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**RIVISTA DI STORIA
DELLA CHIESA IN ITALIA**

ESTRATTO

V&P
UNIVERSITÀ

1973, Philippe Ariès si era visto costretto a dover tralasciare la questione del battesimo per mancanza di studi.

LUISA CLOTILDE GENTILE

I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura fra Rinascimento e Barocco. Atti del convegno storico internazionale (Bologna, 8-10 dicembre 2000), a cura di GIANNA POMATA - GABRIELLA ZARRI, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2005 (Biblioteca di storia sociale, 33), XLIV-412 p.

The field of musicology has changed dramatically in the last thirty years. In the early 1980s, the only scholar at a major research university who had done substantial work on women and music was Anthony Newcomb from the University of California, Berkeley, who wrote an excellent study of the three ladies in Ferrara, which had grown out of his 1969 Princeton dissertation¹. Even these ladies were not composers, they were performers of madrigals written by male composers such Luca Marenzio, Luzzasco Luzzaschi, and Alfonso Fontanelli. When it came to the subject of women composers in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, one would, of course, always mention Hildegard of Bingen, and otherwise assume that all female artistic talent was suppressed. One was aware of certain people who worked on music in convents, but they were marginal.

It is therefore not surprising that Craig Monson, the first scholar to write a fundamental book on this subject, first established his reputation as a solid William Byrd scholar and only later turned to research on music in convents². Eventually his book on the Bolognese nuns received the biggest book prize the American Musicological Society has to give, the Otto Kinkeldey Award.

Since Monson's book we have had a virtual explosion of studies of music in convents. There are Robert Kendrick and Colleen Reardon, who wrote on convents in Milan and Siena, respectively³. Kimberlyn Montford gave an account of music in Roman convents, while Jonathan Glixon did the same for Venetian institutions⁴. Finally, Elissa B. Weaver has studied dramatic productions in Tuscan convents⁵. All of

¹ A. NEWCOMB, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597*, Princeton, N.J., 1980.

² C. A. MONSON, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent*, Berkeley 1995.

³ R. L. KENDRICK, *Celestial Sirens: Nuns and Their Music in Early Modern Milan*, Oxford 1996; C. REARDON, *Holy Concord within Sacred Walls: Nuns and Music in Siena, 1575-1700*, Oxford 2002.

⁴ K. MONTFORD, *Music in the convents of Counter-Reformation Rome*, Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1999; J. E. GLIXON, *Images of Paradise or Worldly Theaters? Toward a Taxonomy of Musical Performances at Venetian Nunneries*, in *Essays on Music and Culture in Honor of Herbert Kellman*, ed. B. HAGGH, Paris 2001, 423-51.

⁵ E. B. WEAVER, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women*, Cambridge 2002.

these scholars have fundamentally transformed our field; they address such issues as the musical training these nuns received, the terms under which they were admitted to the convent, the relationship between these musical nuns and the outside world, to name just a few topics. Last but not least, much of the music these nuns composed has been edited and recorded. Composers such as Lucrezia Vizzana and Chiara Margherita Cozzolani are a necessary part of the curriculum for anyone who teaches seventeenth-century music.

The book under discussion complements these earlier studies. In the first chapter, Craig Monson concentrates again on Bolognese convents. He addresses three different issues: first, he has found some additional archival documents which illuminate the financial agreements between the convents and the families, agreements under which women musicians were admitted to the convents; second, he has some additional insights into the musical training the nuns received; and third he has dug up sound more biographical data on one of most famous seventeenth-century singers, an ex-nun, Laura Bovio. The article includes a useful appendix with all known information about the 150 nuns active in Bologna in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Not surprisingly, most were organists and choir directors. Moreover, the vast majority was eager to perform, because regular performance could result in a reduction of the dowry. Monson gives an example of a nun (Angela Venturoli), who was accepted into the convent in 1781 with a reduced dowry of 1000 Lire instead of the usual 4000 Lire. Seven years later, she developed heart problems, and could not perform any more. Monson found letters that reminded the parents of their original agreement; they payed all on their own 1000 lire to the convent to make up for the inactivity of their daughter.

We should not think that all nuns enjoyed making music. Monson gives the example of a nun who inherited money from her brother and used it to get out of her duties as an organist. The important point here is that there is very little truth in the idyllic picture which some older historians have painted of all nuns enjoying music-making in the convent.

Colleen Reardon, the author of the second article, adds more information on the Sieneese nuns. Siena was different from Bologna in that the nuns were not writing their own compositions. Moreover, they were not in constant conflict with church authorities about what kind of music making would be appropriate for a nun. Quite the contrary, the patrician families actively supported the music making, arranged for commissions from composers, and attended performances. Reardon even suggests that male singers were allowed to perform with the nuns, a point which might not be readily accepted by everyone⁶. In fact, as Reardon has written in her book, the Chigi family commissioned an opera to be performed by two of their daughters. The Sieneese composer Alessandro Della Ciaia, also a distant relative of the Chigis, dedicated his 1650 publication *Lamentationi sagre e motetti ad una voce col basso continuo* (Venice 1650) to Sieneese nuns. It is the only surviving musical print for a Sieneese convent.

⁶ See, for example, Kelley Harness, review of *Holy Concord within Sacred Walls: Nuns and Music in Siena*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», 59 (2006), 190-96.

