IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528)

Baldassare Castiglione’s bestseller of the sixteenth century provides a window into everyday life in the Renaissance, at least life at the courts of Europe’s fashionable rulers. Although it was written in Italy using the Italian court as a model, the book was soon translated into French as well as English (1561). Castiglione was born near Mantua in 1478 and served at the courts of Mantua and Urbino. While in Mantua, he enjoyed close ties with Isabella d’Este, Marchesa of Mantua (see Chapter 28). Later he became the pope’s ambassador to Spain and died there, in Toledo, in 1529.

*The Book of the Courtier* was written over the course of nearly twenty years, from roughly 1508 through 1528. Through a series of dialogues, both real and imagined, with some of the leading figures of the day, Castiglione is able to set forth a model for the courtier, both male and female. In the discussions of ideal courtly life, Castiglione places a premium on music, song, and dance. In his mind, the highest form of musical activity for the courtier was to sing a solo, while accompanying himself with a string instrument, preferably the *lira da braccio*. While in Mantua, Castiglione had heard Isabella d’Este’s court composer, Marchetto Cara (Chapter 20), and here he makes note of Cara’s distinctive style of singing. Then, almost in the same breath, Castiglione refers to the equal pleasure provided by the unique styles of painters da Vinci, Mantegna, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Giorgione—all the great ones of the day. We have entered, needless to say, the world of high art.

Nor does our friend Marchetto Cara move us less by his singing, but with a gentler harmony; because he softens and penetrates our souls by placid means, full of plaintive sweetness, greatly stirring them to sweet emotion.

Again, various things give equal pleasure to our eyes, so that we can with difficulty decide which are more pleasing to them. You know that in painting Leonardo da Vinci, Mantegna, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Giorgio da Castelfranco, are very excellent, yet they are all unlike in their work; so that no one of them seems to lack anything in his own manner, since each is known as most perfect in his style. [Book I, section 37]

Soon, in a discussion of what are the best qualities for a courtier to possess, Castiglione constructs a colloquy among three leading members of the aristocracy: Count Ludovico da Canossa (1476–1532), Gasparo Pallavicino (1486–1511), and Giuliano de’ Medici (1479–1516). Notice that we are, of course, in the Renaissance, and Castiglione, to underscore the legitimacy of music, frequently refers to ancient Greek music theory, in the present case the music of the spheres as articulated by Boethius c500 c.e. (Chapter 2), and Greek attitudes about music as propounded by Socrates, Plato, and the myth of Orpheus.

Here everyone laughed, and the Count began anew and said:

“My Lords, you must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he be also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read music, he can play upon diverse instruments. For if we consider rightly, there is to be found no rest from toil or medicine for the troubled spirit more becoming and praiseworthy in time of leisure, than this; and especially in courts, where besides the relief from tedium that music affords us all, many things are done to please the ladies, whose tender and gentle spirit is easily penetrated by harmony and filled with sweetness. Thus it is no marvel that in both ancient and modern times they have always been inclined to favour musicians, and have found refreshing spiritual food in music.”
Then my lord Gasparo said:

“I admit that music as well as many other vanities may be proper to women and perhaps to some that have the semblance of men but not to those who really are men; for these ought not to enervate their mind with delights and thus induce therein a fear of death.”

“Say not so,” replied the Count; “for I shall enter upon a vast sea in praise of music. And I shall call to mind how it was always celebrated and held sacred among the ancients, and how very sage philosophers were of opinion that the world is composed of music, that the heavens make harmony in their moving, and that the soul, being ordered in like fashion, awakes and as it were revives its powers through music. [Note the reference here to *musica mundana* and *musicum humana*.

Thus it is written that Alexander [the Great] was sometimes excited by it so passionately, that he was forced almost against his will to leave the banquet table and rush to arms; and when the musician [Timotheus] changed the temper of the tune, he grew calm again, lay aside his arms, and returned to the banquet table [drawn from Plutarch, *Moralia*, II, 2]. Moreover I will tell you that grave Socrates learned to play the cithara *[kithera]* at a very advanced age. And I remember having once heard that Plato and Aristotle would have the man of culture a musician also; and they show by a host of arguments that the power of music over us is very great, and (for many reasons which would be too long to tell now) that it must needs be taught from childhood, not so much for the mere melody that we hear, but for the power it has to induce in us a fresh and good habit of mind and an habitual tendency to virtue, which renders that soul more capable of happiness, just as bodily exercise renders the body more robust; and that music is not only no hindrance in the pursuits of peace and war, but is very helpful therein. . . .

Therefore seek not to deprive our Courtier of music, which not only soothes men’s minds, but often tames wild beasts [refers to the familiar story of Orpheus taming the beasts with his music]; and he who enjoys it not, may be sure that his spirit is ill attuned. See what power it has, to make (as once it did) a fish submit to be ridden by a man upon the boisterous sea [refers to the legend of Arion, a Greek poet of Lesbos, who was saved by a dolphin that he had lured to him by the music of his lyre as recounted in Herodotus, *History*, I, chapters 23–24]. We find it used in holy temples to render praise and thanks to God; and we must believe that it is pleasing to Him and that He has given it to us as most sweet alleviation for our fatigues and troubles. Wherefore rough toilers of the field under a burning sun often cheat their weariness with crude and rustic song. With music the rude peasant lass, who is up before the day to spin or weave, wards off her drowsiness and makes her toil a pleasure. . . .”

