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Introduction: *Musica secreta*

In late March 1606, Luzzasco Luzzaschi, nearing the end of a long and productive life, sent a consignment of eleven volumes of music, carefully ruled and copied in *canto e basso*, to the Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga. In the musician's words, the collection represented eighteen years of his life in nearly three hundred pieces of music. The gift was kept secret, at least from other important parties interested in obtaining the books. Luzzaschi asked for no reward, simply the reassuring knowledge that the music would be used by an ensemble of sufficient quality to do it justice. His own ensemble, the virtuoso *concerto delle dame* of the court of Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara – long since disbanded, and all but two members deceased or disgraced – had been famous throughout Europe. Its talents were the stuff of conversation and envy at courts all over Italy, although it had been called the *musica secreta* because only a select few were allowed to witness it perform. Hugely precious and closely guarded for nearly thirty years, in the end Luzzaschi's priceless library did not go to the highest bidder, but to the place – the Mantuan court – where he believed it would continue to come alive through the bodies of musicians and the ears of listeners who would do it most honor. One of those musicians, of course, was Vincenzo's *maestro della musica*, Claudio Monteverdi.

Thirty years old or not, this music was sought after, for Vincenzo had competition from both the Medici court and Cardinal Montalto in Rome. It must have caused quite a stir upon its arrival at Mantua, as after many months of waiting, Vincenzo would have been eager to hear the music performed by his own *concerto* (a group which included Monteverdi's wife), and perhaps even to share it with his sister Margherita, Duke Alfonso's widow and erstwhile employer of the Ferrarese ladies. At the very least, the arrival of the books would have allowed Monteverdi space to develop new ideas, given that they provided him with more than enough new chamber music to last for a while. Indeed, the subsequent two years saw him set aside the madrigal in order to establish himself as an innovator in a new kind of spectacle, composing and producing two large-scale theatrical works, the *favola in musica*, *L'Orfeo* (1607), and the *tragedia … in musica*, *L'Arianna* (1608).[1]

[1] Fabbri, *Monteverdi*, 63–99, 104.

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The only testament left to Luzzaschi's gift is a series of letters, written by Duke Vincenzo's agent in Ferrara, the Marquis of Scandiano, Giulio Thiene.[2] Alas, the trail goes cold quickly, for all eleven books are unaccounted for, either lost or destroyed. The testimony of the letters is as frustrating as it is fascinating: they give us more information about Luzzaschi and his working methods, and they are proof of the cultural value and importance of the *concerto*, even in its afterlife, but we are left only a little wiser with regard to what and how the *concerto* actually sang. We have only a single publication as primary musical evidence of its performance practice, Luzzaschi's *Madrigali … a uno, doi e tre soprani* (Rome: Verovio, 1601), but the letters have thrown the book's ostensibly authoritative evidence into doubt. However detailed its florid ornamentation appears, the book now needs to be regarded with a more critical eye, for its notation does not correspond to the description of the library in Thiene's letters; nor, for that matter, does any other publication that emanated from Ferrara during the sixteenth century. And while there are copious descriptions of the women's performances, the language is not always precise or easy to interpret in modern usage.

The existence of the Ferrarese *concerto delle dame* is well known to modern musicologists despite this lack of hard practical evidence, and the group has been frequently invoked in discussions of patronage, performance, embellishment, professionalism, courtliness, gender, and genre. Nonetheless, they were neither the first nor the only female musicians to be admired in Ferrara. Musical women had graced the court in generations past, and beyond the *castello*, the city's convents had a long history of musical excellence. The Este were generous in their support of female religious houses, recognizing that convents played a vital role in securing Ferrara's spiritual and economic stability. Ducal patronage ensured that convent music-making flourished throughout the sixteenth century, and exclusive convent ensembles – not unlike the *concerto* at court – entertained and amazed elite audiences. Yet the story here, too, is fragmented, distributed randomly through archival records, and the musical evidence of what and how the nuns sang, if recorded at all, has been even more effectively obscured.

This, then, is a book about secrets: hidden histories, hidden meanings, hidden music; private concerts, concealed musicians, veiled women, forgotten practices, exclusivity, enclosure, codes, artifice, and spin. The phrase *musica secreta* has several connotations in relation to late-sixteenth-century Ferrara. The word *musica* itself can have at least three. It can mean the

[2] Thiene was also a *principe* of the Ferrarese Accademia degli Intrepidi, to whom Monteverdi dedicated his *Quarto libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venice: Amadino, 1603); see Carter, "'E in rileggendo,'" 146–47.

