

Italian Convent Music of the Early Modern Period: Overview and Suggestions for
Current Performances

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ABSTRACT

Women's role in music has garnered much curiosity and attention in the twenty-first century. While many women of the Romantic period and later have been thoughtfully studied, not as much research has been dedicated to women of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Even less has been dedicated to women who were a part of female monastic communities. These nuns served a vital role in the musical and spiritual lives of their communities. They served as singers, organists, instrumentalists, teachers, and composers. While many of their publications remain lost or attributed to men, much can be gained from studying their music. Paramount to this conversation is how many of their works, originally published for mixed voices, were performed and what this means for current performances.

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Introduction

In recent years, scholars increasingly have recognized the importance of female monastic musicians of the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods. These women of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries make up a vast network of astonishing women who served as composers, organists, singers, instrumentalists, conductors, and teachers. Many of these women did so defying direct papal orders, edicts, or bans. Much of their music remains unpublished or lost, with a good portion of their work, moreover, inaccurately attributed to men of the time.¹ As leading convent researcher Craig Monson explains, “If, throughout history, women musicians have generally been accorded a marginal place, which in turn governed their musical development, this is nowhere truer than in nunneries.”²

As modern scholarship has aimed to uncover works by under-researched composers and performers, the focus on female monastic musicians and their publications and practices has received less attention than most. By taking a closer look at the general sphere in which these women were learning and working, we not only illuminate important musical and historical figures, but also broaden women’s historically narrow presence in early music history. Researchers such as Robert Kendrick, Candace Smith, Craig Monson, Kimberlyn Montford, Bruce Dickey³, and others have begun to research

¹ Craig Monson, *Divas in the Convent: Nuns, Music, and Defiance in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 4.

² Craig Monson, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), 7-8.

³ Bruce Dickey is a musicologist who cofounded Artemisia Editions with his wife Candace Smith. Their small publishing house produces editions of 17-century convent music.

and report convent musician's contributions to music and society. Whereas Kendrick has focused on Milanese convents, Monson has concentrated on the Santa Christina convent of Bologna and nun, Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana. Monson's writings concern illuminating information regarding the inner workings of Santa Christina, including the musical practices and daily lives of Vizzana and her sisters. Candace Smith and Bruce Dickey's efforts center around the current performability of the nuns' music. Smith's treble choir, Cappella Artemisia, frequently performs and records albums featuring convent music repertoire. Smith and Cappella Artemisia's performances, recordings, and archival research involving Ursuline nun Isabella Leonarda is of particular distinction.⁴ A popular treble choir from Canada, Elektra, recently presented a program entitled "Women of the Italian Baroque." On their website, their founder, Morna Edmundson, discusses the processes used to render much of this repertoire, which was originally published for mixed-choir, appropriate for treble choirs.⁵ Her methods are based on valuable research and recent discoveries that will be discussed below.

Despite this flurry of scholarship, many women's repertoires remain unexplored, with much of it unsung and unheard. In many secondary and post-secondary choral programs today, treble singers account for the majority of choir members. Though much effort has been exerted to perform more works for and by women, music of this kind from the Renaissance and Baroque periods is rarely included in programs. I believe the issue is not the repertoire itself; rather, it is the access to and knowledge of the repertoire.

⁴ "Artemisia Editions," Cappella Artemisia, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://cappella-artemisia.com/artemisia-editions/>.

⁵ "Collection: Women Composers," Elektra Women's Choir, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://elektra.com/collections/women-composers>.

My aims are to give a summary of the context in which these women were living and working, discuss selected musicians and their works, address the issue of the tenor and bass parts, and offer research-based solutions to encourage and facilitate future performances of this repertoire.

Overview

The number of Italian women in convents during the Early Modern Period is staggering. In Bologna during the 1630s, more than 13.8 percent of women lived behind convent walls.⁶ In Milan, between 1600 to 1650, approximately seventy-five percent of noble and upper-class women were living as nuns, while in Florence, between 1500 to 1799, almost one half of the city's women lived in a monastic institution.⁷ Women joined convents for many different reasons from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries across Italy. Widows often joined convents after the deaths of their husbands. Abused wives also frequently found escape and solace behind convent walls. For others, religious piety remained of central importance in their lives and motivation for joining a convent. In Venice the Augustinian convent, Santa Maria, was known as the "Convertite" and accepted women who previously worked in the sex trade. Although it was not established as a fully-fledged monastic institution at its founding in 1530, the Convertite eventually became a traditional convent where participants were required to take the veil and vows.⁸ Because the two primary options for women were to marry or enter a convent, many took the veil after rejecting a life of marrying and raising children. Bhasin notes that at the Convertite "as well as for many young women in the Venetian territories, the adage "*au mas aut murus*" ("either marry or a [convent] wall" proved all too true.⁹

⁶ Craig Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 6.

⁷ Silvia Evangelisti, "'We Do Not Have It, and We Do Not Want It': Women, Power, and Convent Reform in Florence," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no. 3 (2003): 679.