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The central question of Reardon's essay is why the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* would have been so appealing to the nuns? Caroline Bynum and Robert Kendrick have already explained in fascinating detail the particular importance the celebration of the Holy Week held for the nuns⁷. Reardon describes additional rituals from Siena for the Holy Week: many practiced flagellation, lived through horrible diseases, all the while identifying with the suffering Christ. Women in the convent of Santa Caterina del Paradiso became married to Christ, and in some convents the abbesses washed the feet of every nun.

Then, Reardon relates the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* to women's laments in Italy. She describes how women had to prepare the body of the deceased for last rites with herbs and perfumes. They would gather around the casket and sing traditional laments. The association of the women's lament with death was so strong that in some places clerics would take over women's roles during the processions on Holy Friday and Saturday.

Nuns were not able to participate in these laments. Yet, since they considered themselves married to Christ, and therefore became widows during Holy Week, they must have felt a need to honor his death with proper funeral rites. This is exactly where the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* come in: they were sung for three days before, during, and after the crucifixion. The performance of these pieces therefore allows a single nun, the soloist, to express the pain of the entire community for the death of Christ.

The last article by Manuela Belardini tells the story of the nun Maria Vittoria Frescobaldi from Florence, who by all accounts must have been a great beauty as well as a gifted singer. Belardini pieced the story together from documents she found in the papers of the criminal tribunal of the Apostolic Nuntius in Florence. Maria Vittoria entered the convent of Santa Verdiana probably at the age of five, in 1589. A student of the famous Francesca Caccini from 1611 on, her singing regularly attracted Florentine nobility during the Easter weekend, among them Francesco Cini, Piero Strozzi, and Ottavio Rinuccini as well as the famous madrigal composer Alfonso Fontanelli, a diplomat from Ferrara.

The atmosphere and rules in the convent could not have been more different than those described by Reardon. Permission for music instructions was denied regularly, especially if the teacher was male. But clearly in this case this is not the whole story: because of her beauty and spirit, Maria Vittoria aroused the envy of other nuns who tried to prevent her from performing. She regularly asked her protector Virginio Orsini, the son of Paolo Orsini and Isabella de Medici, to intercede on her behalf. The protection of Virginio generally helped and until 1614 Maria Vittoria was allowed to sing. When Virginio Orsini died in 1614 she addressed her letters to his son Paolo Giordano.

Thus far the events are not different from many other such biographies. However, in 1611 Maria Vittoria caught the attention of a passionate music lover, the Marchese Sinolfo Ottieri. From 1617 on his passion for her singing escalated to such

⁷ C. WALKER BYNUM, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York 1991, 131; KENDRICK, *Celestial Sirens*, 162.

an extent that he stayed in the parlatorio from morning until night and showered gifts on her which were by no means all related to music making. After three years of daily visits, with the support of a friendly nun, the two decided to make music during the night. The next day, two envious and jealous nuns told the Prior that a man had set foot into the convent during the night; the Prior, in turn, notified the General Abbot. The latter informed the Grand Duke at the Palazzo Pitti. Sinolfo was immediately imprisoned in the Bargello. Maria Vittoria was eventually transferred to Rome to be tried there.

The trial began in July, 1620, and naturally centered around the question of whether any sexual contact took place or not. The fact that both adamantly denied that anything happened is less interesting than their explanation as to how they spent their time: she sang for him and he read to her. Their account was supported by two friendly nuns who claimed to have been with Maria Vittoria all night. Similarly, Sinolfo's wife and his friends rose to his defence, among them Innocenzo Rucellai, the librettist Ottavio Rinuccini, the poet and composer Andrea Salvatore, and the poet Michelangelo Buonarroti il Giovane. They all described him as someone who was only interested in music and musical instruments and utterly unable to deal with everyday life.

Since no proof of any guilt emerged, Sinolfo could not be executed. So the Magistrates of the Otto di Guardia decided to place him in the Volterra Prison for life, where he died (or was perhaps poisoned) after a few months in July of 1622. Maria Vittoria was condemned to spend the rest of her life in a cell in her convent. Fifteen years later, after having been transferred to a neighboring convent, Maria Vittoria's spirit remained unbroken. After numerous petitions she returned to full convent life in 1635.

Belardini concludes that the nuns saw the musicianship of Maria Vittoria as a disturbance in their convent life. Perhaps it was even more a simple drama of envy and jealousy: her musical gifts and her beauty allowed sister Maria Vittoria to captivate the attention of men, something utterly impossible for most nuns. It is a truly remarkable story, and I would not be surprised if someone would try to turn it into a movie.

ANNA MARIA BUSSE BERGER

ANTONIO MENNITI IPPOLITO, *I papi al Quirinale. Il sovrano pontefice e la ricerca di una residenza*, Roma, Viella, 2004 (La corte dei papi, 13)

Antonio Menniti Ippolito ha già dato importanti contributi alla storia politico-istituzionale del papato cinque-seicentesco e dei suoi rapporti con le élites politiche della penisola¹. Ora, in questo agile volume, Menniti si interroga su un fenomeno noto, ma del tutto sottovalutato dalla storiografia modernistica, ovvero il fatto che du-

¹ Cf. in particolare A. MENNITI IPPOLITO, *Politica e carriere ecclesiastiche nel secolo XVII. I vescovi veneti fra Roma e Venezia*, Bologna 1993 e Id., *Il tramonto della Curia nepotista. Papi, nipoti e burocrazia curiale*, Roma 1999.

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