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woman who makes music, the feminine form of *il musico*; the creating of music, as the third person singular form of the verb *musicare*; and the music itself, both immaterial, as something you hear, and material, as something you can hold in your hand.[3] *Secreta* adds many nuances: It pertains not only to privilege, esoterica, confidentiality and suppression, but also to position in relation to a ruler – the origin of the English *secretary*. A prayer said *in secreta* may be heard by no one else save God. Moreover, a *segreta* can be a place, either for storage or imprisonment – a room, a cellar, a dungeon, or *clausura* – that hides its contents from the outside world. Each meaning of *musica secreta* has a resonance for Ferrarese music, and in particular for the women whose participation made Ferrara one of the great musical centers of sixteenth-century Europe.

This book is also the first exploration of female patronage and music-making in Ferrara both throughout the century and across the sacred/secular divide, bringing together the evidence from both court and convents. The task is not always clear-cut, as the sound of the Ferrarese women musicians is disguised by the very means by which we even know of their existence. Their stories have been told and their music recorded on paper according to conventions that we may no longer understand completely, or that we have completely misunderstood. The historical evidence has been filtered through the subjectivities of the chroniclers and critics; and each account is intrinsically shaped by its teller's purpose – what Natalie Zemon Davis called "the fiction in the archives."[4] Nevertheless, enough remains to demonstrate the vital role of music in the lives of the Este women, as both patrons and musicians, and how the women of Ferrara came to have such an impact on the development of music at the end of the Renaissance.

Secret Histories: Ferrarese Women in Musicological Literature

While the musical practices of the *concerto delle dame* and the convent ensembles were carefully guarded, knowledge of their existence was not, as it constituted an important element in the projection of Ferrarese, and hence Este, magnificence. Acknowledgment could come in a dedication, such as in Giaches de Wert's *L'ottavo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venice: Gardano, 1586), which praises both the women of the *concerto* for their virtuoso

[3] In the preface to her book on Francesca Caccini, Suzanne Cusick makes this point with regard to the word *musica* containing a tension between being and doing; Cusick, *Francesca Caccini*, xxv–xxvi.

[4] Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 1–6.

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performances and their patrons for their exquisite taste. It could come in theoretical debate, such as Ercole Bottrigari's *Il Desiderio* (Venice: Amadino, 1594) and Giovanni Maria Artusi's *L'Artusi* (Venice, Vincenti, 1600), both of which extol the nuns of San Vito as the finest musicians in the city, even though they disagree about most everything else.[5] These reports were used in the seventeenth century as the basis for retrospective comment intent on salvaging Ferrara's cultural importance, which waned after city devolved to the Papal States upon the death of Duke Alfonso II in 1597.[6] Chroniclers highlighted the musical excellence of its convents in particular, establishing their reputation over generations and emphasizing their debt to the Este, no longer dukes of Ferrara but still the closest it had to an indigenous nobility.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the names of individual female singers at the Ferrarese court lived on, but only as muses to its great literary figures, Torquato Tasso and Giambattista Guarini. The nuns were mentioned by Charles Burney, but only in passing, for he found Artusi's account of San Vito most interesting for its descriptions of instruments.[7] But at the turn of the twentieth century, the work of Angelo Solerti revived scholarly interest in a sixteenth-century court culture at Ferrara. Solerti uncovered the women's role in musical entertainment through his examination of the archival record, and published a history that revealed the extent and importance of their performances, illustrated with transcriptions of letters, memoirs, and reports.[8] Solerti's discoveries remain the bedrock on which most modern explorations of the *concerto* are based, for they included both biographical information that helped locate the women in the courtly context and vivid descriptions of their singing, the most detailed of which is perhaps Vincenzo Giustiniani's seventeenth-century memoire, the *Discorso sopra la musica*.[9] However important, though, Solerti's assertions are sometimes erroneous: For instance, he identified the "three ladies" of the *concerto* with the three women most often associated with Torquato Tasso (through the poet's own dedications) – Lucrezia Bendidio, Tarquinia Molza, and Laura

[5] Bottrigari, *Il Desiderio*; Artusi, *L'Artusi*.

[6] GuarComp; Faustini, *Aggiunta* (Ferrara: Gironi, 1646); