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Paving the Way: Women in Music at Ferrara, Italy During the Late 1500s

During the late Renaissance period, musical advancement and development thrived in the courts of dukes around Italy. However, in Ferrara around 1580, a group of women began to gain unprecedented attention for their court performances and dedication to music. Interestingly, this region was also home to a prolific group of cloistered musicians. This paper explores the impact that the Ferrarese madrigal singers would have on the future of music professions for women of all social classes, as well as the relationship of court music to religious music in a time where life as a whole was becoming more secular.

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Paving the Way:

Women in Music at Ferrara, Italy During the Late 1500s

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Music has often been deeply intertwined with spirituality in its powerful role in human society. However, in late 1500s Italy, music was branching away from the religious realms and into more secular realms, making it accessible to even those not involved with the church. As scholar Anthony Newcomb notes in his text *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597*, perhaps the single most important development for Italian secular, professional music during the period was the formation of a group of madrigal singers at Ferrara at the hands of Duke Alfonso in response to his new wife Margherita's passion for music and performance.¹ This group under Margherita was specifically made up of women. At the time, only men were allowed to sing publicly in the church, so the development of a secular music profession was key in allowing women to perform music. Additionally, as the group grew in popularity, the women who made up this ensemble were not only of high class, but daughters of merchants and artisans who were allowed into the court because of their talent. The Madrigal Singers at Ferrara, or *concerto delle donne*, as well as one of their most devout leaders, Margherita Alfonso, paved the way for professional women musicians in late 1500s Italy and represented the ability to gain social status through merit, as well as a nuanced cultural shift away from solely religious pathways.

Music in Ferrara, Italy thrived during the Renaissance period under the rule of the Este family, of which Duke Alfonso was a member. Political structures and power in Italy during the period were generally organized into systems of courts under leaders in the nobility. As those who had the most control, the noble leaders of these courts had the most influence over the amount of attention given to the arts. In Ferrara specifically, the Este family, notable patrons of arts like painting, music, dancing and more, had control of the city until 1598. Their reign provided stability and continuity to the city as a whole, but more specifically, to the health of the

¹ Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3.

musical community and the depth of achievement that would come out of long line musical groups under their control throughout their time in power. To provide some context, the musical developments during the Renaissance in Italy occurred later than many of the other developments of the era. In addition, Ferrara is part of Northern Italy, and since the Italian Renaissance started in Central Italy in cities like Florence, it arrived north slightly later.^{2,3} Because of this, the more innovative shifts in music that occurred at Ferrara were in the later parts of the 1500s, despite the Renaissance era typically being defined as being between the 14th and 17th centuries.

Duke Alfonso was the head of the Este family in Ferrara during the late 1500s. His young wife, Margherita, served as the catalyst for many notable developments of music during that time because of her passion and interest. Although the era of music under Margherita is most consistently referenced as a key influence on the path of professional music for women, it is important to note that music and music ensembles of high achievement had been intertwined with the Este family from the time of their rise to power.⁴ One example of this investment into the musical arts is the discovery of Lucrezia Bendidio around 1561 under the patronage of Princess Leonora, one of the most influential women of the Ferrarese court. A lady-in-waiting thought to be around thirteen years old when her talents were uncovered, Lucrezia was a member of a family with a long history of generational wealth, although they were not specifically noble.⁵ She became a celebrated solo performer under the sponsorship of the Este women, but if not for

² “Venice and Northern Italy, 1400–1600 A.D.” Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=08®ion=eustn>.

³ “Italy Map, Showing Major Cities,” Map of Italy, map-of-italy.org, 2006, <https://www.map-of-italy.org>.

⁴ The *concerto delle donne* is also known as the *concerto delle dame*, both translating in Italian to mean “concert of the ladies” (my translation).

