

Lasso's Fleas: A Hungarian Connection for a European Topos*

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Fleas – ubiquitous and maddeningly hard to eradicate even in our own time – must have been a staple of European life in past centuries, unwelcome beasts who could be tolerated only with the help of a little humor. This essay examines some of the humorous responses to fleas in literature, painting, and, especially, music. While scholarship has been aware of the wide-spread popularity of the flea-topos for some time, no attention has yet been given to its musical manifestations. In this survey I will focus on one of Lasso's two such compositions, particularly, because it extends the geographic boundaries of our theme to remote Hungary.

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There is a curious title among the motets in the list of Lasso's works in the *New Grove Dictionary*.¹ *Bestia curvafia pulices*, coming between *Benedixisti Domine* and *Bone Jesum verbum patris*, seems shockingly out of place for the Hungarian reader since the second word of the title (*curvafia*, or according to the present day spelling *kurvafia*) in Hungarian means 'son of a bitch', or 'whoreson', to use the Shakespearean equivalent. Together with the first word of the title the second forms an expression in Hungarian, *bestia curvafia* [whoreson beast], which for centuries was one of the most common verbal abuses. A brief account of the history of this term is in order, so that we can see how Lasso might have encountered it.

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¹ James Haar, 'Orlando di Lasso', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1980), X, 495.

The expression is now obsolete, familiar to Hungarian speakers today only through the well known humorous poem, *Pázmán lovag* [Sir Pázmán], written by the great nineteenth-century Hungarian poet, János Arany.² The ballad tells the story of an elderly knight, Pázmán, whose country manor was once the site of one of the hunting parties of the young Hungarian ruler, King Matthias (1458–1490). As in other legends about this charismatic, much-loved figure of Hungarian folklore, the king participated in the party *incognito*. When his company left the home of the knight, he turned back to give a kiss to the knight's pretty young wife who was accompanying the guests to the gate. Pázmán, though he did not protest on the spot, took great offense and decided to bring his grievance to the king's attention. Matthias, suspecting the reason for the knight's sudden appearance at the court, ordered his jester to sit on the throne, promising that whatever verdict the jester reached would be carried out. Pázmán tried to make his case, but the jester interrupted him constantly, putting each of his arguments in ridiculous light and thus making the knight more and more angry. As he tried to proceed with his tale, he started each sentence with a curse, among them the most vulgar one: *Beste kura fi... zetésért látni a vendéget!* [It is a lecherous man who makes his guest pay!] Arany's notation of the line even suggests that the knight tried to swallow this rude expression, making the last syllable (*beste kurafi*) equal to the first syllable of the next word (*fizetésért* [for pay]).

Bestia kurvafia was probably rare already by 1856.³ Arany used it as one of numerous archaizing expressions that he employed in his historical ballads. But there is abundant documentation of the expression's frequent occurrence from the beginning of the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth centuries. It survives mostly in court records where it was duly registered in accusations and testimonies since it was considered a calumny and punished by fine if the accused proved to be innocent.⁴ The possessive attribute *kurvafia* was first recorded in 1479 as *kwrwanewfya*⁵ (*kurva nő fia*, that is, a

² János Arany, *Kisebbségi költemények*, ed. Tamás Vekerdy (Budapest, 1986), 313–318.

³ According to the *Új magyar tájszótár* (Budapest, 1979), I, 452, only older people used this expression in 1906. My thanks to Mária Domokos for providing me with the linguistic sources.

⁴ *Erdélyi magyar szótörténeti tár*, ed. T. Attila Szabó (Budapest, 1995), VII, 666. 'Ha valakit kurva fiának ... mondanak ... ha a más jel meg bizonyítja, hogy ő hozzája büntelen mondotta, eleven díján, az az tizenharmad fél forintot marad: mert tisztességében jár.' [If someone is said to be a son of a whore ... and there is other evidence proving that person's innocence ... the accuser should pay twelve and a half florins since the honor of that person was aspersed.] From a 1555 record of the *Szekler Archives*.

⁵ *Magyar oklevél-szótár* (Budapest, 1984; reprint of 1900–1906 edition), 557. In the documents the word is often written as two words and variously spelled also as *curva*, *curwa*, *kwrwa*, *kurwa*, *kurua*, and respectively as *fya*, *ffya*, *ffya* or *fija* and their combinations.

son of a woman who is a whore). Another form, where the possessive attribute is substituted with the very similarly sounding qualifying attribute *kurvafi* (that is, a lecherous man) first appeared in 1488.⁶ The first registered occurrence of the defamation *bestia kurvafia* (spelled as *bestia hyres kwrwaffy* [you notorious beast, you lecherous man]) is from 1507⁷. In some of the later notations, as in Arany's poem, *kurvafia* takes another form (*kurafia*, or *curafia*), dropping the *v* sound before the second syllable – a phenomenon known of the Hungarian language in other cases as well.⁸ The first part of the expression (*bestia* [beast]) more often appears in another, different sounding form: *beste*, or *bestye*⁹ and frequently followed by the word *lélek* [soul], as in the court records of another famous Hungarian poet, Bálint Balassi's lawsuit in 1578,¹⁰ or with other adjectives, as notorious, treacherous, foolish, thievish, imbecile, heathen, etc. Surviving data of the erstwhile proliferation of the curse *bestia kurvafia* show that it was known throughout the country.¹¹ Documentation is especially rich from Transylvania where it was registered in court proceedings some seventy five times between 1567 and 1710.¹²