⁸ Christina Scippa Bhasin, "Prostitutes, Nuns, Actresses: Breaking the Convent Wall in Seventeenth-Century Venice," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 1 (2014): 20.

⁹ Bhasin, "Prostitutes, Nuns, Actresses," 20.

Furthermore, for those women who wanted further musical training, entering a convent was essentially the only option to make or learn music in the public sphere. Craig Monson states that had Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana, a Bolognese nun, not entered the convent of Santa Cristina, she probably would not have become a published composer. It is safe to assume that this was also the case for many convent musicians across the country. It was customary for girls and young women in upper-class families to receive some musical training at home. However, “such musical education rarely went beyond genteel amateurism . . . [it] never extended to ‘public’ performance, and hardly ever involved serious attempts at composition.”¹⁰

However, most women joined convents because a convent dowry cost significantly less than a marriage dowry. Families with multiple daughters could rarely afford to pay for more than one daughter to marry, so convent life provided an inexpensive alternative to marriage. Many women could obtain a still lower rate if they had musical training.¹¹ In Rome, a spiritual dowry, or a monastic dowry, was approximately one-tenth to one-third the cost of a marriage dowry.¹² In Venice, where this was a common occurrence, many families offered up their daughters to monastic life by age seven. While spiritual dowries were still substantial at 1,000 *ducats* for entrance to Venetian convents, the alternative marriage dowry could surpass that amount by eight or

¹⁰ Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 7.

¹¹ Meredith Y. Bowen, “Sacred Music from the Convents of Seventeenth-Century Italy: Restoration Practices for Contemporary Women’s Choirs” (DMA diss., Michigan State University, 2016), 9.

¹² Kimberlyn Montford, “Music in the Convents of Counter-Reformation Rome” (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1999), 11.

forty times.¹³ Just under two-hundred miles away, spiritual dowries in Florence were a quarter and a third the amount of a marriage dowry.¹⁴

Unfortunately, women sometimes were forced into monastic life against their will, as in the case of Arcangela Tarabotti, a seventeenth-century nun from the Santa Anna convent, who discusses forced enclosure and misogyny in her pamphlets *Paternal Tyranny* and *The Convent as Hell*.¹⁵ Many accounts by Tarabotti and others document mistreatment and conspiracy, although most focused on the effects of enclosure and visitor restriction. Meanwhile, convents welcomed women who showed musical ability or had experience with composition or instrumental lessons; in some cases, they were even known to seek women who were musically gifted.¹⁶ Although Colleen Baade's convent research primarily concerns institutions in Spain, she does recount that reduced dowries or even dowry waivers were offered to women who would contribute musically to the convent. Additionally, in Spanish convents, she asserts that many nuns were compensated for their music service.¹⁷ It is certainly not unreasonable to wonder if similar practices were seen in Italy during this time.¹⁸

Although many convents, particularly in larger Italian cities such as Florence, Milan, Novara, and Rome, had vibrant musical communities, the size of the ensembles

¹³ Gabriella Zarri, Francesca Medioli, and Paola Vismara Chiappa, "De monialibus' (secoli XVI-XVII-XVIII)," *Rivista di storia e letterature religiosa* 33 (1997): 47.

¹⁴ Evangelisti, "We Do Not Have It and We Do Not Want It," 679.

¹⁵ Bhasin, "Prostitutes, Nuns, Actresses," 20.

¹⁶ Monson, *Divas in the Convent*, 186.

¹⁷ Kimberlyn Montford, "Convent Music: An Examination," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jane Couchman, Katherine A. McIver, and Allyson M. Poska (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 94.

¹⁸ Barbara Garvey Jackson, "The Seventeenth Century," in *From Convent to Concert Hall: A Guide to Women Composers*, ed. Sylvia Glickman and Martha Furman Schleifer (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 57.

and degree of musical training and abilities varied from house to house. Larger convents had more singers in the choir and more government or church support. As Barbara Garvey Jackson outlines, if music was successful and notable in these houses, it was because the male ecclesiastics permitted it to be so. “In actual practice, many [men] not only permitted but even encouraged music making by nuns, and more than half the music published by women in northern Italy in the seventeenth century was by nuns.”¹⁹ Smaller houses assuredly meant fewer women involved in music making, but we know from dowry waivers or reduction requests that these houses were still interested in securing a small handful of musically inclined women to keep the music, and polyphony in particular, alive.²⁰ In S. Pietro Martire in Pavia, south of Milan, only five singers were mentioned in the convent.²¹ These smaller houses considered a loss of a spiritual dowry a small loss in exchange for the continuance of quality music, and therefore valued and supported the women who came to their convent with musical training.

Women from the same family tended to enter the same convent, affording that house the benefit of multiple sisters with similar musical training. At Santa Radegonda in Milan, at least five women from the Cozzolani family lived at the convent during the seventeenth century. All the women in the family were musical.²² Multiple generations of women within the same convent was also common, with diaries mentioning music education by the diarists’ aunts, for example. Women who could play the organ, other instruments, or compose were especially prized. Some families would even begin to train

¹⁹ Jackson, “The Seventeenth Century,” 56.

²⁰ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 121.

²¹ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 205.

²² Jackson, “The Seventeenth Century,” 64.

their daughters at a young age in music for the sole purpose of one day placing them in a monastic institution. This was not only to broaden the young woman's education, but also to prepare them for acceptance into a convent and a lower dowry cost.

Larger and wealthier houses tend to be better documented, and this certainly holds true concerning their musical practices. We know from various travelers' logs and diary entries that there were several Italian convents highly revered for their choirs and even instrumental performances. Pietro Della Valle, an Italian composer and author, traveled to the convent of Spirito Santo in Rome to hear a vespers service. He describes the music "sung just by the nuns only . . . that I certainly swear to your Lordship that in all my days I have never perceived a more beautiful work in this type of style."²³ He later discusses an especially talented nun, Anna Verovia, known colloquially as "La Verovia." Convent musicians also achieved great influence in administrative capacities within their respective convents. These women were integral parts of their communities and often achieved an influence that would have been unattainable for women outside of convent walls. Kimberlyn Montford discussed the nuns' influence in Rome, "in the male-controlled Catholic hierarchy, women were legally marginalized creatures; yet nuns were able to utilize their special status to maintain a vital presence in the spiritual lives of their communities."²⁴ In these ways, female monastic musicians held more power and influence than if they had not entered a convent.

Many other first-hand accounts of extraordinary monastic choirs are relatively well-documented, and often describe performances that were otherworldly. Filippo

²³ Pietro della Valle, *Le Origini del Melodramma* (Milan: Torino, 1600).

²⁴ Kimberlyn Montford, "Holy Restraint: Religious Reform and Nuns' Music in Early Modern Rome," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 1008.

Picinelli, an Augustinian canon, recounted his experience at the convent of San Radegonda as follows:

The nuns are gifted with such rare and exquisite talents in music that they are acknowledged to be the best singers of Italy . . . but (under their black garb) they seem to any listener to be white and melodious swans, who fill hearts with wonder, and enrapture tongues in their praise. Among these sisters, Donna Chiara Margarita Cozzolani merits the highest praise.^{25 26}

The convent music education system was certainly not standardized, but it seems to have been strong in many houses. As Laura Stras states in “The Performance of Polyphony in Early 16th-Century Italian Convents,” there was often a terraced music education system, as was the case in Le Murate in Florence. “A small group of nuns would gather at the grate to receive singing instruction, chaperoned by senior members of the convent; these sisters were expected then to teach the others.”²⁷ This was not a permanent luxury, however, as the last meeting of the Council of Trent soon changed many aspects of monastic musical life. Religious officials restricted visitors, imposed enclosure or *clausura*, heavily regulated the instruments allowed and the amount of polyphony sung, and even monitored and regulated the texts they were allowed to sing.

We do not have a full picture of music education in convents of this period, but we do know that some convents allowed the presence of male composition teachers.²⁸

While changes in the second half of the sixteenth century resulted in intense scrutiny and

²⁵ Bowen, “UnCONVENTional Restoration,” 10.

²⁶ Cozzolani was born in 1602 and died between 1676 and 1678. Like many other nuns during this period, she served various roles within the convent, and became known first as a singer. She first published her own works around the age of thirty-seven.

²⁷ Laurie Stras, “The Performance of Polyphony in Early 16th-Century Italian Convents,” *Early Music* 45, no. 2 (July 2017): 199.

²⁸ Robert Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 205.

restriction of male visitors, there are many recorded instances of nuns requesting lessons from musical instructors, even if they were denied. However, several convents did break the rules. Primary source material cites bans, orders, and frequent visits by religious authorities to certain convents to address the presence of male composition teachers, with the sheer number of such sources suggesting that this practice was prevalent.²⁹

Even if the convent musicians were not granted additional composition teachers, their works still stand with contemporary works by their male counterparts. Although male composition teachers were not physically present, their influence via compositions and published tutors still assisted the nuns in learning contemporary compositional style and trends. Nuns often performed repertoire written for them by men, so they were constantly learning and observing musical styles and trends, even if it was secondhand. Publications by these male composers dedicated to nuns often featured prefaces addressing music education. The preface to Ignazio Donati's second book of motets from 1636, for example, contains information regarding contemporary ornamentation and how to set texts.³⁰

²⁹ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 60-67.

³⁰ Ignazio Donati, *Il Secondo Libro de Motetti* (Venice: Alessandro Vincenti Press, 1636).

The Council of Trent

While one of the problems facing current researchers is the lack of documents and sources about the exact nature of monastic musical life, we do know that the Council of Trent (1545-1563) profoundly altered life and music in the Italian convents. Convened by Pope Paul III from 1545 to 1563, the Council aimed to address perceived heresies committed by Protestants, address and clarify doctrine, and address abuse and corruption.³¹ Of primary concern was the church's liturgical practices. Radical changes were made to sacred music and religious communities, particularly in convent practice and culture.³² Although there was not much attention given to monastic practices until the very end of the Council meetings, one of the most important decisions made was that of *clausura*, or enclosure. This enclosure was reimposed by Pius V in 1566. Walls were erected around convents to keep the earthly, evil influence out; but this was yet another means to assert control over, and further oppress these women and their voices. Church officials became obsessed with strict enclosure and aimed to further separate monastic women from the outside world.³³ This also drastically transformed the musical performances in the convent, as the nuns were rarely allowed to perform outside of the inner church or for the public.

