

A NOVEL INSPIRED BY THE LIFE OF  
**GUIDO D'AREZZO**

# MUSIC'S GUIDING HAND

**Kingsley Day**

## Preface

**M**ore than a thousand years after the death of Guido of Arezzo—also known as Guido Monaco (Guido the Monk)—his influence remains pervasive. As the inventor of music notation, he created a method of specifying pitch using the lines and spaces of a staff, a system still used universally today. He also devised standard syllables for the steps of the musical scale, an innovation that is famously celebrated in the song “Do-Re-Mi” from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music*.

Yet, aside from his authorship of four surviving works of music theory, the documented facts of his life are scarce. Even the date and location of his birth and death are uncertain, though local tradition places his birth in Talla, a small town north of Arezzo in north central Italy.

The principal source of information about Guido’s life is his own *Epistola ad Michaelem*—a letter he wrote to Michael, a friend and fellow monk at the Benedictine abbey of Pomposa, located in northern Italy near the Adriatic coast. It was as a monk at Pomposa that Guido developed a new way of notating music as an aid to train singers. But his innovations aroused resentment at the monastery, so he took a new position further

inland, training the choirs at the cathedral in Arezzo. Under the patronage of its bishop, Theodaldus, he began putting his ideas in writing, and his *Micrologus* became the most widely circulated music treatise of the Middle Ages. He also collected his written-out chants in an antiphoner, with all pitches notated precisely on a four-line musical staff. To explain this new notational system, he provided the chant book with two introductions, one in prose (*Prologus in antiphonarium*) and one in verse (*Regule rithmice*). The *Micrologus*, *Prologus*, *Regule rithmice*, and *Epistola* were widely copied and have all survived; there are no extant copies of the chant book.

Word of Guido's methods reached Rome, and he was summoned by Pope John XIX, who was so impressed with Guido's system that he asked him to stay and teach the singers there. But the area's summer heat and vaporous swamps adversely affected Guido's health, so he presumably went back to Arezzo, planning to return to Rome the following winter. The abbot at Pomposa, having repented his earlier opposition, invited Guido to come back to the abbey, and Guido at least hoped to do so, especially in light of clerical graft at the Arezzo cathedral.

It was soon after his Roman sojourn that Guido wrote his *Epistola* to Michael, who was still at Pomposa. In the section titled *Ad invendiendum ignotum cantum*, Guido outlines his latest innovation, a system using the syllables beginning each phrase of the chant *Ut queant laxis* to identify the notes of the scale: *ut re mi fa sol la*. (In later centuries, *ut* was changed to *do*, and *si* or *ti* was added as the seventh scale tone.) Another medieval pedagogical device, using the fingertips and joints of

the left palm to indicate the notes of the scale, became known as Guido's Hand or the Guidonian Hand. The device is never mentioned in Guido's own writings, although it is attributed to him in Sigebert of Gembloux's *Chronicon sive Chronographia*, written roughly half a century after Guido's death.

Documents at a Camaldolese monastery near Avellana, east of Arezzo, indicate that Guido later served there as prior. Beyond these few details, the rest is speculation.

# Chapter One

## THE CLAY TAKES SHAPE

The gentle hum of the potter's wheel was barely audible above the cries of pain.

Carefully shaping the clay with his hands, prodding the wheel with a stick whenever it began losing speed, Duccio did his best to ignore the piercing screams from the cottage behind him. He knew the midwife was doing all she could to help his wife through the pangs of another childbirth. And he had promised to produce a dozen new earthenware goblets for the manor outside the village, so this was no time to delay his work.

“May the child come quickly,” prayed Duccio silently as the screams continued. He knew Arditia was strong—she had already survived the births of their two sons. But his brow furrowed with each cry as he sensed the intensity of her pain. At least the whirring wheel helped distract his mind from something he could do nothing about, and he kept it spinning at maximum speed.

Muscular in build, of medium height, with dark curly hair and a thick beard, Duccio had just entered his fourth decade. He wore the same gray sleeveless tunic he wore every day, a rough

woolen garment extending past his knees, accompanied by his usual linen undershirt, woolen stockings, and thick leather clogs. His pottery shed—containing the wheel, shelves for drying and display, and crates for storing glaze and brushes—was a crude wooden lean-to abutting one wall of the family’s modest cottage. Just beyond it stood the stone kiln, longer than Duccio was tall, with stokeholes at each end.

