

## The great teachings of Leonardo on the Silk Route

In the vast number of initiatives put forth by the Italian Embassy and the Italian Institute of Culture in Beijing for the 500 year anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci, we also find – at the close of the beautiful exhibition titled *Leonardo e la sua grande scuola* [Leonardo and his outstanding circle] – a singular concert activity offered by the Fondazione Levi.

The *Fondazione Levi* has decided to host an exhibition of *Leonardo e la sua grande scuola*, destined to travel from Venice to Beijing, where it will be hosted in the Museum of Central Academy of Fine Arts.

We must underline the fact that Venetians are particularly passionate about exchanges between China and Venice. Venice is, of course, an international city which hosts people from around the world; and its activities often involve the collaboration of foreigners; however, it is the word *China* itself that evokes in the Venetian memories of a famous undertaking by what we now know to be a most extraordinary protagonist – a man who was considered anything but extraordinary at the time – Marco Polo (1254-1324).

The Leonardo exhibit has offered us an occasion to reflect and put forth proposals in the field of music.

It is a highly interesting theme which has not, until now, received the attention it deserves. As Emanuel Winternitz rightly states «it is not generally known that Leonardo da Vinci was deeply involved in music, not only as an admired performer, improviser, and teacher, but in many areas of research, such as acoustics, musical aesthetics, and the invention of numerous ingenious musical instruments». His multiform genius, which was universally acknowledged in every figurative, scientific, and literary facet, also led him to the study of diverse areas of music. Numerous sources bear witness to his interests; and his contemporaries, and his earliest biographers, such as Luca Pacioli, Paolo Giovio and the Anonymous Gaddiano, describe him as a fine player and improviser of the lyre. Giorgio Vasari, too, in his *The lives of the artists* states that Leonardo “turned to music for a while, and soon he decided to learn to play the lyre, like one to whom nature had given a naturally elevated and highly refined spirit, and accompanying himself on this instrument, he sang divinely without any preparation [as was the practice at the time of “*cantare a mente*” (improvising) in humanistic circles]. [...] Leonardo was brought with great ceremony to Milan to play the lyre for duke who was very fond of the sound of that instrument. Leonardo brought with him an instrument he had made with his own hands largely from silver and shaped in the form of a horse's head (a strange and unusual thing) so that the sound would be more full and resonant, and he thus surpassed all the other musicians who had gathered there to play.”

His portrait *Ritratto di musico*, whom the majority of critics identify as Franchino Gaffurio, leads us to believe he was associated with the renowned theoretician and composer from Lodi. Second only to painting, music was often referred to in Leonardo's writings, in which we find Pythagoric and Boezian echoes. Some of his most interesting ideas on the nature of music, and its place in the universe of the arts can be found in *Paragone*. In this treatise, painting is always exalted as the most noble of all the arts, the “nephew of nature and a relation of God”, but music is just as noble as art since it is “the configuration of the invisible”. This definition is terribly interesting

because music, in his view, is not so much an imitation of nature, but an art whose forms are created quite freely from something which is neither visible nor tangible. Leonardo also studied the origins of sound and other physical phenomena, for example the vibration of bodies, sympathetic oscillation, and the propagation of sound waves, anticipating Ernst Chladni's *Discoveries in the Theory of Sound* by three centuries. Another interesting fact that links Leonardo to music can be found in his sketches of the instruments and musical “machines”, which are found in his many codices, but which, unfortunately, say little or nothing about the author’s repertory or the performances to which they are linked.

Based on these very interesting facts regarding the great *Maestro* and his love of music, the Fondazione Levi is pleased to present - thanks to its privileged relationship with the Conservatorio “Benedetto Marcello” of Venezia, and especially with their viol teacher, Cristiano Contadin, as well as Luca Pisano of the University of Enna “Kore”, a sinologist who cultivates pure studies in traditional Chinese music - the music of the “*Ugo and Olga Levi Venice Ensemble*”. The ensemble is made up of the students of Cristiano Contadin, and those of other teachers in the *Dipartimento di Musica Antica* of the Conservatorio “Benedetto Marcello” – a long-time partner of the Fondazione Levi in the realization of numerous projects. The music programme created by Contadin is based on music from Leonardo’s era: two concerts which will be performed in China at the CAFA Art Museum, and the Italian Embassy – organized by the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* and the Beijing Music Festival, of which Francesco Stochino (the director of the exhibit) is the Venetian secretary.

Stochino has suggested that the music programme of the concerts include two pieces of Chinese music from that same era. Reference was, therefore, made to Luca Pisano, who uncovered and transcribed Chinese musical pieces from that epoch. This may well lead to a new line of research, one with incredibly promising prospects. It, therefore, gives us reason to imagine new horizons in the relationship between Venice and China, and, this time, in the name of music.

Prof. Roberto Calabretto  
President of the Scientific Committee