

# Orpheus Christianus

The art of singing improvised Latin poetry

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Aurelio Lippo Brandolini (c. 1456–1497) is perhaps best known today for James Hankins's bilingual edition of his dialogue *Republics and Kingdoms Compared* (2009), written in 1490 in Buda whilst in the service of Matthias Corvinus. To most of his contemporaries who knew him, however, he was a blind poet and singer. Some of his friends and patrons called him “Orpheus Christianus” because of his extraordinary talent for improvising Latin verses to the lyre.

In this talk, we want to revisit the art of singing (improvised) poetry accompanied by an instrument – the most popular musical genre in fifteenth-century Italy – focusing in particular on its humanist form, which featured Latin poems. We shall present two cycles of improvised poetry sang by Aurelio on special occasions in Rome and Verona, which have been preserved in the notes of listeners. These manuscripts will



allow us to have a particularly vivid insight into how this oral tradition developed in practice. However, in order to place Aurelio's art in context, we shall first examine the tradition of official poet singers (the *canterini*) in the Italian city states, its humanist variant in Florence, and reflections on this by Aurelio's brother, Raffaele Lippo Brandolini (c. 1465–1517) in his *De musica et poetica* (1510). Raffaele, who followed in his brother's footsteps and became an extemporary poet and singer himself, deserves our attention both on his own right and because of his nuanced approach to music and poetry, which is not only an outstanding source on this tradition but also a great document of the humanist learning of these little known blind brothers.