Bestia curvafia, of course, also turns up in a poem that Lasso set to music and published in his *Les melanges* in 1576.¹³ In this beautifully illustrated edition, the initial letters of the chanson *Bestia curvafia* depict a young man in a vine arbor riding a goat and holding a goblet – an allusion to the character of the composition¹⁴ (*Example 1*).

⁶ Levente Závodszy, 'Nyelvtörténeti adatok', *Magyar nyelv*, 8 (1912), 331. The spelling varies in other documents (*kuruaffi*, *kwrwafi*, *kwrwafy*, *kwrwaffy*; *kurwafy*, *kurwaffy*; *kurua fy*, *curwa fi*, *curwafy*, etc.)

⁷ *Magyar oklevél-szótár*, 557.

⁸ See other examples in Ödön Beke, 'Husvét', *Magyar nyelvőr*, 62 (1933), 128.

⁹ Also spelled as *bestie*, *bestje*, *besthye*, *bestye* or *bestyie*.

¹⁰ *Bestia hitetlen lélek, kurafi* [you beast with a pagan soul, you lecherous man] and *bestye lélek kurafi* [you lecherous man, you soul of a beast]. See *Magyar nyelvőr*, 91 (1967), 491.

¹¹ *A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára* (Budapest, 1970), II, 676. The latest data were registered in 1780, 1789 and 1792.

¹² *Erdélyi magyar szótörténeti tár*, ed. T. Attila Szabó (București, 1975), I, 824–826 and VII, 663–668.

¹³ *Les melanges d'Orlande de Lassus, contenant plusieurs chansons a IIII, V, VI, VIII, X parties, revuez par luy, et augmentez* (Paris: Adrian le Roy & Robert Ballard, 1576), L891 in *Répertoire international des sources musicales* (hereafter RISM). The words are taken from the *Contra* part available for me in a microfilm version of the copy of the first edition in possession of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris (Rés. 619). The other parts show the following divergences: in line 1 *Pulices* in *Superius*, in line 1 and 2 *curva fia* in *Quinta pars* and *Tenor*; in line 2 *progenies* in *Superius*; in line 4 *prefocanda* in *Superius*, *perfocanda* in *Quinta pars*; in line 5 *pelesque* in *Quinta pars* and *Tenor*; in line 6 *propugnat* in *Superius* and *Quinta pars*; in line 7 *pediclas* in *Quinta pars* and *Tenor*.

¹⁴ According to a marginal note in the *Quinta pars* of the copy preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale, the young man is Bacchus himself. I want to thank Professor Peter Bergquist for calling my attention to this detail.

*Marcha M. Augustini Pfla. Conciatoris Cytrensi
ex Ungaria late.*

Example 1: Les melanges d'Orlande de Lasso

(Paris: Adrian le Roy Robert Ballard, 1576) (RISM L891).

Quinta pars of the copy preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Rés. 619)

*Bestia curvafia pulices proch posoniensis
Progenies pungunt. Bestia curvafia
Per similes peditum passim proterva pediclis
Prefocanda pigra. Bestia curvafia
Perlustrat pectus poplites pellesque politas
Propugnat passim. Bestia curvafia
Pellantur pulices pelagus perdatque pediclos
Profundum pastos. Bestia curvafia.*

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[Whoreson beast! The fleas – alas for the race of Pozsony! –
sting. Whoreson beast!

Very similar to infantrymen, the wanton, lazy (beast)
ought to be choked everywhere by little feet. Whoreson beast!

It ranges over the breast, the knee-joints, and everywhere
defends the dressed skins. Whoreson beast!

Let fleas be driven away, and may the deep sea destroy the lice
after they have fed. Whoreson beast!

Wolfgang Boetticher, who published the first modern edition of the piece in 1956,¹⁵ thought that the text was comparable to typical student verses of the time but he did not recognize the true meaning of the Hungarian epithet of the flea. Nor did he realize that “posoniensis” referred to the Hungarian town Posonium.¹⁶

Both the presence of a Hungarian swearword and the reference to a Hungarian town prove the Hungarian origin of the text that has gone unrecognized by Lasso scholars. But there is further evidence as well. I have found another setting of the same text in an Augsburg manuscript,¹⁷ mistakenly attributed to Lasso. This anonymous, three-voice setting, published here for the first time (at the end of this article), was probably written in or after 1571 since the paper of the manuscript was produced in that year.¹⁸ An inscription on top of the *altus* and *bassus* parts reads: *Manubiae M. Augustini Nesor, Concionatoris Castrensis ex Hungaria latae* [Booty of master Augustinus Nesor, camp preacher, brought from Hungary] (*Example 2*). While this can either mean that the manuscript was prepared for its Augsburg owner in Hungary, or more probably was copied in Augsburg from a source acquired in Hungary, the text's Hungarian origin can hardly be doubted. Also, the farcical penultimate appearance of the swearword in the music – each of the three words exposed by the initiating Bass voice and the echoing joint upper voices – denote the hand of someone well aware of the expression's meaning.

¹⁵ Orlando di Lasso, *Sämtliche Werke*. Neue Reihe, ed. Wolfgang Boetticher (Kassel, 1956), I, 67–70. Another version of the work, a contrafactum with the text beginning *Bestia stultus homo* was published in Orlando di Lasso, *Magnum Opus Musicum* (Munich: N. Henrici, 1604), no. 312. This version appeared in Orlando di Lasso, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Franz Xaver Haberl and Adolf Sanberger (New York, 1973; reprint of Leipzig 1894–1923 edition), XI, 95. There is also a Hungarian-language version, in László Lukin's translation, published in Zeneszó, 4 (1994), no. 5, A–D (László Lukin's kind information). The composition has also been recorded with the original text *Bestia curvafia pulices*, by the Alsfelder Vokalensemble, directed by Wolfgang Helbrich (Telefunken 6.42632 AZ and Musical Heritage Society, MHS 7029W, both issued in 1981).

¹⁶ Boetticher argued that the word *posoniensis* is a corrupt version of the French *poisonné* [poisonous] (Orlando di Lasso: *Sämtliche Werke*, xxxii). Edward E. Lowinsky also used *poisonous* for *posoniensis* in his translation of the text in his ‘Humanism in the music of the Renaissance’, in *Music in the Culture of the Renaissance and Other Essays*, ed. Bonnie J. Blackburn (Chicago: 1989), 204.

¹⁷ Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg, Tonkunst Schletterer 272–278, No. 42 (discantus: fol. 60v–61r; *altus*: fol. 59v–60r; *bassus*: fol. 56v–57r. See Clytus Gottwald, *Die Musikhandschriften des Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg* (Wiesbaden, 1974), 175–181. In this catalog the piece is identified as Lasso's composition, and Boetticher also refers to it as such in his *Orlando di Lasso und seine Zeit* (Kassel, 1958), I, 865. However, this is a very different composition. Lasso's setting is homophonic throughout with practically no text repetition, the Augsburg version alternates imitative and chordal sections, and applies frequent word repetitions. The Augsburg setting is published here with the kind permission of the Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg. I thank Dr. Helmut Gier, director of the library, for providing me with the microfilm of this work and giving permission to publish it.

¹⁸ Gottwald, *Die Musikhandschriften*, 175.

O R L A N D E

Example 2: Bassus part of the anonymous chanson
in the Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg, Tonkunst Schletterer 272–278, No. 42

But how did Lasso come across this text? Why and when did he choose to set it to music? Since it first appeared in 1576 in the second edition of the collection of the composer's chansons¹⁹, originally published in 1570,²⁰ *Bestia curvasia pulices* was probably written some time between 1570 and 1576²¹. Within this time-frame, there is one particular event that deserves special attention. In September 1572, Rudolf II, the future Holy Roman Emperor, was crowned as King of Hungary in Pozsony (=Pozsonium, or Pressburg, today Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia). One of the distinguished guests of the week-long activities was the twenty-four-year-old Duke Wilhelm, heir to the throne of Lasso's employer, the Bavarian Duke Albrecht V.²² Thus it seems feasible to suppose that that festive occasion in Pozsony provided an opportunity for the Duke or one of the members of his entourage to stumble upon the poem (or the anonymous composition) and to bring or send it to Lasso.

¹⁹ See above, note 13.

²⁰ *Mellange d'Orlande de Lassus, contenant plusieurs chansons, tant en vers latins, qu'en ryme françoise à quatre, cinq, six, huit, dix parties* (Paris: Le Roy & Ballard, 1570), see RISM L834.

²¹ Although Boetticher places this work with an earlier group of chansons based on stylistic analysis, taking into consideration the publishing dates he proposes the years of 1573–75 as the possible time of its composition. See Boetticher, *Orlando di Lasso und seine Zeit*, I, 236.

²² Thomas DeCosta Kaufmann, *Variations on the Imperial Theme in the Age of Maximilian II and Rudolph II* (New York, 1978), 40–43.

Duke Wilhelm was the addressee of the majority of Lasso's extant letters.²³ Indeed, the first two surviving letters were written a few months before the Duke's trip to Pozsony. Forty-four more letters followed, the majority between 1574 and 1576. These letters are often singled out for their curious linguistic aspects: the constant mixture of Latin, Italian, French, with some German and Dutch expressions, for the playful employment of rhymes, alliterations and other play on words, sometimes written in doggerel verse. The text of *Bestia curvafia pulices* carries at least two of these linguistic characteristics: the mixture of languages (Hungarian and Latin) and the almost complete alliteration throughout the poem. It is no wonder then that it had an appeal to this composer so predisposed to making puns of a similar sort.²⁴

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The other attraction of the text was surely its subject – fleas. In literary circles the *pulex-topos* enjoyed tremendous popularity from the second half of the sixteenth century. Pierre de Ronsard, leader of the group of the French Renaissance poets calling themselves *La Pleïade* was the first to publish poems introducing the flea motive (*Ha, seigneur Dieu, que de graces écloses* and *Enfant quartannier*, both published first in 1552 in his *Les amours*²⁵). Literary critics have pointed out that this topos belongs to the metamorphosis poems inspired by the classical and neo-Latin poets and can be directly traced back to the lengthy *Elegia de pulice*, often ascribed to Ovid but written by the late medieval poet Ofilius Sergianus.²⁶ In these poems poets either suffer the pangs of jealousy as they describe the feast of the flea on the most delicate parts of their adored woman's body, or, express their wish to become a flea themselves to be able to enjoy the same privileges as the lowly but fortunate insect.

²³ Horst Leuchtman, *Orlando di Lasso. II: Briefe* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 35–44.

²⁴ Although Lasso set texts in different languages throughout his life, his multilingualism manifested itself right around this time in his remarkable four-language print: *Sex cantiones latinae quatuor, adiuncto dialogo octo vocum. Sechs teutsche Lieder mit vier, sampt einem Dialogo mit 8 Stimmen. Six chansons Françaises nouvelles a quatre voix, avecq un dialogue a huit. Sei madrigali nuovi a quatro, con un dialogo a otto voci. Summa diligentia compositae, correctae et nunc primum in lucem aeditae* (Munich: Adam Berg, 1573), see RISM L860. This work was recently published in a modern edition by Peter Bergquist in the series *Recent Researches in the Music of the Renaissance*, v. 102: *Orlando di Lasso: The complete motets*, v. 10: *The Four-Language Print for Four and Eight Voices* (Madison, Wis., 1995).

²⁵ *Les amours de P. de Ronsard Vandomoys* (Paris: Chez la veufve Maurice de La Porte, 1552). Quoted in Marcel Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse au XVIe siècle', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 56 (1941), 310–313.

²⁶ Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse', 312–313.

One of the first and most successful works inspired by Ronsard's flea-poems was *Der Flohhaz* by Johann Fischart, who was working in Paris between 1565 and 1567. *Der Flohhaz* was first published in 1573 and reprinted five times between 1578 and 1619.²⁷ In French soil, the popularity of the flea-topos culminated in 1579. In that year, during the court session in Poitiers called the *Grand Jours*, members of the legal community and their friends often visited the cultivated, witty and beautiful Madame des Roches and her daughter, Catherine, at their house, which was a kind of forerunner of the literary salon. As the poet-advocate Estienne Pasquier told the story, 'one day a keen observer espied a flea proceeding across the bosom of the erudite but engaging Catherine. Straightway the muses of the assembled guests were set to work, the result being a quantity of facetious and merely ingenious verses on the subject of the venturesome flea and its fair prey.'²⁸ The poems were published in 1583 as *La Puce de Madame Desroches*, a collection of fifty-six poems in French, Italian, Spanish, Latin and Greek.²⁹ This collection and Ronsard's poems were soon imitated by English poets. The first English flea-poem was written in 1582 by Thomas Watson.³⁰ Another English poet, William Drummond, also learned from French poetry: he had in his possession everything published by Ronsard and also the book of *La Puce de Madame Desroches*. His two flea-poems, however, are free translations of two Italian madrigals by Torquato Tasso (*Loda la zanzara* and *Invidia la morte di una zanzara*) who also stayed in France in 1570–1571.³¹ Finally, John Donne's much appreciated poem, *The Flea* (1633), also drew upon the rich poetic tradition of the flea-topos of the previous centuries.³² In Italy, the flea-topic was still popular well into the seventeenth century: Giacomo Lavagna's poem *Ad un pulce sub petto de bella donna* was published in 1671.³³

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 327–328.

²⁸ Alexander Hermann Schutz, 'The Group of the Dames des Roches in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 48 (1933), 648. Cited in Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse', 317 n. 47.

²⁹ *La puce de Madame Desroches* (1583), ed. D. Jouaust (Paris, 1872). Discussed in Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse', 317–325.

³⁰ 'Passionate Centurie of Love', no. 27 in Sir Robert Neunton, *Fragmenta Regalia*, ed. Edward Aber (London, 1870), 64. Cited in Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse', 321.

³¹ Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse', 324–325. For Tasso poems, see *Opere di Torquato Tasso*, ed. Bartolo Tommaso Sozzi (Torino, 1974), II, 860–861.

³² H. David Brumble III, 'John Donne's "The Flea": Some implications of the encyclopedic and poetic flea traditions', *Critical Quarterly*, 15 (1973), 147–154. Cited in John F. Moffitt, 'La femme à la puce: the textual background of seventeenth-century painted "flea-hunts"', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 110 (1987), 103 n. 8. See also John Donne, *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1965), 174.

