

## MUSC 115 Response 4 – Josquin’s *El grillo é bon cantore*

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If you still remember, as a member of my high school’s choir, I sang Josquin’s *El grillo é bon cantore*, so what better piece to analyze this secular chanson?

If one takes the lyrics of *El grillo* literally, then the piece is an Italian song that writes about a cricket who is an excellent singer. The lyrics describe the cricket’s ability to sing days and night, “*canta giorno e notte*.” The cheerful melody, lively rhythm, and interweaving short vocal parts bring forth a joyful theme, making *El grillo* a lighthearted piece of music.

However, as with a handful of other Renaissance chansons, the lyrics of this song can be interpreted metaphorically. Scholarly interpretations, surprisingly, diverge drastically over the implications of this song. On a positive side, some scholars believe that the first stanza claims that crickets are good singers, despite the only song they sing is monotonous yet never-ending chirping. The second stanza describes how birds have superior singing skills, and the last stanza explains stanza 1, that the crickets are good singers because of their perseverance, that they sing even in the most adversarial weathers. This leads to their conclusion that the *El grillo* symbolizes how, in the matter of love, “sweet fanciful talk is worth less than endurance and fidelity,” where the former refers to the birds that can sing beautifully but only when they want to, and the latter to crickets who sing incessantly.<sup>1</sup>

On the flip side, the very same lyrics may be interpreted in a sarcastic viewpoint, leading to the complete opposite. If one views the first stanza sarcastically, calling crickets bad singers instead, then the song becomes a commentary on the limitations of the crickets’ singing abilities and the superiority of the birds. The second stanza, viewed in this light, becomes a praise of the birds’ beautiful singing skills, and the last stanza a criticism of the crickets’ persistent, annoying, monotonous song. Metaphorically, this song may represent the criticism of those who persist in love despite their lack of abilities, and a celebration of those who have the skills to truly captivate the heart of a lover. And all of these difference comes solely from the different interpretations of the line “*El grillo è buon cantore*.”

Nevertheless, I must not conclude this write-up without mentioning what we discussed in lecture, as well as what Claudio Gallico has alluded: the word *grillo* refers to a vulgar term in Italian slangs, and with this understanding, the song describes an “ardent little creature [that] makes many a member of the opposite sex happy with his quickly moving and long-lasting organ.”<sup>2</sup> Truly secular!

In conclusion, “*El grillo*” is a complex and multifaceted piece that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, reflecting the rich cultural and historical context of the Renaissance period.

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<sup>1</sup>de Victoria, T.L. "Josquin des Prez and his 'Erotic' Cricket." *OMICS Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-5. doi: 10.4172/2329-6797.1000118.

<sup>2</sup>Frisch, Walter. "Josquin's El Grillo: A Song of Love and Fidelity or of Bitterness and Sarcasm?" *Musicology Today*, vol. 5, 1986, pp. 97-104. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20203933](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20203933).