

# Some Observations on the Blind Medieval Composer Francesco Landini

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## ABSTRACT

Music notation usually plays a crucial role with regard to most composers' writing style. The way notes appear on paper or parchment may offer scholars a variety of clues as to how a certain work was composed. Francesco Landini, a blind medieval composer, could not notate his own music without the help of a scribe. Moreover, I believe he could not actually visualise the manner voices were built vertically one over another. In this paper I will try to prove that Francesco Landini's blindness actually shaped his compositional style. The fact that he could not see what he was writing obliged him to work virtually from memory. As a result his music has some quite unique characteristics which, instead of impairing his compositional technique, render his style a harbinger of the forthcoming Renaissance period.

## 1. ESSAY

Disability may be considered catalytic as it defines a person's experiences. Regardless of the light in which lay- people view it, it renders one's life exceptional as the disabled person cannot help but deviate from the norm. In this paper, I refer to the members of the general, uninformed or misinformed public as lay persons. Society rarely if ever tolerates such "abnormalities" as significant sensory impairment, motor disability, or any difference with regard to bodily or mental function.

The word "difference" does not usually carry negative connotations and is therefore utilised by advocates of disabled individuals. The word "deviance" has negative repercussions since it implies that the disabled individual is inferior and subnormal with regard to an able-bodied person.

Blindness in particular renders a person even more deviant than is usual with most other disabilities. This happens even though visual impairment is not characterised by significant deformities. Through the centuries, the power generated by one's eyes has acquired almost mythical proportions. A person's eyes are sometimes considered the windows to his or her soul. Looking deep into someone's eyes, provides some sort of almost preternatural access to their character in most western cultures. Eyes that are not functional, may cause

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fear. Elisabeth Gitter<sup>1</sup> quotes a nineteenth-century poem where the blind are portrayed as horrible sleepwalkers with their blank eyes darting hopelessly who knows where. She also mentions that when visitors came to the Perkins Institution for the Blind during the first decades of its existence (1840s), blind students were obliged to wear a green ribbon over their eyes so as to hide them from public view.

Serious visual impairment has been associated with two antithetical personality types, the blind seer who has been blessed with supernatural abilities, and the profoundly disabled blind individual who needs to be always led about by the hand. This second personality type presents with serious visual as well as social problems, and is, all in all, inadequate to face reality.

The two types mentioned above, originate as stick figures in literature and the arts. They may be likened to Teiresias and Oedipus respectively as those two characters have been portrayed by the Ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles in his play *Oedipus Rex*.

In English Romantic literature, Edward Rochester, the male protagonist in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, is a famous example of the profoundly disabled blind person who has been virtually castrated by his disability. A man with a very strong personality, is transformed into Jane's puppet. Even the problem of finding himself a wife is solved by the young governess, not the now-disabled master.

When blind individuals are part of the community, not just literature, I believe that the negative connotations are overcome by the positive ones. Thus, blind people who have created some sort of legend with regard to their achievements, naturally belong to the Teiresian archetype. Those individuals are fewer than the others who are rendered non entities by blindness, and are recorded as such by history.

The blind organist and composer Francesco Landini (ca. 1325-1397) may be considered as an example of a talented though disabled person. According to the musicologist and disability specialist Joseph Straus<sup>2</sup>, society remembers Francesco's music through the mirror of his disability.

In the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Music*, edited by Mark Everist, there is a brief overview of his life. He is known as "Francescus Cecus" or the blind Francesco. In fact, this is how he is referred to in Charles

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1 Gitter p. 40.  
2 Straus.

Burney's *A General History of Music*, first published in 1789.<sup>3</sup> His works survive in the Squarcialupi Codex.

His prodigious skill as an organist earned him a reputation of legendary proportions. While improvising on his portative organ in the woods, it is said that the birds stopped singing and listened to his music while flying close to him and his instrument.

He had lost his sight to smallpox at a very young age but this fact did not stop him from becoming an organist, instrument builder and composer. "A posthumous but vivid representation of Landini's role in the Florentine society of 1389 is offered in 'Il Paradiso degli Alberti', written by Giovanni Gherardi from Prato in the early fifteenth century."<sup>4</sup> According to Everist, Francesco Landini helped design the new organ of the Florentine cathedral in 1387.

Landini is, again according to Everist, the most important Italian composer of his time. He wrote many polyphonic compositions such as madrigals and ballatas. He has been depicted while playing his organetto both on the Squarcialupi Codex and on his tomb-stone discovered in the twentieth century. Joseph Straus remarks how prominent his sunken eyes look in both depictions.

Most of Landini's works are for two voices, not three. Moreover, the two voices are usually homorhythmic. This means that the note values are similar in both voices. One voice does not support the others by sustaining long note values while the other voice or voices sing in florid patterns created by many shorter notes.

I am not implying that most of Landini's compositions are simpler works than those of his contemporaries. I am only wondering whether his blindness led him to choose a less dense compositional style than was usual in Western Europe at the time.

The byword of fourteenth-century music is isorhythm. Isorhythmic compositions are polyphonic works characterised by a recurring rhythmic and melodic pattern. The two patterns, rhythmic and melodic almost never occur simultaneously. They are the building blocks of the isorhythmic work. Moreover, the main voice is the tenor with its long held notes. The supporting voices are replete with short note melismatic passages.

The bulk of Francesco Landini's output consists of two voice songs which, as I mentioned above, are homorhythmic or consist of rhythmically equal voices. We cannot tell to what extent medieval composers relied on learning voice parts by heart. I believe that Francesco, being blind, could not notate his music, and even if he relied on a scribe, he could not actually see the outcome. Being unable to visualise the progressions of recurring rhythmic and melodic patterns characterising the isorhythmic compositions of his time, he chose to avoid using such complex particularities, and instead composed two part songs where the upper voice was prominent. In my opinion, that isorhythmic works are characterised by equality in all voices. If anything, the prominent voice is the tenor part where the notes are

long and sustained. The florid upper voices are viewed by the composer as secondary.

In Landini's compositions, the upper voice is the primary part and most of his works urn the characterisation of "song" as they have a distinct melodic line. In this sense The blind composer Francesco Landini has paved the way towards a new Renaissance style where the upper voice is the prominent element of compositions such as frottole and Renaissance lute songs. His disability helped him become an innovator. Francesco Landini's compositional style was not at all impeded by his blindness. The visually impaired organist chose to use his unique manner of understanding written music of his time, in order to move music history a step further.

## REFERENCES

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- [3] C. Burney, *A General History of Music With Critical and Historical Notes*, F. Mercer, Ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 2001.
- [4] M. Everist, Ed., *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Music*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Burney.

<sup>4</sup> Everist p. 141.