³³ Françon, 'Un motif de la poésie amoureuse', 328.

When Ronsard brought out his famous collection *Les amours* in 1552, the publication contained an appendix of nine musical settings of some of the poems by four composers.³⁴ This was the beginning of an unprecedented popularity of Ronsard's poems with contemporary musicians, first on French soil but later in the Low Countries as well. During the next fifty years more than two hundred of Ronsard's poems were set to music by more than thirty composers, Lasso included. Some composers even published whole collections using Ronsard poems. One of them, Guillaume Boni's *Sonetz de Pierre de Ronsard*, containing thirty-five settings, was published nine times between 1576 and 1624; it is recognized today as 'the most reprinted book of music by any single French composer of the 16th century'.³⁵ Another composer predisposed towards Ronsard poems in his publications was Anthoine de Bertrand. He published four collections of chansons using exclusively Ronsard texts.³⁶ The first of these collections also contains one of Ronsard's flea poem, *Ha, seigneur Dieu, que de graces écloses*, which was also set to music by Jean de Maletty in 1578.³⁷

We come again to Lasso because he was one of the composers to set the popular flea-poem, *Une puce j'ay dedans l'oreille*, attributed to Jean-Antoine de Baïf, also member of the *Pleiade* group.³⁸ His villanella *Une puce* was published in the same collection of chansons where *Bestia curvafia pulices* appeared.³⁹ Two other composers set this text to music. Fabrice Marin Caietain's setting was published in 1576, while Claude Le Jeune's setting appeared two years later.⁴⁰ Something that has escaped notice is that the first stanza and the refrain of the poem seems to be a translation or reworking of an earlier anonymous Italian poem set to music by Baldassare Donato in 1550.⁴¹

³⁴ Pierre Certon, Claude Goudimel, Clément Janequin and Marc-Antoine de Muret. See Guillaume Boni, *Sonetz de Pierre de Ronsard* (Paris, 1987), 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ *Les amours de Pierre de Ronsard, mises en musique a III parties* (Paris: Adrian le Roy & Robert Ballard, 1576), see RISM B2414; *Première livre des amours de P. de Ronsard, mis en musique a IIII parties* (Paris: Le Roy & Ballard, 1578), see RISM B2415; *Second livre des amours de P. de Ronsard, mis en musique a IIII parties* (Paris: Le Roy & Ballard, 1578); see RISM B2416; *Troisième livre de chansons, mis en musique a IIII parties* (Paris: Le Roy & Ballard, 1578), see RISM B2419.

³⁷ *Les amours de P. de Ronsard, mises en musique à quatre parties* (Paris: Adrian Le Roy & Robert Ballard, 1578). See RISM M243.

³⁸ However, Baïf's authorship is doubtful. See Horst Leuchtman, ed., *Kompositionen mit französischen Text: II. Die fünf- und achtstimmigen Chansons, Orlando di Lasso: Sämtliche Werke*, 2nd, rev. ed. (Wiesbaden, 1981), XIV, xxviii.

³⁹ See above, note 13.

⁴⁰ Leuchtman, *Kompositionen mit französischen Text*, xxviii.

⁴¹ Baldassare Donato, *Il primo libro di canzon villanesche alla napolitana* (Venezia: Ant. Gardano, 1550).

No pulice m'è 'ntrato nell'orecchia
Che nott'e giorno mi fa pazziare

Non faccio che mi fare
Corr'in qua, corr'in la
Piglia questa piglia quella
Dammi soccorso tu faccia mia bella.

Une puce j'ai dedans l'oreille', hélas!
Qui de nuit et de jour me fretille et mord
Et me faict devenir fou,

Nul remède n'i puis donner,
Je cour deça je cour dela,
Ote la moy, retire la moy, je t'en pri
O toute belle, secour moy.

Compositions with texts employing the same expression 'to have a flea in one's ear' as Baif's poem started to appear well before Ronsard wrote his flea-poems. Susato's fifth book of chansons, published in 1544⁴² contains two such compositions, one by Adrian Willaert and one by Cornelius Canis, both using this expression in lamenting the lack of money which could buy women's friendship and love. The origins of the expression *avoir la puce à l'oreille* [to have a flea in one's ear] can be traced back to the beginning of the fourteenth century when it either meant to have an irritating rebuke, unwelcome warning and hint (as the present day English equivalent does) or served as a gallant euphemism for amorous longing and for the torment of lovesickness.⁴³ This latter meaning appears in Willaert's chanson,⁴⁴ while the text of Canis's work falls into the first category.⁴⁵ As for Willaert, he chose to adopt a popular tune in his chanson (the two middle voices treat the original melody in canon), consequently the expression *avoir la puce à l'oreille* probably first appeared in music in the popular tune of *Faulte d'argent*, well-known already at the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁴⁶

In Italy the flea-topic seems to have been particularly popular in music. The earliest example is Donato's above cited composition, first published in 1550 and reprinted several times.⁴⁷ Giovan Leonardo Primavera's canzona, *Mamma nu grosso pulice m'intrato dentr'un'orecchia* appeared in 1574.⁴⁸

⁴² *Le cinquiesme livre contenant trente et deux chansons a cinq et a six parties* (Antwerpen: T. Susato, 1544). See RISM 1544/13.