⁵ Laurie Stras, *Women and Music in the Sixteenth-Century Ferrara*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 143.

the influence and status of the family she worked for, she would have never been able to perform in the way that she did in terms of exposure and audience size. In addition to this, there were also musical ensembles that were precursors to the *concerto delle donne* that provided important context. These groups were primarily made up of men and women who were affluent and not specifically sought out for their musical talent. This resulted in music playing a secondary role. Duke Alfonso the II sponsored a large group of women and men referred to as the *cappella di musica*, which was known to perform publicly and was the largest music establishment of the court.⁶

Another important piece of the narrative of Ferrara as a city of music is the prominence of religious musical achievement as well as secular achievement in the town. The music scene at Ferrara was far from solely secular. Raphaella Alleotti, one of the most notable female composers of her time, lived in the San Vito convent, which was located just outside of Ferrara.⁷ Aleotti is known as the first nun to have her music published.⁸ She served as the concertmaster at San Vito, and instructed the nuns in both singing and instrumental practice. In addition to the women in the secular music realm, the men at the San Benito monastery were known for their commitment to musical learning as well.

In the earlier stages of development for the musical groups at Ferrara, members were not chosen specifically for their talent, rather trained or discovered to be musicians secondary to their other role in the court. In these musical groups, musicians were certainly well trained and

⁶ Newcomb, 4.

⁷ She sometimes published under her secular name, Vittoria.

⁸ Catherine Moore, "ALEOTTI: For the Nuns of San Vito: The Record Connoisseur's Magazine," *American Record Guide*, Jan, 2008,

<http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com/magazines/aleotti-nuns-san-vito/docview/223364722/se-2?accountid=13265.52>.

commended for their talent, however, being musicians was not their primary role. This began to change around 1580 with the entrance of the Duke's new wife, Margherita into the court.

Margherita had a specific passion for music that led her and the Duke to begin seeking out ladies in waiting with significant musical skill. The first three women that she hired were Laura Peverara, Anna Guarini, and Livia d'Arco. A document written by Girolamo Merenda, a member of the Ferrarese court, describes these women and their backgrounds:

Margarita Gonzaga ... took in her service for her lady the Lady Laura, [daughter] of Antonio Peverara, of marriageable age, who plays the harp miraculously: and [because] the Lord Duke greatly enjoyed music, he decided to put together an ensemble of ladies and, thus, Her Most Serene [Highness] having two other ladies - one who played the lute called Lady Anna Guarini, a Ferrarese noblewoman, and the other the Lady Livia d'Arco, a Mantuan noblewoman who played the viol a little.⁹

This account reveals some important information about the three first ladies of the *concerto delle donne*. The source clearly links the event of the creation of the group with the introduction of Margherita into Ferrara. In terms of the women themselves, it is true that these women were of upper class. However, it is evident that they were hired because of their musical talent as the author writes that they were chosen specifically because the Duke decided to create an ensemble of women to play music. Additionally, they were not just from Ferrara, suggesting that they must have had some merit that would prompt their recruitment from other parts of Italy.

⁹ Stras, 218.

These factors of merit-based selection are an important indicator of the music at the Ferrarese court becoming increasingly professional in nature.

In addition to the selection of the women who served in the court pointing to a shift to a more professional model, there is an interesting source presenting the viewpoint of a man often invited to perform with the singing ladies named Giulio Brancaccio. Brancaccio was a military official, and was upset by the idea that he was being accepted into the court on the basis of his musical talent rather than as a royal courtier.¹⁰ There were documented instances of him leaving the court in 1577 or 1578 and again in 1583 because he did not appreciate that the court became a place of business and not a place of pleasure.¹¹ While this provides an interesting inversion to the positive effect that the ability to become a professional may have provided to some people, especially those of the lower class, it certainly provides evidence for the idea that the role that these musicians were playing was effectively that of a professional musician.