Trent also heavily restricted access to their families, lay people, and clergies. Frustrated nuns wrote to family members to complain that they could not even be seen by

³¹ Montford, "Holy Restraint," 1008.

³² Monson, *Divas in the Convent*, 8-10.

³³ Montford, "Holy Restraint," 1007.

a doctor.³⁴ Visitors were required to pass supplies or food through a *ruota*, or rotating wheel, through the grated walls. Enclosure was enforced in varying degrees of severity, but many women found the order to be suppressive, and left the convent.³⁵ However, *clausura* was not ordered in male monasteries, the reasoning for which Silvia Evangelisti discusses:

Interestingly, enclosure was a gender-specific obligation. Monastic prescriptions recommended it to nuns as well as monks, but were invariably much tougher for nuns, placing far more emphasis on strict cloister in female religious houses than in male ones. Strict cloister, therefore, became primarily linked to the need for internal safeguards that would protect women from the weakness of their own sex; only secondarily was it regarded as protection against the dangers of the outer world.³⁶

With the new regulations in monasteries came the many drastic orders that addressed musical life and that of instruments and polyphony. “Music was suspect, because the time and effort that was appropriated for learning and rehearsing was better spent on prayer and devotional reading. The danger of falling under the spell of singing for the sake of beauty rather than for worship always necessitated unremitting vigilance.”³⁷ This also hints at a common misogynist view that women’s singing, especially if it was too beautiful or too ornate, would not only distract the women from their own worship, but more importantly would tempt and rouse men. It was clear: music was not to be made for pleasure alone.

Generally, the nuns were allowed to use only organ as accompaniment, and they were also to limit imitation and counterpoint. The more complicated or virtuosic the

³⁴ Jackson, “The Seventeenth Century,” 65.

³⁵ Evangelisti, ““We Do Not Have It, and We Do Not Want It,”” 677.

³⁶ Evangelisti, ““We Do Not Have It, and We Do Not Want It,”” 680.

³⁷ Montford, “Holy Restraint,” 7.

music became, the more religious officials felt that it detracted from the devotional or pious nature of sacred music. Therefore, plainchant was recommended to be the only music sung by these women. During few occasions and festal days, instrumental or polyphonic music was allowed, but only “by approved composers and accompanied by the organ.”³⁸ The musical restrictions described above becomes essential when discussing how to interpret modern performances and editions of convent music of this period.

After 1588, visits to convents were made by a committee of cardinals to uphold certain standards and restrictions of convent practices. Antonio Seneca was a Roman cardinal who approached this task very seriously. His treatise, *Prattica del governo*, was concerned with the proper administration of female monasteries. He mandated that the nuns should sing with “restraint,” meaning no polyphonic, solo, or concertated singing. He also wrote that “we order that the abuses of dancing, masquerading, and playing vain instruments such as viols and violins shall no longer be tolerated.”³⁹ Seneca found it necessary to report instances that did not meet religious authorities’ standards. Similarly, Pope Alexander VII banned dancelike rhythms in liturgical music as well as elaborate settings; he also prohibited many texts previously used in services.⁴⁰ Church officials continued to justify their edicts and orders by expressing their worry that learning or performing polyphony would distract the nuns from their spiritual and ceremonial duties. Second only to enforcing clausura, the enforcement of restrictions on musical practices appeared often in church documents and archives that addresses convent practices. The

³⁸ Antonio Seneca, *Prattica del governo spirituale e temporale de monasterii delle monache secondo le regole et constitutioni de Santi Padri loro fondatori et del Sacro Concilio di Trento e di Sommi Pontefici*, In Archivio Segreto Vaticano, 1604.

³⁹ Montford, “Holy Restraint,” 1012.

⁴⁰ Montford, “Holy Restraint,” 1011-14.

frequency of the infractions points to how inventive and adamant these women were, however: what officials viewed as abuses was simply the way of monastic musical life before Tridentine reform.

Punishment for breaking the rules could be severe and lengthy, including being prevented from musical duties or practice. In some cases, punishments even included excommunication. The nuns' public performances of music became linked to illicit relations, which made church officials quick to crack down on polyphony. While male choirs might have been allowed to sing with the nuns for special services or festal days before the Council of Trent, such was not the case during Tridentine reform. "At issue was the connection of the outside music to the music performed by the nuns during the services. Indeed, any collusion, in the form of the two choirs singing together, was decidedly inappropriate, for it hinted at nuns' working closely with men in an endeavor that had sensual overtones."⁴¹ This important aspect of passive enclosure regarding the restriction of male outsiders became cause for new bans and reprimands. Milanese Archbishop and Cardinal Charles Borromeo is an example of such enforcement, as we see through his punishment of a nun who simply allowed a male organist into the church to eat:

Suor Angela Serafina is to be without her veil [i.e., with a bare shaven head] for three months. She is relieved of the organist's duties, nor may she return to this position for six years. The large harpsichord is not to be kept in her room, but somewhere else in the house; nor can she play it or any other keyboard, nor sing polyphony for three years. And every Wednesday for six months she is to eat on the floor of the refectory, and ask forgiveness for the disturbance she caused, and for the scandal of having fed the [male] organist inside the monastery.⁴²

⁴¹ Montford, 1013.

⁴² Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 64-6.

Kendrick also cites an instance of Borromeo punishing two nuns for their possession of secular music by not allowing them to sing polyphony for six years.

In addition to musical restrictions, nuns were restricted to visits from their families in the *parlatorio*, or parlor through a window, and no family or outsiders were allowed inside without specific permission from authorities. The latter restriction, after Tridentine reform, also meant that outside music teachers were also not allowed in.

What then of the nun's musical training? Scholars have shown that many of these musical women served various musical roles while in the convent, so most instruction must have come from the women themselves during this period. At the same time, we know from the negative responses of religious authorities that convent rules were often being broken. Considerable evidence, for instance, points to the use of melodic instruments within the convents, as Robert Kendrick has observed.⁴³ There were certainly many houses that followed these new restrictions, although we also know of quite a few who broke them, sometimes drastically. As seen through primary sources, in 1602, the nuns of Santi Vitale e Agricola in Bologna purchased five new viols which included "a permissible bass, three illicit tenors, and an illicit treble."⁴⁴ This also suggests that Bolognese officials may have allowed bass melody instruments to substitute for published bass voice parts. Inventories at the Santa Margherita convent a year later showed that the nuns still owned forbidden instruments like a lute, harpsichord, guitar, and trombones. Though the adherence to these rules and restrictions varied widely across countries, regions, and individual convents, events of this era significantly altered the

⁴³ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 96.

⁴⁴ Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 47.

nuns' musical activities and education. Fortunately, even with the restrictions of enclosure, these amazing women did not allow the restrictions placed on them to stunt their inspiration and creativity.

The Tenor and Bass Parts

As discussed previously, convents were heavily restricted in their use of both polyphony and instruments. Enforcement of these restrictions became a priority for church officials. The degree of difference across Italian convents was drastic, however; none of the houses regularly welcomed men into their musical practice after the Council of Trent's last meeting. Men were not allowed in the interior of the convent churches, and most often not in the *parlatorio* either. This makes much of the nuns' published music, which often included tenor and bass voices, quite a conundrum. If men were not allowed in even to teach the nuns, they certainly were not allowed in to sing with them. This begs the question: how was this music performed?

Robert Kendrick illustrates that about half the repertoire in Cozzolani's 1642 publication, and almost all works in the 1650 publication include tenor and bass voices. This is also often true of music written by men and dedicated to nuns.⁴⁵ This kind of voicing stands at odds with accounts that underscore the absence of male singers and reports of music being sung solely by the nuns. If men were not allowed close contact with these women, and certainly not allowed to sing *with* them in the church, how did the nuns perform this music? Additionally, several nuns also published music for male voices alone: Isabella Leonarda's solo works, for instance, feature fourteen pieces for solo bass and continuo.

Assuming Tridentine reforms were not fully enforced, nuns could have played the bass or tenor parts on instruments or doubled them on the organ. While there are reports

⁴⁵ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 188.

of women breaking the rules to use accompaniment in addition to organ, primary sources exist supporting the performance on additional instruments, especially in small houses with fewer resources. What of the music that does not even include continuo? How does one explain the many instances where textual or syntactically essential music is included in one or both tenor and bass voices? Although there is much speculation involved with these queries, Robert Kendrick, who has done significant work in this area, offers a variety of scenarios that seem to have been possible, with varying degrees of probability and application. The possibility of men behind walls or visible singing with the nuns is quickly discredited by Kendrick, however: “Given the public nature of female monastic music, and the absence of any records concerning a major scandal of importing men inside enclosure, it must be assumed that performances took place in the *chiesa interiore* or in the *parlatorio*, and that only nuns were involved.”⁴⁶ Another still improbable scenario is that the women would sing all these parts themselves. Although there are accounts of amazing female basses, this certainly was not common, and highly improbable in smaller houses. In larger houses with many singers, Kendrick suggests that members of the choir could be expected to sing down to an E3. He also summarizes that the roster of singers at S Radegonda in the late seventeenth century included Sopranos, Contraltos, and “bassi,” which he suggests is a loose term suggesting the women who could sing modern tenor parts.⁴⁷ Any of these answers, of course, would depend greatly on the resources that the women had available. It is highly unlikely that the tenor or bass parts would have been left out entirely, as they often contain

⁴⁶ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 191.

⁴⁷ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 193.

harmonically imperative or textually significant passages. In Cozzolani's sacred dialogue motets of 1642 and 1650, for example, the tenor parts alternate in conversation with the treble voices, making them essential.

It is also improbable to assume that men would have come in for performances of the music due to the restriction of men on the premises. Although the most obvious answer is that the nuns sang this music at written pitch, this too is highly unlikely. As Kendrick summarizes from Alexander Ellis's survey of choristers, a choir with exceptional low and high voices might have spanned the range of D-sharp³ to B⁵.⁴⁸ In Isabella Leonarda's motet *Litanie della Beata Vergine Maria*, for example, the bass part frequently lies at a G², making performance by women at written pitch implausible. In Cozzolani's *Magnificat* published in 1650, one of the bass parts descends to a D below the bass clef staff. This leaves modern interpreters with three possible solutions: instrumental substitution, whole score transposition, and part transposition. A combination of any of these strategies is also an option.

Suggestions for Current Performances

Instrumental substitution certainly is a viable solution, and in many cases, was documented in treatises, travelers' logs, and composition prefaces. The use of cello or other low-voiced string instruments to substitute for the written tenor and bass parts was common, particularly in houses with fewer singers. In the convent of S. Maria Maddalena of Monza, a northwest neighbor to Milan, a 1600 petition cites requests made for the use

⁴⁸ Alexander Ellis, born in 1814 and died in 1890, was an English philologist and phonetician who also influenced the development of musicology.

of a viola da gamba for the bass parts so that the nuns could still perform polyphony.⁴⁹ Repertoire in which the bass line is written to essentially double the continuo or organ line would be particularly suited to this solution. When considering repertoire in which the tenor or bass parts contain textually or syntactically relevant material, this becomes less desirable. Many significant works by Cozzolani or Cesis, for example, contain poetic or scripturally essential text in the bass part alone. In highly imitative works, instrumental substitution of any vocal lines makes this rendering ineffective in performance.

Generally, instruments like the trombone or cornet were banned in the performance of polyphony in female monastic houses. However, Kendrick sheds light on how the nuns bent or even broke these rules: “the prohibition within convents of all instruments except the organ, harpsichord, or bass viol, instituted in 1580, was interpreted with considerable flexibility, or just ignored, to suit the nuns’ own purposes.”⁵⁰ Tellingly, Sulpitia Cesis and other nuns actually published music written for these instruments. When considering instrumental substitution for modern performances, performers should consider how modern instruments differ from their late Renaissance counterparts. Instruments of that time did not have the dynamic or timbral capabilities that our modern instruments do. While current instrumental substitutions might make performance of certain works possible, it may not make the performance effective, considering issues of balance especially, and should thus be carefully contemplated in a modern rendering. To omit these parts entirely is also not an option, as this would create incorrect inversions or skew harmonic integrity.

⁴⁹ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 196.

⁵⁰ Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 47.

Upwards transposition of the entire texture is another answer with both past and present probability. Many compositional volumes and tutors from this period included guidance on transposition of sacred music and point to standard practice. As quoted by Robert Kendrick, Jan Alensoon described the ensembles at S Radegonda in 1724 as follows: where “the cantus is very high, the alto like a canto II, the tenor like an alto, and the bass like a tenor.”⁵¹ This would translate to the published cantus as Soprano 1, the published alto as Soprano 2, the tenor line as Alto, and the bass line as Tenor. As previously discussed, S Radegonda did have singers who could sing in the modern tenor range.

A 1662 publication by Pompeo Natali, *Madrigali, e canzoni spirituali e morali*, contains a preface by the composer with the continuo line transposed up a fifth or down a fourth so that the lower works could be sung by nuns. Kendrick also provides advice regarding whole score transposition, “for *stile antico* and even *concertato* mixed-voice pieces that do not exceed the overall compass of two octaves and a sixth, one possibility is that of upward transposition (of all parts) by ‘standard intervals.’”⁵²

Part transposition at the octave is the third answer which, perhaps, is more practical for performance of most of this repertoire. The bass line transposed at the octave often makes a standard alto II part, rarely descending below G3 when transposed in compositions of this period. This is comparable to many modern alto II parts. The tenor line up an octave could become either the soprano I or the soprano II line, depending on the range, instances of voice crossing, and melodic motion. The notated alto part could be

⁵¹ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 199.

⁵² *Ibid.*

sung at pitch as alto I, and the notated soprano I would remain at pitch for one of the soprano lines. I have used part transposition of a five-voice work by Sulpitita Cesis, originally published SATTB, to create what I call an SSMAA: soprano I, soprano II, middle, alto I, alto II. If the choir is large and comfortable with part independence, this is a viable solution for mixed voice works of four or more parts. A danger of this approach, though, is of increased voice crossing between the soprano lines. To an extent this is unavoidable, but with repertoire that contains smaller ranges or that are highly imitative, this could increase the already prevalent voice crossings.