⁴³ Claude Duneton, *La puce à l'oreille: anthologie des expressions populaires avec leur origine*, 2nd ed. rev. (Mayenne, 1985), 58–63.

⁴⁴ *Faulte d'argent c'est douleur non pareille... / Qui a argent sera le bienvenu / Entre des dames tres bien entretenu.*

⁴⁵ *Faulte d'argent c'est la puce en l'oreille... / Dont plus ne doibs pour ta devise avoir.*

⁴⁶ Other chansons, by Antoine de Févin (who died in 1511 or 1512), Josquin Desprez and Pierre de Manchicourt, also make use of this tune, although they lack the verses which contain the expression 'to have a flea in one's ear'.

⁴⁷ See above, note 41. This book was published twice in Venice by Antonio Gardano in 1550 (RISM D3405 and D3406). The latter issue was then reprinted in 1552 (RISM D3408) and in 1558 (RISM D3410). Girolamo Scotto published the same collection in 1551 (RISM D3407) and reissued it in 1556 (RISM D3409).

⁴⁸ Giovan Leonardo Primavera, *Il quarto libro de le canzon napolitane a tre voci* (Venezia: Giovanni Bariletto, 1574), see RISM P5453.

In 1580, Gasparo Costa published his canzonetta, *Godi pur d'il bel sen, felice pulce*,⁴⁹ and the text of this work was also used by Monteverdi in 1584⁵⁰ and Enrico Radesca in 1599,⁵¹ while Bernardino Mosto's madrigal *Una pulcia, madonna, in mezo al petto* was published in 1588.⁵² Numerous composers favored Tasso's above-mentioned poems which substitute the mosquito for the flea.⁵³ *Questa lieve zenzara* (from the poem *Loda la zanzara*) was set to music by Gentile Malpigli in 1598;⁵⁴ *Tu moristi in quel seno, piccioletta zenzara* (from the poem *Invidia la morte di una zanzara*) features in Giacomo Moro's and Lelio Bertani's madrigals (both from 1585) and in Stefano Landi's 1619 madrigal.⁵⁵ Another late example is Gesualdo's five-part madrigal *Ardita zanzaretta*, first published in 1611, then republished in 1613 and 1616.⁵⁶ Finally, Filippo Azzaiolo's villotta, *Sentomi la formicula su la gambetta* could be mentioned here.⁵⁷ Though in this frivolous little piece the allusion to the amorous encounter is carried out with still another insect, the ant, it nevertheless represents the same idea as the flea-topos. On the other hand, the text of Lasso's *Bestia curvafia pulices* has no amorous content and thus has only loose ties with the two types of the flea-topos discussed above, the metamorphosis motive and the euphemistic use of the expression 'to have a flea in one's ear'.⁵⁸ Since however, this topos was so wide-spread at that time, a poem about fleas, even with an innocent content,

⁴⁹ Gasparo Costa, *Canzonette, il primo libro a quattro voci* (Venezia: Alessandro Gardano, 1580), see RISM C4217.

⁵⁰ Claudio Monteverdi, *Canzonette a tre voci, libro primo*. (Venezia: Giacomo Vincenzi et Ricciardo Amadino, 1584), see RISM M3452. László Virágh called my attention to this work in his comments after my presentation of this article in Hungarian at the conference in memory of Bence Szabolcsi (Budapest, November 26, 1999).

⁵¹ Enrico Radesca di Foggia, *Thesoro amoroso, il primo libro delle canzonette a tre...* (Milano: erede di Simon Tini, et Francesco Besozzi, 1599), see RISM R12.

⁵² Bernardino Mosto, *Madrigali ... a cinque voci* (Antwerpen: Pierre Phalèse & Jean Bellère, 1588), see RISM M3811.

⁵³ See note 31 above.

⁵⁴ Gentile Malpigli, *Primo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venezia: Ricciardo Amadino, 1598), see RISM M253.

⁵⁵ Giacomo Moro, *Gli encomii musicali a quattro et a cinque voci* (Venezia: Giacomo Vincenzi et Ricciardo Amadino, 1585), see RILM M3729; Lelio Bertani, *Il primo libro de madrigali a sei voci* (Venezia: Angelo Gardano, 1585 and 1607), see RILM B2115–B2116; Stefano Landi, *Madrigali a cinque voci, libro primo* (Venezia: Gardano, appresso Bartolomeo Magni, 1619), see RILM L529.

