devices) and tropes (forms of figurative speech such as metaphor or allegory).

4. *Memoria* (Latin: memory). The speaker memorizes his presentation, for which the authors provide tips and tricks.

5. *Pronuntiatio* (Latin: pronunciation, vocal delivery). This is the actual delivery of the speech, which ultimately decides the success through the use of facial expressions, gestures, and actions.⁶

The classical speech, therefore, was not improvised but meticulously calculated beforehand. Of course, a skilled speaker is also capable of drafting a speech extemporaneously. The more important the speech is to him, the more thoroughly they will prepare it. We know that ancient orators rehearsed their speeches almost like actors. However, there remains a stage that can always contain improvisational elements: the *Pronuntiatio*, the actual delivered speech.

⁵ Menke, Johannes: "ponere vel facere", Überlegungen zur Aufführungspraxis und Improvisation des Kontrapunkts in der Renaissance, Vortrag auf dem Leipziger Improvisations Festival 2013, 22. September 2013

⁶ And this is the point which interest us most, see about *Pronuntiatio* later.

In his book Blake Wilson⁷ gives a lot of space to the role the trained memory acted by professional *canterini* and *cantori ad lyram*:

The memory of a professional *canterino* was the storehouse for an astonishing array of materials, and the essentially oral and often improvisatory processes by which this material was transformed into what his audiences heard was governed by forces that inhered in these processes, such as combinatorial facility, fantasy, digression, interpolation, and repetition. Such works underwent a constant process of *rifacimento* (both in performance and in copying, which may have been simultaneous) ...

Those *cantari*, like Pucci's, or later the *Libro Primo de' Reali* by Cristoforo Fiorentino that emerged directly from this milieu are probably the closest record we have of Tuscan oral poetry at that time, and their fundamental expressive and structural modes share many qualities with the poetry of primary oral cultures, that is:

1. **mnemonic patterns**: rhythmic, balanced patterns (e.g., ottava rima), repetitions or antitheses, epithets and formulae ("vaga damigella," "un bel prato tutto pien di fiori"), standard thematic settings (a "palazzo fortissimo," a "selva oscura");

2. **additive style**: " ... e andò alla casa e ritrovò suo padre, e suoi fratelli, e suoi parenti cari ..." that generates continuity;

3. **redundancy**: repetition with variation of words, phrases, situations, or names vs. the sparse linearity of written discourse;

4. **cultural conservatism**: the same stories are told repeatedly, often with content that upholds accepted moral codes; originality resides not in new stories, but in managing the audience interaction anew each time;

5. **concretization**: the structuring of knowledge as immediate, specific, and "close to the human lifeworld" vs. abstract, analytic structuring made possible by writing;

6. **agonistic intonation**: oral discourse that is interactive, competitive, and contested vs. a written discourse abstracted from the arenas of human interaction and more focused on interior crises;

7. **empathetic/participatory**: transmission depends on personal connection vs. writing that fosters disengagement, objectivity;

8. **somatic**: discourse in oral culture never exists simply in a verbal context, but is inseparable from the physical context of performance: gestures, vocal inflections, facial expressions, etc.

Wilson about the Niccolò Cieco of Florence⁸ treatise on *arte della memoria*:

Niccolò passed on to Michele [del Giogante], with permission to transcribe it, something which may constitute his greatest legacy.

⁷ Wilson, Blake: *Singing to the Lyre in Renaissance Italy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019

⁸ Maestro Niccolò Cieco of Florence (or Arezzo?), ? - ca 1440?

Niccolò's *arte della memoria* is what one might expect - a pragmatic and idiosyncratic appropriation of a common practice drawn principally from the *Ad Herennium*.

Artificial memory supplements natural memory and consists of places and images. Regarding places (*luoghi, loci*), which can be either natural (mountains, etc.) or artificial (house, room, etc.), the memory is usually conceived and organized as a house of memory, an architectural space either familiar or imaginary, and consists of any number of contrasting rooms or locations through which the mind can move freely. The locations are to be of moderate in size, luminosity, and space between them, and they should not be crowded with people or activity. There can be any number of locations depending on the number of names and things to be memorized (100 is common, 10,000 is possible), but every fifth one is to be specially marked, and once determined they should be mentally practiced until they become spatially fixed. And it is the spatial rather than the sequential order of the rooms that is fixed, which forms the basis of improvisation since terms and things can be extracted in any order one desires.