There is a handful of works written by nuns and published SSB with continuo as well. For a modern treble performance, most of this repertoire is very well suited to part transposition at the octave, making an alto out of the notated bass line. This voicing is especially accessible for secondary school choirs. The 1650 Christmas motets for three and four voices by Chiara Margarita Cozzolani and the 1675 motets by Maria Xaveria Perucona for three voices are examples of such works. Similarly, a grand sectional motet by lesser-known nun Maria Francesca Nascinbeni, *Sitientes venite*, would lend itself to performance using octave part transposition of the bass line. A performance in this configuration would make the duets between the written soprano and transposed alto closer in pitch and sonority to one another.⁵³

A combination of any of the above strategies can also work, particularly of part transposition at the octave or transposition of all parts by a particular interval. For repertoire with lower alto, tenor, and bass parts, the entire work could be transposed up a

⁵³ The Petrucci Music Library inaccurately lists Nascinbeni as “Maria Francesca Nascimbeni.”

fourth, as well as the bass line transposed up an eleventh. The latter combination of approaches has been used by Cappella Artemisia, Elektra Women's Choir, and various editors to create new performing editions: Perucona's brilliant *Regina Caeli*, which was originally published for SAT and continuo. While a performance at pitch of the Tenor line is unlikely for modern treble choirs, as it descends to a C3 once and often lies around D-E3, a whole score transposition of a third could make this piece more accessible.

Selected Musicians and Works

It is also helpful to look further at specific convent musicians and their repertoire that might be well suited to modern editions. Santa Radegonda is a Milanese convent mentioned above for its brilliant musical reputation. The convent featured at least two choirs with Cozzolani serving as the *maestra di cappella* before later becoming abbess and prioress of the convent. S Radegonda also featured at least two *maestrae di cappella* and, before Tridentine reform, thirty to forty musicians, including six or seven string players, three or four keyboard players, and two chitarrone players.⁵⁴ Cozzolani's known publications include *Primavera di fiori musicali*, 1-4vv, bc, op. 1 (Milan, 1640) lost, *Concerti sacri*, 2- 4vv, bc, op. 2 (Venice, 1642), *O dulcis Jesu*, 1649, *Scherzi di sacra melodia*, 1v, bc lost, op. 3 (Venice, 1650), and *No, no no che mare*, Aria, lost.

There are several of Cozzolani's works that I think would lend themselves well to modern treble performances. One of her Christmas motets, *Quis audivit unquam tale? à 3*, was published in 1650 for SSB and continuo. This motet would work in modern SSA edition with the printed bass line up an octave for the alto. The second Christmas motet, *Gloria in altissimis Deo à 4* was published SSAT and continuo. If this work were to be performed at pitch with the written tenor becoming the new Alto II, this would descend to a D3. This range is likely too low for modern altos, so transposing the entire score up by the interval of a third or fourth would render a better edition. Capella Artemisia recently used a combination of octave transposition and whole score transposition to render Cozzolani's *Messa à 4* from 1642 singable.

⁵⁴ Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 205.

A little over 150 miles southeast of Santa Radegonda was the monastery San Vito of Ferrara. The musical training and skills of the women of San Vito were documented by composers and travelers of the time. One such writer, Ercolo Bottrigari, visited the convent and described the choir as “angelic spirits.”⁵⁵ He complimented their musical gifts and reported that their spectacular performance had nothing to do with their physical appearance, as they wore their modest clothing, rather “no other musician living or man, has had any part either in their work or in advising them; and so it is all the more marvelous, even stupendous, to everyone who delights in music.”⁵⁶ Not only does this shed light on their talents, but it also mentions that there were no men involved in the performance or musical training. A musician and nun from San Vito, Raffaella/Vittoria Aleotti, is likely the same woman, one who took Vittoria as her name after entering the convent. She is known to have trained and conducted the choir, played several instruments including the organ, and performed in public performances. One of Vittoria’s publications consists entirely of madrigals, supporting a common theory that secular music did indeed exist in the convent. Her known publications include *Ghirlanda de madrigali a quattro voci* (Venice, 1593), and *Sacrae cantiones quinque, septem, octo et decem vocibus decantande* (Venice, 1593).

Of the *Sacrae cantiones* for 5 voices, *Exurgat Deus*, *Sancta et immaculta virginitatis*, *Facta est cum angelo*, and *Vidi speciosam sicut columbam* might work well for modern performances. Although these were first (or originally) published as SATTB, if all three tenor and bass parts are transposed up the octave, the parts can be arranged to

⁵⁵ Ercolo Bottrigari (1531-1612) was an Italian scholar, music theorist, poet, architect, and composer who published two books of madrigals and a musical treatise.

⁵⁶ Jackson, “The Seventeenth Century,” 28.

be more suitable for a treble choir. This would create what I have called an SSMAA arrangement. Usually, the first tenor line transposed up an octave would become the Soprano I line, the second tenor or original soprano line would become Soprano 2, the original alto would be the new Alto I, and the bass line up an octave would become the Alto 2. Although this often creates more voice crossings than in the original voicing, it makes the music singable and challenging for treble choirs. These motets are also unaccompanied, which is an appealing factor for those conductors or performers who lack experience realizing continuo. It is not recommended that instrumental substitution be used for these motets, as they are highly imitative and often contain syntactically imperative text in the tenor and bass parts. *Ego flos campi* and *hodie nata est beata Maria* are both published for seven voices, SAT/SATB. Although transposition for performance by one choir is not feasible, performing this as double choir or as SSAA and a featured trio is a brilliant option, as there are very few works in all treble choir repertoire that feature such a configuration.