A potter like his father and grandfather before him, Duccio expertly worked the whirring mass at the center of the wheel, instinctively knowing just when and how to caress the clay to give it shape. Soon a small cup began to emerge, perfectly rounded and gracefully contoured. In just a few moments it would be time to remove his handiwork from the wheel and set it aside to dry.

From within the cottage, Ardita’s screams suddenly gave way to a different cry—the bawling of a newborn baby. Seconds later, seven-year-old Bertoldo, their elder son, ran breathlessly from the cottage to his father.

“Papà! Papà! It’s a boy! I have a new little brother!”

“Another boy!” exclaimed Duccio, still concentrating on the spinning clay.

“What will you name him?” panted Bertoldo.

Duccio’s mind flew back to his own boyhood, learning the potter’s trade at this very wheel from his late father. Without answering his son, Duccio slowed the wheel to a stop, letting the flawlessly shaped goblet come to rest. With the tip of his index finger, he impulsively traced the letters of his father’s name on the side of the cup: *Guido*.



Nestled in the Casentino mountains in north central Italy, surrounded by wooded pastures, the tranquil village of Talla was four or five hours' walk north of Arezzo, a city known in Roman times for its molded, glazed ceramics. Duccio and his forebears were among the medieval remnants of that artisanship, working the area's distinctive clay to produce earthenware pottery for the villagers and the local nobility. He had already begun to instruct Bertoldo and his younger brother Bernardo in the familial craft, and so later that evening the boys helped their father set out the dozen earthenware goblets for drying—plus the extra one that Duccio had inscribed in honor of the new baby.

A few days later, after the pieces had been glazed and then fired in the kiln, Duccio brought the finished "Guido" goblet into the family cottage—a two-room dwelling with a dirt floor, a thatched roof, and walls made from mud-covered branches. Toward the roof line, tiny open windows admitted a few glints of sunlight, but most of the rooms' illumination was provided by candles.

Duccio was excited to show the goblet to his wife. A petite peasant woman in her mid-twenties with pale skin, full lips, and cascading dark hair, Ardita was wearing her usual long brown woolen dress. Claspng her newborn son as she sat on the straw mattress, she could have plausibly modeled for an artist painting a Madonna and child.

"But what does it say?" she asked hesitantly, seeing the

characters on the goblet but unable to read or write. Even Duccio knew only how to write his own name and his father's.

"It's his name: Guido, just like my father," Duccio answered proudly. "He'll never be a potter himself," he added, knowing he could only bequeath his trade to their first son, or at most to the first two. "But as long as he keeps this, he'll never forget where he came from."

The first week of May found the whole family at the village church for baby Guido's christening. Duccio brought along the goblet, carefully wrapped in a woolen cape, and hesitantly asked the priest if it could be used in the ceremony. The reverend father nodded and blessed it with a sign of the cross.

After Duccio and Ardita formally presented the child and promised to raise him faithfully, the priest immersed tiny Guido in the baptismal font, pronouncing the words of the sacrament. Right on cue, the baby started crying. Smiling indulgently, the priest gestured for the boy's father to dip the goblet into the font. Duccio did so and then tentatively poured a few drops of water on little Guido's head.

"The cup is now a holy chalice," whispered the priest as he restored the squawking infant to his mother's arms. "Treasure it always."

Nodding reverently, Duccio dried and rewrapped the cup. When the family returned home, he carefully set it in a safe place at the back of the highest shelf in their wooden cupboard.



All three boys grew up listening to the hum of the potter's wheel, but for Guido it held a special fascination. From an early age he seemed mesmerized by the sound.

One day as Duccio stood working at the wheel, he heard a small, high-pitched voice humming behind him. He turned to find little Guido—who had barely begun to walk—singing along with the wheel. Duccio smiled as he continued his work, but then he had an idea. He slowed down the wheel so that the pitch of its hum began to drop. Soon Guido was humming lower too, matching the sound of the spinning. Then Duccio gave the wheel a few vigorous turns, speeding it up so that its pitch started to rise. Sure enough, Guido's humming rose higher as well, his voice soaring like a soprano choirboy. Bursting into laughter, Duccio picked up the lad and kissed the top of his head.