⁵⁶ Carlo Gesualdo, principe da Venosa, *Madrigali a cinque voci, libro sesto* ([Napoli]: Giovanni Giacomo Carlino, 1611 and Venezia: Gardano, 1616); *Partitura delli sei libri de' madrigali a cinque voci* (Genova: Giuseppe Pavoni, 1613). See RISM G1741–1743. The same text inspired Peter Eötvös' composition *Insetti galanti* (Paris: Salabert, 1990). I would like to thank Márta Grabócz for this information.

⁵⁷ Filippo Azzaiolo, *Il primo libro de villotte alla padoana* (Venezia: Antonio Gardano, 1557 and 1564; Venezia: Girolamo Scotto, 1560 and 1564); *Villotte alla padoana* (Venezia: Francesco Rampazetto, 1566), see RISM A2979–2983. Thanks to Mária Eckhardt for calling my attention to this composition.

⁵⁸ Márta Grabócz suggested to me that *Bestia curvafia* might be a soldiers' song. Since the Augsburg chanson was acquired by a camp preacher, and the text itself mentions foot-soldiers, this might indeed be the case.

could probably awaken the same piquant connotations as the love poems. We can therefore add another title here to the number of musical compositions inspired by the flea-topic: the anonymous Augsburg chanson of Hungarian origin, *Bestia curva fia*.

Although the flea-motive faded from the musical scene with the madrigalists by the seventeenth century,⁵⁹ it conquered, at the same time, another area, the visual arts. The first paintings starting a long tradition, the so-called *flea-hunt* theme, was created by Bassano's circle at the beginning of the seventeenth century, followed by some forty paintings from the workshops of Italian, Spanish, Dutch, French, German and English masters well into the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ In these paintings the 'painter takes on the role of the contemporary poet-lover flea... The color-daubed tip of the painter's brush becomes the microcosmic amorous adventurer, scaling the breathtaking scenery of the swelling hills and dales of his recumbent mistress's roseate body.'⁶¹ One of the earliest examples, the *Merry flea hunt* by Gerard Hornhorst (c. 1625–30) depicts two laughing women: one of them, probably a prostitute, is sitting on a bed, her bare breasts lit by the candle held by her older, bespectacled companion, the procuress, as they catch a flea, hinting 'at the fate meted out to another kind of nocturnal "visitor".'⁶² In some of the later paintings again 'the setting is nocturnal and the flea-pursuer is female, solitary and semi-nude',⁶³ while in others the iconographic tradition of the flea-hunt inspired by the Renaissance flea-poems seem to merge into the depiction of low-life group scenes.

When some of these paintings emerged from the artists' studios, Lasso's chanson *Bestia curvafia pulices* was still in circulation: the collection in which it originally appeared was reprinted twice, in 1586 and 1619.⁶⁴ The publishers le Roy and Ballard also included it in one of the volumes of their popular series of chanson-collections, in the *Vingtuniesme livre de*

⁵⁹ Let me mention as a curiosity Joseph Bodin de Boismortier's character-piece *La Puce (Pièce en rondeau)* in one of his *Suites de pièces de clavecin* (op. 59, no. 3), originally published in 1736, republished by Erwin R. Jacobi in the series *Alte Musik, Leuckartiana*, no. 26 (Munich, 1959), 14–15. It is a lively piece with little jumps, probably imitating the flea.

⁶⁰ Arthur Pigler, *Barockthemen: Eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Budapest, 1974), II, 537–538.

⁶¹ Moffitt, 'La femme à la puce', 103.

⁶² Julius S. Held and Donald Posner, *17th and 18th Century Art: Baroque Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York, 1972), 226. Quoted in Moffitt, 'La femme à la puce', 99.

⁶³ Moffitt, 'La femme à la puce', 99.

⁶⁴ *Meslanges de la musique d'Orlande de Lassus* (Paris: A. le Roy & R. Ballard, 1586 and 1619). See RISM L967 and L1032.

chansons, first published in 1577 and reprinted in 1581.⁶⁵ These volumes attest to the lasting appeal of the pieces they contained and prove, at the same time, the sensitivity of their creator to the fashions of his time: in the case of the chansons *Bestia curvafia pulices* and *Une puce*, to the universal and enduring popularity of the flea-topic.

Transcription

Notes to the transcription*

In four cases I suggest alternative notes in brackets to replace those appearing in the manuscript. The original notes are: *ee* in measure 15, *d* in measure 57, *f* in measure 76 and *b flat* in measure 101. In a few places some words needed to be added: these also appear in brackets. I supply capitalization and punctuation, which is arbitrary in the manuscript, to conform with the structure of the elegiac couplets. In measures 18, 20 the *Discantus* reads *Pesoniensis* instead of the correct *Posoniensis*, attesting, perhaps, to the unfamiliarity of the scribe with the town of Posonium. In the *Bassus*, *Posoniensis* is clear both times, in the *Altus*, however, the left circle of the first *s* almost touches the preceding *o* thus making it easy to misread it as *e*.

* I want to thank Dana Dalton for her advice on the transcription, to George and Julia Deák for their willingness and patience in helping with the preparation of the printed version, and to John Mallia for finding solutions in the music notation program for the more intricate details.

⁶⁵ See RISM 1577/6 and 1581/3.

Bestia curva fia

c. 1572

[Discantus]  Be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va


[Altus]  Be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a

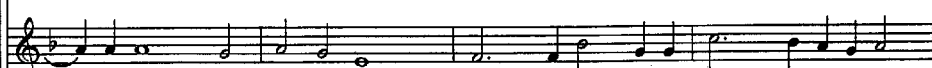
[Bassus]  Be - sti - a cur -


5  fi - a be - sti - a be - sti - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a

 cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be -

 va fi - a be - sti - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be -

10  be - sti - a cur - va fi - a pu - li - ces pu - li - ces pu - li -

 sti - a cur - va fi - a pu - li - ces pu - li - ces

 sti - a cur - va fi - a pu - li - ces pu - li -

Transcription, p. 1

14

ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces proh proh proh—
 pu - li - ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces proh proh proh—
 ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces pu - li - ces proh proh

18

— Pe - so - ni - en - sis Pe - so - ni - en - sis pro - ge - ni -
 — Po - so - ni - en - sis Po - so - ni - en - sis pro - ge - ni -
 proh Po - so - ni - en - sis Po - so - ni - en - sis pro - ge - ni -

23

es pun - gunt pun - gunt pun - gunt pun - gunt. Be - sti - a
 es pun - gunt pun - gunt pun - gunt pun - gunt. Be - sti -
 es pun - gunt pun - gunt pun - gunt pun - gunt.

28

cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a
 a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur -
 Be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur -

Transcription, p. 2

32

cur - va fi - a per si - mi - lis pe - di - tum

va fi - a per si - mi - lis pe - di - tum per si - mi - lis

va fi - a _____ per - si - mi - lis

36

pe - di - tum pas - sim pro - ter - va pe - di - clis pas - sim pro - ter -

pe - di - tum pas - sim pro - ter - va pe - di - clis pas - sim pro - ter - va pas -

pe - di - tum _____ pas - sim pro - ter - va

41

va pro - ter - va pe - di - clis [pas - sim] pre - fo - can - da pi - gra pre - fo - can -

sim pro - ter - va pe - di - clis pre - fo - can - da pi - gra pre - fo - can -

pas - sim pro - ter - va pe - di - clis pre - fo - can - da pi - gra pre - fo -

46

da. Be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va

da pi - gra. Be - sti - a cur - va fi - a cur - va

can - da pi - gra. _____ Be - sti - a cur - va

Transcription, p. 3

51

fi - a per - lu - strat pec - tus po - pli - tes po - pli - tes per - lu - strat

fi - a per - lu - strat pec - tus pop - li - tes per - lu - strat

fi - a per - lu - strat

56

pec - tus po - pli - tes per - lu - strat pec - tus po - pli -

[pec - tus] pop - li - tes per - lu - strat pec - tus pop - li -

pec - tus pop - li - tes per - lu - strat pec - tus pop - li - tes

60

tes pel - les - que po - li - tas pel - les - que po -

tes pel - les - que po - li - tas pel - les - que po - li - tas po -

pel - les - que po - li - tas pel - les - que po - li - tas

65

li - tas pro - pug - nat pas - sim pro - pug - nat pas - sim pro - pug - nat pas -

li - tas pro - pug - nat pas - sim pro - pug - nat pas - sim pro - pug - nat

po - li - tas pro - pug - nat pas - sim pro -

Transcription, p. 4

70

sim. Be-sti-a cur-va fi-a

pas-sim. Be-sti-a be-sti-a cur-va fi-a be-sti-a be-sti-

pug-nat pas-sim. Be-sti-a

74

be-sti-a cur-va cur-va fi-a pel-lan-tur

a cur-va fi-a cur-va fi-a pel-lan-tur

cur-va fi-a be-sti-a cur-va fi-a pel-lan-tur

78

pu-li-ces pe-la-gus per-dat-que pe-di-clos pe-di-

pu-li-ces pe-la-gus per-dat-que pe-di-clos [pe-di-

pu-li-ces pe-la-gus per-dat-que pe-di-clos pe-di-

82

clos pro-fun-dum pa-stos pel-lan-tur pu-li-

clos] pro-fun-dum pa-stos pel-lan-tur pu-li-

clos pro-fun-dum pa-stos pel-lan-tur pu-li-

Transcription, p. 5

86

ces pe - la - gus per - dat - que pe - dic - los pe - di - clos pro -
 ces pe - la - gus per - dat - que pe - di - clos pe - di - clos pro -
 ces pe - la - gus per - dat - que pe - di - clos pe - di - clos pro -

90

fun - dum pa - stos. Be - sti - a cur - va fi - a
 fun - dum pa - stos. Be - sti - a cur - va be - sti - a cur - va
 fun - dum pa - stos. Be - sti - a cur - va fi -

95

be - sti - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a
 fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a
 a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur -

99

cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a.
 cur - va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a.
 va fi - a be - sti - a cur - va fi - a.

Transcription, p. 6