The increased role of merit in these women court musicians and shift towards primary roles as musicians helped make important steps toward professionalism. Another indicator of this monetarily-focused shift is how the music of the *concerto delle donne* became a popular product. Composers began to write music specifically for them with the goal of selling it, inspired by the Ferrarese women.¹² The fact that composers began to take that sort of interest in these women musicians indicates an increased interest and attention for them, to the degree that composers believed they could make a profit catering to women's ensembles. Additionally, it indicates the commitment that Alfonso had as a patron to the *concerto delle donne* because of the cost involved with commissioning music. Along with music sales, the phenomenon of women

¹⁰ Newcomb, 14.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Newcomb, 113.

individually finding success and fame for their musical talent is an indicator of the increased interest in women's music that the activity of Ferrara's ensemble contributed to. Women were able to remain in their positions as court musicians after they married, as seen in other sections of Girolamo Merenda's document: "Even after they were married, the ensemble continued because all three lived in court, and their husbands were Gentlemen of the Table with excellent provisions, like their wives."¹³ While it is unclear whether the husbands of the musicians enjoyed comfort and status because of their wives or simply as well as their wives, this evidence suggests that at least the women were responsible for their own success, because they married after the ensemble was formed. This provides reason to believe that, increasingly, women were able to make a name for themselves and increase their social status through their own merit and primary work as musicians.

As the women of the *concerto delle donne* in Ferrara gained fame and success, imitations began to arise in other parts of the country. This expansion and replication is evidence of the impact that the Ferrarese women had on the profession of music for women as a whole. The Medici court in Florence is cited as the first successful imitation of the Ferrarese women's ensemble in early 1586.¹⁴ The Gonzaga court in Mantua is also a notable successor of the *concerto delle donne*. Vincenzo Gonzaga was the brother of Margherita of Ferrara, and after spending time in Ferrara around the music and women of the court, he became inspired to create his own version in Mantua.¹⁵ The Orsini court in Rome also creates a *concerto delle donne*, this one with close ties to the ensemble formed in Florence to the extent that they actually shared a singer, one of which was Vittoria Archilei, who spent time in both courts throughout the 1580's and

¹³ Stras, 218.

¹⁴ Newcomb, 90.

¹⁵ Newcomb, 95.

1590's.¹⁶ Not only did these courts serve as imitations of the Ferrarese *concerto delle donne*, but they also supplied competition, creating an environment where being a musician was a reasonable way for women to climb the social ladder, and where women musicians were in demand.

In looking at the impressive growth of secular singing groups, especially for women, it is important to remember the strong relationship many of these secular groups had with religious musicians near them. Secular music would not have gotten nearly as far as it did during such a short period of time without the aid and development lent by the musicians of cloisters and monasteries. Although the Renaissance is characterized by new development and rebirth, much of the progress throughout the era was developed on the backdrop of Christianity. For example, the humanist movement provided new ideas about education and the role of a human in creation, but there were still deeply religious themes to this new theory. Musical communities and developments mirrored this shifting, and yet still crucially intertwined relationship of secular and religious life. While the phenomenon of secular, entertainment-based music was fairly new, there were still deep ties between religious musicians and secular musicians, because of the wealth of musical knowledge in the church as well as the general societal connections. For the *concerto delle donne* at Ferrara, the bond between the ensemble and neighboring cloisters was strong. One reason for this was Margerita's religiosity.¹⁷ As the patron of the group, she had significant influence over the women. In her book, *Women in Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara*, Laurie Stras details the devotion Magherita showed to religion and describes accounts of the women of the *concerto delle donne* rehearsing with the women of the San Vito convent, led by the well-known musician and composer Raphaella Aleotti. In fact, this privilege came at the direct

¹⁶ Newcomb, 94

¹⁷ Stras, 233.

allowance of the Pope, which Margherita was able to attain because of the connection of her brother, a bishop, to the church.¹⁸ It was certainly at the benefit of Margherita and her women to be able to rehearse with the women from the church, since it allowed the musicians access to both secular and cloistered teachers.¹⁹ This evidence suggests strong ties between the church and the *concerto delle donne* at Ferrara. At the same time, the presence of women performers was not sponsored by the church at the time. This leads to the conclusion that while it is not accurate to say that music experienced a large shift towards the secular realm during this time, there is evidence of a nuanced coexistence of both the religious and the secular, which provides a shift from earlier atmospheres of music being mainly religious.