Santa Christina of Bologna, the focus of Craig Monson's research, was the home of Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana. Born in 1590, Vizzana is one of the most thoroughly researched nuns in history, thanks to Monson's work. She served as an organist and conductor and learned music from her aunt Camilla Bonbacci, another well-known musician in the convent. Vizzana is the only nun in Bologna who published music. Several of her family members, including two of her sisters, were also members of Santa Christina. Her published collection *Componimenti Musicali* of 1623 contains spectacular writing and was dedicated to the nuns of the convent. She did not publish any additional music after 1623, perhaps in part due to the inner turmoil of the convent that persisted for

more than two decades.⁵⁷ Monson details the turmoil of S. Christina citing personal conflict and rivalries amongst many sisters as well as disagreements between Bolognese bishops and nuns, including Vizzana, regarding enclosure and musical reform. Several male composers also dedicated works to the nuns at Santa Christina, including Adriano Banchieri, Gabriele Fattorini, G. B. Biondi, and Ercole Porta. Some of this repertoire included double-choir works, pointing to a significant number of skilled singers at the convent.

Vizzana's *Domine Dominus Noster*, originally published for soprano, canto, and tenor, with continuo, makes for an effective SSA work, as evident in Craig Monson's recent edition from Hildegard Publishing. The tenor line is rewritten in the treble clef, but at original pitch, and he has realized the continuo for modern keyboard performance. Many of Vizzana's duets were published as Canto Primo and Canto Secondo. These works could be performed at pitch with no alterations in transposition or substitution. The continuo would need to be realized, of course. While some of her duets might be virtuosic for younger singers, *Paratum cor meum* would lend itself very well to a performance by a young treble choir or children's choir. It is only a little over fifty measures in length, features Latin text, and would be an introduction to meter changes and proportional relationships. The solo arias by Vizzana should certainly not be overlooked, as they are beautifully set for emerging voices that feature more virtuosic writing than those recommended above.

⁵⁷ Jackson, "The Seventeenth Century," 29.

Conclusion

Although modern scholars and interpreters have several options regarding the performance of tenor and bass parts in this music, the bottom line remains the same. The nuns worked with what they had. Although many of the reforms and harsh restrictions placed on these musicians might suggest that their musical landscape had become a barren wasteland, this was not the case. As Craig Monson remarks: “It did not take long for the nuns to find ways to work within and around these restrictions imposed upon them from without. They would interpret such formal prescriptions, in which they had no say, in informal ways that suited their own purposes and were justified in their eyes by the circumstances.”⁵⁸ They did not cast aside the mixed voice works; if that were the case, we would see a lot more music of two to four-part treble voicing. Our research into the nuns’ musical lives and practices is certainly incomplete, but if we aim to learn from what we do know and apply it for future performances of this rarely performed repertoire, young women and men will be exposed to an under-researched period of musical history as well as learn about strong women who persevered and grew under harsh scrutiny. There is much work to be done, but the work that has been completed is invaluable.

The early music repertoire, at present, includes little repertoire for treble choirs. Works for treble choirs mostly consist of arrangements of mixed voice works for treble voices, music written for boy sopranos or castrati, or modern music written for treble choirs. As Kathryn Kelly Longo mentions, the bulk of music for treble choirs was written

⁵⁸ Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 39.

after 1850.⁵⁹ Repertoire guides are similarly unhelpful: in Dennis Shrock's *Choral Repertoire*, the chapter on the Renaissance period does not include a single female composer. In fact, this seminal text does not mention a single woman for a span of over four hundred years.⁶⁰ Most treble choirs might perform some Hildegard von Bingen or rotate between two or three madrigals by Thomas Morley without ever experiencing any of the convent repertoire. This gap is very evident when surveying past and present treble choir performances and programs. While music of the Renaissance and Baroque has started to be seen on more programs, this music is almost always written by men. While this music is important, nuns' music provides us with a new and exciting way to view a woman's role in the musical fabric of this period.

There is a treasure-trove of repertoire to be uncovered from the study and performance of these women and their art. Treble singers who explore this newly adapted repertoire would be exposed to a whole new world of possibility and knowledge. This could certainly open the door for discussions of this music in a historical and religious context, in addition to issues of women and gender studies. This burgeoning research affords singers an opportunity to perform music composed by unheard, and often unseen, women. In a sphere where women were intentionally contained, and even oppressed, the nuns continued to perform, compose, and learn despite their circumstances and restrictions. The women that I have discussed are just a few examples of a larger pool of

⁵⁹ Kathryn Kelly Longo, "Sacred Renaissance Choral Music for Women's Choirs: An Annotated Repertoire List of Music from Italy and Spain" (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2014), 2.

⁶⁰ Dennis Shrock, *Choral Repertoire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

female musicians with incredible talent and energy. Their music deserves a rightful place in the canon as well as further research and performance.

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