"Little Guido," he exclaimed, "I'll never be able to spin the wheel fast enough to make it hum as high as you can!"

Before long, Guido was strong enough to turn it himself. While his father was busy glazing pottery or firing the clay, the boy would stand beside the wheel and try to make it spin with ever greater speed, his delighted shrieks rising in perfect unison with the hum.

"It's too bad he cannot be a potter," Duccio told Ardita. "He hears the music of the wheel."

The wheel wasn't the only music Guido heard. The songs of birds never failed to draw his attention, and he would often imitate their calls. When his parents took him to Mass, even if he was fidgeting, he would stop and listen as soon as he heard the

chanting of the priest. And one night, as Ardità was serenading him as usual with a soothing lullaby, she was amazed to hear him begin singing along with her.

She stopped to listen as Guido continued the tune without her. “Do you hear?” she whispered to Duccio. “The boy has music in his heart.”

One autumn morning when Guido was still a toddler, the whole family went bustling off to a farm on the other side of Talla. It was the home of Ardità’s brother Lorenzo and his wife, who were caring for Guido’s dying maternal grandfather. Assorted cousins were milling about the clan’s tiny cottage, and there was a feeling of familial affection, despite the sad occasion.

Entering the rear room where her father was lying, Ardità saw a tall, slender man in a black cassock kneeling beside the cot. He was beardless, with the top of his head shaved in a tonsure as a sign of his religious vows. A large crucifix hung from his neck. When he looked up, Ardità cried, “Cristofano!”

He stood, a head taller than his sister, and gave her a brotherly embrace. “Lorenzo sent word that our father hoped to see me one last time,” he told her quietly. “The abbot gave me permission to return here for a few days to pay my last respects.”

Turning to the boys, Ardità said, “This is your Uncle Cristofano. He’s a monk—a holy man in service to God.”

Following their father’s example, Guido and his brothers bowed their heads.

“These are our sons: Bertoldo, Bernardo, and Guido,” said Ardità.

As Cristofano bent forward to greet them, little Guido took a few wobbly steps toward him and grabbed the dangling crucifix, giving it a tug. They all laughed, but later Ardita would remember the moment. Could it have been a sign?

# Chapter Two

## THE CALL OF THE CHURCH

**D**uccio and his family kept track of the annual rotation of the seasons, but their specific knowledge of the years' progression was entirely secondhand or thirdhand. Monasteries and wealthy nobles kept elaborate calendars tabulating the days, months, and years, including saints' days and liturgical feasts. Eventually that information filtered down through priests, itinerant artisans, and others who claimed to know. And gradually even the remote village of Talla became aware of the approaching millennium—the year AD 1000, the thousandth year after the birth of Christ.

Talk of the millennium was nearly always accompanied by fearful mutterings: Surely this landmark year would bring the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. Monks and other biblical scholars pored over the Bible's Book of Revelation, pondering its reference to those who “lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” Some men of wealth and position went so far as to donate all their belongings to the poor and wait for the end.

For Bertoldo and Bernardo, all of this was just another way to tease their little brother, now eight years old.

“You’ll never even make it to your tenth birthday,” Bernardo taunted Guido.

“Why not?”

“Because the world is about to end,” answered Bertoldo with a note of finality.

“Why should I believe that?” asked Guido defiantly. “Besides, if the world is about to end, why are you learning to be a potter? You might as well quit trying.”

Unsure how to answer, Bertoldo ran to his mother. “Mamma, Mamma! Guido says the world isn’t going to end.”

“Guido!” Ardita called sternly as the boys approached. “You know we must all be prayerful and vigilant as our Savior’s millennium draws near.”

“But the world isn’t going to end,” Guido retorted. “What could stop the sun from coming up every morning?”

“You must humble yourself before others who are wiser than you.”

“Anyone who thinks the world is ending can’t be wiser than me.”

“Guido, that’s enough! No supper for you tonight.”

“If I know I’m right, why shouldn’t I say so?” he continued, even as his mother escorted him to the ladder leading up to the tiny loft where he slept.

In the end it was Guido who was able to say “I told you so”—although, with the imprecision of date calculations, it was only some weeks after Easter of the year 1000 that the

widespread millennial fears began to abate. One Sunday in late April, at Mass in the village's cramped stone chapel, the priest announced that to celebrate the start of the new millennium, a special Mass of Thanksgiving would be offered on the following Sunday at the Cathedral of St. Maria and St. Stefano in Arezzo.

"We must go to Arezzo," said Ardita as the family was returning home.

"It's an awfully long journey just to go to Mass at a different church," answered Duccio skeptically.

"Duccio! This happens only once every thousand years," retorted his wife. "The boys will be able to say they celebrated the new millennium at the big cathedral."

None of the boys had ever heard of a cathedral before, but the occasion sounded exciting.

"Please, Papà, can we go to Arezzo?" begged Bernardo, soon joined by the whining entreaties of his two brothers. Looking at their eager faces, Duccio could only shrug.

And so a week later, equipped with a basket of bread and fruit for the journey, Duccio, Ardita, and the three boys set out before dawn for the long trek down the mountain. Gentry, artisans, and peasants from all around the area were converging on Pionta Hill outside the walls of Arezzo. Tired but excited, the family joined the throng filing across the portico into the cathedral. Although the centuries-old building was in poor repair, the boys gasped in awe as they gazed at the high vaulted wooden ceiling and the twin rows of rounded archways framing the central nave.

More people continued to pour in, and eventually the priests

and canons took their places in the elevated chancel to begin the service. The choir was largely hidden from view by a screen, so when a chorus of men's voices began to sing, the sound seemed to come from another world.

*Te Deum laudamus: te Dominum confitemur.*

*Te aeternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur.*

Listening with rapt attention, young Guido was transported to a whole new state of being. For the first time in his life, he was hearing the liturgical chants sung not by a single droning priest but by a multitude of trained singers. As his ears drank in the rich, golden voices, Guido little suspected that even greater enchantment was still to come. For as the Mass continued, a hymn was sung by the boy choristers, their pure, sweet voices reverberating into every corner of the nave. It was as if he were being serenaded by angels.

At the end of the service, Guido was still mesmerized by what he had heard. Not even knowing why, but drawn by some inner compulsion, he tried to push forward toward the chancel screen.

"Where are you going?" exclaimed his mother, grabbing him firmly by the hand.

"The music—it was so beautiful," responded Guido, as if in a trance.

"Come along now, we can't let you get lost in the crowd," said Ardita, giving his shoulder a stern tug. But for the boy, even this rough treatment could not undo the spell that the service had cast.

After pausing along the road to eat their modest meal, the family began the hours-long walk back to Talla. Ardita and

Duccio chatted quietly; Bertoldo and Bernardo joked with each other. But Guido walked along in silence, as if replaying the entire service in his mind.

Eventually the path began sloping upward into the foothills of the mountains, and as the trudge became more difficult, the rest of the family gradually ceased their chatter. Only then did they notice that Guido was softly singing to himself. Leaning toward him to pay closer attention, Ardita realized with a start that he was singing a hymn he had heard at the cathedral—intoning every note and syllable perfectly.

*Te Deum laudamus: te Dominum confitemur.*

*Te aeternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur.*

Quietly, she caught the attention of Duccio and the older boys, and they all listened in wonder as Guido continued to sing chants from the service's liturgy. The rest of the way home, his parents and brothers walked as quietly as possible, reluctant to disturb Guido's singing.

That night, after the boys were asleep, Ardita reminded Duccio of what had happened.

"He's the third son," she continued. "Bertoldo will inherit your pottery trade, or maybe Bernardo, but never Guido."

Duccio shrugged, unsure where her thoughts were leading.

"And now we know his calling," she said. "His life must be devoted to the Church—especially to music." Squeezing Duccio affectionately as he nodded in agreement, she continued, "The music inside him will be dedicated to God."



Having determined young Guido's future, Ardita lost little time in trying to make that future come to pass. She immediately thought of her brother Cristofano, since he was a monk at the Benedictine monastery in Pomposa. If she could get word to him, he might be able to help lead the boy to a monastic calling.

When she shared these thoughts with their village priest, he smiled noncommittally. But fortunately he recalled their conversation some months later when an emissary from Rome arrived in Talla and sought lodging for the night.

"Of course, my son," answered the priest in welcome. "And to where do you journey from here?"

"I am bringing messages from the pope to the Basilica Ursiana in Ravenna and then to the monastery at Pomposa."

"Pomposa," repeated the priest pensively. Within the hour he had sent to fetch Ardita, who soon was eagerly entering his modest rectory.