From the rise in professionalism seen in women performers fostered under Margherita, Duchess of Ferrara, to the expansion of music for women's music ensembles and the presence of imitations of the *concerto delle donne* in courts as famous as the Medici, there is strong evidence to suggest the the Ferrarese women's ensemble of the 1580s had substantial influence on music as a profession in late-Renaissance Italy. However, there are other theories and narratives about women musicians during the period that must be examined in order to see the whole picture.

One such argument that somewhat inhibits the strength of evidence supporting a narrative that women were able to be professional musicians during this time is the assertion that because women like Laura Peverara were of high class, they did not represent an ability to become professional or climb socially through their skills.²⁰ However, it can be argued that these women were much more set apart by their musical talent than they were by their wealth. Their affluence

¹⁸ Stras, 229.

¹⁹ Stras, 223.

²⁰ Stras, 219.

alone was not enough to make them desirable and therefore could they have only been chosen for their merit.

Another example of a common rebuttal to the importance of groups of women like the *concerto delle donne* is the claim that since men overall had a much greater impact than women on music during the time, women in music were generally irrelevant to developments made during the Renaissance.²¹ It is undeniable that there were more men making music during this period, and even in Ferrara in terms of composers, but the significance of women's ensembles is not necessarily diminished simply because of the role women were placed in during the 1580s. Despite being a small group compared to the amount of men's ensembles, the *concerto delle donne* still had an impact that is worth investigating today.

Thirdly, there are instances of castrated men, or *castradi*, who were used to cover the upper register in choirs instead of having women in the ensemble because of the fact that women were not generally allowed to sing in public, but especially in the church. In fact, in 1589, a Papal bull was issued, requiring young boys of the St. Peter's church choir in Rome to be replaced by *castrati*.²² While not completely prohibiting the presence of women musicians, these men did fill a role that could easily be filled by women, and at their own expense, although the procedure was done on boys by their parents before they reached puberty in order to preserve the high pitch of their voice. This presents an interesting example of the lengths taken to avoid using women in music. The practice of castrating boys in order to preserve their voice was never truly

²¹ Janna MacAuslan and Kristan Aspen, "Noteworthy Women: Renaissance Women in Music," *Hot Wire*, September 9, 1993,

http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com/magazines/noteworthy-women-renaissance-music/docview/220868443/se-2?ac_countid=13265.

²² Elizabeth Davis, "What was a castrato? And what did they sound like?" Classical FM, Global, 1 May 2020, <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/what-is-a-castrato/>.

legal, but it was very common. The practice was officially banned in the mid 1800s, hundreds of years after the *concerto delle donne* was at its height, but the last living *castrati*, Alessandro Moreschi, died in 1922. The widespread preference for these castrated male singers presented an obstacle for women singers, the knowledge of which provides important context for understanding the position of women singers during the late Renaissance period.

From the entrance of Duke Alfonso's young, lively wife Margherita to the final years that the Este family was in power, there was a notable impact on the musical community that came from the developments made at Ferrara. A shift can be seen in the way women were able to become professional musicians and gain status for themselves through their talent, especially after 1580. There was a precedent set for women to be hired for their musical training and skill and be paid to focus on that specifically. This precedent had an effect not only in Ferrara, but in surrounding cities, resulting in the presence of imitation courts, allowing more women to participate in the profession. While the religious and secular musical realms remained deeply intertwined, investment into the development of secular groups, especially for women, was a driver for the emergence of musicianship as a public profession, especially for women. Study on this particular madrigal group at Ferrara is not extensive, which creates difficulty when representing a multitude of viewpoints in the examination of their impact. However, there is compelling evidence in the favor of the Ferrarese women rooted in primary sources. As history is often told through a male-centered lens, focusing on women and other oppressed groups can be a challenge, especially considering the relative scarcity of well-documented accounts of these groups. With strong examples of success despite oppression, as seen in the women of the *concerto delle donne* in Ferrara, it is key to acknowledge that the progress they made, while small, took steps to advance the ability women had to better their lives through a career in music.

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