According to the Scarlatti⁹ treatise,

for one full month you must toil over the places so that you can say them from the first to the last, or from the middle one or the third or the fourth up or down; and so you can say which one is the 20th, or 30th, the 17th, the 94th, the 53rd, etc., and separately go back and forth.

Once your memory house is constructed, then, in the words of the *Ad Herennium* author,

order the ideas, words, and images that you wish to remember, placing the first thing in the vestibule, the second in the atrium, then move around the impluvium, into the side rooms, and even onto the statues or paintings [the "house" in this case is an ancient Roman one].

The images are also of two kinds, figurative or verbal (*cose e nome, or res et verba*); these should be striking and vivid, and strongly associative, such as a lion for courage, or Herod for betrayal.

The particular features of Niccolò's treatise are outlined in Table 3.3 (see Appendix/Tables) ...

It is conformed to the basic plan of the *Ad Herennium* model: a division into two primary parts dealing with places and images.

What follows is a list of 100 places, each with an object "upon it" (the first fifteen are translated in Table 3.3). As Michele explains in his introduction, the places are "in my house," chosen at a time when Niccolò was residing with Michele.

Table 3.3 Niccolò cieco d'Arezzo/Michele del Gogante memory treatise

⁹ Filippo Scarlatti treatise was compiled during 1467-71.

This is modest compared to many treatises, which claim that a well-trained and practiced memory may have many such houses in it that are ultimately capable of holding material the equivalent of a private library of books.

I want to recall what dr. Jakša Primorac wrote about the process of learning of epic singers (accompanying themselves on the bowed instrument *gusle*) in their younger years and about formula:

... Lord, leaning back on Milman Parry, defines oral-poetic formula as a group of words which have been used in the same metric conditions to express specific basic idea, and the oral-poetic theme defines as a group of ideas which have been regularly used by telling the story in the formulaic style of a traditional song. ...

Young singer imitating [older ones] learns the poetic verses, phrases, patterns, formulas, and themes as well as the playing technique and the basic principles of ornamentation. Therefore, the primary element of the form is the rhythm and the melody of the verse, and everything have to remain within the border of rhythmic pattern which includes metric, syntactical and acoustic elements. ...

Versification is actually the specific grammar within the general grammar of the language, made out of formulas. At learning (process) the most important is to adopt the capability of creation of verses during the performance, and not learning of formulas by heart. There exist special patterns for the beginning of the song, to maintenance of the narration, for stopping before the break, to continue after the interval and for the ending of the song.

With this in mind I organised my musical examples which start with bank of chords for both *lire*, over *Aeri* and *modi*, from Petrucci's *Frottole Libro IV*, chord analysis from both *Libro I* and *Libro II* arranged for voice and lute by F. Bossinensis, Various poetic-music forms taken from both books by same author, his own *ricercari* for lute from both books as well as J.A.Dalza's pseudo improvisational (and notated) *Tastar de corde* 1 – 3, additional modules (*modi, aeri*), from Petrucci's, *Libro XI* (1514), additional pieces from Petrucci edition of Bossinensis *Libri, arie* from C. Bottegari: *Arie e Canzoni in musica di C. B.* (Bottegari, Lute Book, 1574), and a choice of pieces from my own repertory for both *lire*.

To all of that I added a

D.ADDITIONAL - EXERCISES, FOR EXPERIMENTS AND LEARNING, containing the Reservoir of Music and texts, models for improvised counterpoint as well as material and examples how you can make your own *Contrafactum*.

I believe that those seriously interested can, due to all this material, understand and internalize the fundamentals upon which the *arte della memoria* is based. Then, from the abundant material found in the Appendix, they can select one or more poetic-musical forms based on which they can gradually (following the Qualitative levels of performing practice of early Renaissance music and "building" on the foundations from their already internalized memory "storehouse") begin to create their own modules and, with them, their personal improvisation.