It is not known whether Browning was thinking of any one piece by Galuppi; in Galuppi's time, the terms "toccata" and "[sonata](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata)" were less clearly differentiated than they later became, and were used interchangeably.[1] A number of Galuppi's sonatas have been suggested as Browning's inspiration, but as Charles van den Borren wrote in *The Musical Times*, "every poet has the right to evade the prosaic minutiae of fact", and it is impossible to state with confidence that one Galuppi piece has more claim than another to be the inspiration for the poem.[1]

Commentators have remarked on the musicality of the poem.[2] Browning was trained extensively in music, both in composition and musical theory.[2] Professional musicians and musicologists have been dismissive of his use of musical terms, but the music scholar [Deryck Cooke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deryck_Cooke) writes of the poet's precise grasp of fine musical detail in this work.[3] David Parkinson identifies "a link between each syllable of the poem and the musical notes of a scale."[4] Stephen H. Ford contends that the whole poem is constructed "on a double octave form".[5] Marc R. Plamondon argues that Browning's subjective interpretation produces "not just a commentary on music, but a complex portrait of the person attempting to interpret the music."[2] The critic Robert C. Schweik argues that the poem does not require the reader to know Galuppi's music, and that Browning does not provide any description of what the music is really like.[6]

Themes[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Toccata_of_Galuppi%27s&action=edit&section=2)]

The poem is written in the first person, but the voice is not that of Browning himself: the speaker, unlike the poet, has never been out of England, and is picturing life in 18th-century Venice through his response to Galuppi's music.[6] Schweik comments that the speaker's remarks on Venice include "typical bits and snatches of commonplace, second-hand information" and "misunderstandings that would be characteristic of an Englishman who really knows very little about Venice."[6] The speaker, more interested in science than the arts,[7] even gives Galuppi the wrong first name ("Baldassaro" for the correct "Baldassare", an error perpetuated by some literary critics).[7][8]

After the speaker's fanciful and superficial evocation of old Venice, in stanzas I to IX, the voice goes on to muse on the nature of immortality, first of art and then of life itself.[6] In stanza X, the speaker ponders on the deaths of Galuppi's original audiences, and in the following stanzas he contemplates his own mortality.[6] By the final stanza, XV, the speaker has come so far from his original complacency as to have real empathy with the people of 18th-century Venice.[6]

Hawlin, Stefan. “Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' How Venice Once Was Dear.” *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 41, no. 164, 1990, pp. 496–509. *New Series*, www.jstor.org/stable/516276.