"You are traveling to Pomposa? To the monastery?" she asked the visitor after the priest had introduced him.

"I am."

"My brother is a monk there. His name is Cristofano. Could you ask for him at Pomposa, and tell him that you've spoken with his sister Ardita?"

"Of course."

Taking a deep breath, she went on. "Then could you ask him if my young son Guido could join the monastery? He's a very smart boy and has a wonderful ear for music."

"I see," answered the Roman emissary. "But does the boy have the proper temperament to be a monk?"

Thinking of her outspoken son, Ardita hesitated. “He is young. He will learn to train his thoughts.”

“I will be happy to pass along your request,” answered the visitor. “I have other business for the Holy See, but I will bring back word when I am returning this way.”

“I’m so grateful,” responded Ardita joyfully. She bowed to receive his blessing, then added, “May God grant you a safe journey.”

The emissary departed the next morning, and although Ardita reported the conversation to her husband, she said nothing to Guido. His life continued as usual—doing chores for his mother, glazing pottery for his father, and getting teased by his brothers.

Many more months went by before the emissary returned to Talla on his way back to Rome. When he told the village priest about his visit to Pomposa, the reverend father promptly escorted him to Duccio and Ardita’s cottage. Summoning her husband from the potter’s wheel and sending the boys outside to forage for berries, Ardita seated their unexpected guests before the hearth and welcomed them with an offering of bread and wine.

“Madam,” began the visitor, “I have spoken with your brother, and he has spoken with the abbot.”

“Yes?”

“As soon as the boy has reached the age of ten, the monastery will be happy to welcome him as an oblate.”

Barely able to contain her excitement, Ardita threw her arms around Duccio.

“What does it mean to be an oblate?” asked Duccio, reluctantly admitting his ignorance.

“An oblate is a lay member of the community who is permitted to experience monastic life firsthand,” the priest explained. “He will live and work with other oblates, sharing in the life of the monastery to the extent that is fitting. Of course, he is free to leave if at any time you should request his return. When he is older, if he shows signs of an authentic calling, he may take vows to commit to a lifetime of holy service.”

Duccio looked at Ardita, whose eyes shone with happiness.

“Thank you both,” he said. “We are most grateful.”

“And thanks be to God for bringing the Church this new servant,” responded the priest as he and the Roman visitor politely departed.

The next Sunday, after returning home from Mass, Duccio and Ardita sent the older boys outside and sat down with Guido in front of the open fireplace. Looking inquiringly from one parent’s face to the other, he tried to imagine what in the world they were about to tell him.

“I have a brother named Cristofano,” Ardita began. “You probably don’t remember, but you met him when you were little, before my father died.” As Guido showed no signs of recognition, Ardita smiled and added, “You grabbed for the crucifix he was wearing. He’s a monk at the monastery in Pomposa.”

Guido still stared back uncomprehendingly, so Duccio interjected, “A monastery is where men go—and boys too—to

become monks, to devote themselves to serving God in the Church.”

“Cristofano has sent us word that you can join the monastery there as an oblate,” continued Ardita.

“What’s an oblate?” asked Guido hesitantly.

“Someone who studies and learns to live as a monk. Eventually you will become a novice, and finally you’ll be a monk yourself.”

“In Pomposa?” asked Guido. “Where is that?”

“Cristofano told us that it lies to the north and east, in Romagna, not far from the coast of the Adriatic Sea,” answered his mother.

For a few moments, Guido sat in silence, gazing at the floor. His parents looked at each other, unsure what to say next. Suddenly their son stood up and asked reproachfully, “So you’ve decided my whole future without asking me?”

Duccio and Ardita exchanged another uncomfortable glance. Finally Duccio answered, “My pottery trade will go to your brothers. As our third son, your prospects are . . .” His voice trailed off.

“And we’ve known for a long time that you have a talent for music—a great *love* for music,” added his wife warmly. “You’ll learn to sing all the chants, just like they sang at the cathedral in Arezzo.”

The magical memory of the millennial service suddenly flooded the boy’s mind. He took a long, slow breath.

“Fine, I will go,” responded Guido quietly. Then he added,

with more than a hint of defiance, “You should have asked me first.”

“Guido,” said Duccio sternly, “as a monk you must learn to keep your opinions to yourself.”