As the Count now remained silent for a little, the Magnifico Giuliano [de’ Medici] said: “I do not at all agree with my lord Gasparo. Nay I think, for the reasons you give and for many others, that music is not only an ornament but a necessity to the Courtier. . . .” [Book I, sections 47–48]

Thereafter the courtiers go on to discuss the need for a courtier to have skills in drawing, then again the conversation turns to music and to the issue of modesty and how one should appear in public. The lesson for the courtier seems to be “don’t be a showoff.” The Italians have a word for this desired state of feigned casualness: *sprezzatura*—meaning the ability to wear one’s learning or skills lightly. But first we learn of “the leaping cardinal” who clearly lacks *sprezzatura*.

Here messer Cesare Gonzaga said:

“A young cardinal we have in Rome does better than that; for out of pride in his fine bodily frame, he conducts into his garden all who come to visit him (even although he has never seen them before), and urgently presses them to strip to the doublet and try a turn with him at leaping.”
Messer Federico laughed; then he went on:

“There are certain other exercises that can be practiced in public and in private, like dancing; and in this I think the Courtier ought to have a care, for when dancing in the presence of many and in a place full of people, it seems to me that he should preserve a certain dignity, albeit tempered with a little and airy grace of movement; and although he may feel himself to be very nimble and a master of time and measure, let him not attempt those agilities of foot and double steps which we find very becoming in our friend Barletta [musician and dancer at the court of Urbino], but which perhaps would be little suited to a gentleman. Yet in a room privately, as we are now, I think he may try both, and may dance morris-dances [a leaping dance] and branles shaking dances of French origin], but not in public unless he be masked, when it is not displeasing even though he be recognized by all [it’s all right to be recognized as being talented, so long as you give the impression you didn’t want to be recognized]. Indeed there is no better way of displaying oneself in such matters at public sports, either armed or unarmed; because disguise carries with it a certain freedom and license.

I say then that in these martial sports the Courtier ought to use the like discretion, according to his rank. In horseback vaulting, too, in wrestling, running and leaping, I should be well pleased to have him shun the vulgar crowd, or at most let himself be very rarely seen; for there is not on earth a thing so excellent but the ignorant will tire of it and hold it of small account, if they see it often.” [Book II, sections 11–12]

Having finished with dance and gymnastics, the conversation again turns to music and the need for sprezzatura.

“As to music I hold the same opinion: hence I would not have our Courtier behave like many, who are no sooner come anywhere (even into the presence of gentlemen with whom they have no acquaintance), than without waiting to be urged to set about doing what they know and often what they do not know; so that is seems as if they had come only for the purpose of showing themselves, and had that for their chief profession. Therefore let the Courtier resort to music as a pastime and almost unwillingly, and not before vulgar people nor very many. And although he may know and understand that which he is doing, in this too I would have him hide the study and pains that are necessary in everything one would do well, and seem to value this accomplishment lightly in himself, but by practicing it admirably make others value it highly.”

Next the discussion turns to the various types of music appropriate for the courtier, and what types of instruments he or she should and should not play. Wind instruments, for example, distort the face.

Then my lord Gasparo Pallavicino said: “There are many kinds of music, vocal as well as instrumental: therefore I should like to hear which is the best of all, and at what time the Courtier ought to perform it.”

Messer Federico replied: “I regard as beautiful music, to sing well by note, with ease and in beautiful style [il cantar bene a libro sicuramente e con bella maniera]; but as even far more beautiful, to sing to the accompaniment of the voila [surely refers to the lira da braacio, Musical Interlude 2, Figure 2] because nearly all the sweetness lies in the solo part, and we note and observe the fine manner and the melody with much greater attention when our ears are not occupied with more than a single voice, and moreover every little fault is more clearly discerned—which is not the case when several sing together, because each singer helps his neighbour. But above all, singing to the viol [lira da braccio] by way of recitative seems to me most delightful, which adds to the words a charm and grace that are very admirable.

All key[board] instruments also are pleasing to the ear because they produce very perfect consonances [have a fixed tuning such as Pythagorean or Just Intonation], and upon them one can play many things that fill the mind with musical delight. And not
less charming is the music of four viols, which is most sweet and exquisite. The human voice lends much ornament and grace to all these instruments, with which I would have our Courtier at least to some degree acquainted, albeit the more he excels with them, the better—without troubling himself much with those that Minerva forbade to Alcibiades, because it seems that they are ungraceful [the instruments which Minerva and Alcibiades scorned are wind instruments which deform the face of the musician]. [Cf. Aristotle, Politics VIII, Chapter 6; Plutarch, Life of Alcibiades, Chapter 2].

Then, as to the time for enjoying these various kinds of music, I think it is whenever a man finds himself in familiar and beloved companionship and there are not other occupations. But above all it is fitting where ladies are present, because their aspect fills the listener’s heart with sweetness, renders it more sensitive to the tenderness of the music, and quickens the musician’s soul.”

Finally, Castiglione’s courtier tells us when it is appropriate to perform and what constitutes an appropriate and an inappropriate performance.

“As I have already said, it pleases me well that we should avoid the crowd, and especially the ignoble crowd. But discretion must needs be the spice of everything, for it would be quite impossible to foresee all the cases that occur; and if the Courtier rightly understands himself, he will adapt himself to the occasion and will perceive when the minds of his hearers are disposed to listen and when not. He will take his own age into account: for it is indeed unseemly and unlovely in the extreme to see a man of any quality old, hoary and toothless, full of wrinkles—playing on a viol and singing in the midst of a company of ladies, even though he be a passable performer. And the reason of this is that in singing the words are usually amorous, and love is a ridiculous thing in old men—albeit it is sometimes pleased among its other miracles to kindle frozen hearts in spite of years.” [Book II, section 13]

Source: Translated from the original Italian by Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (1903).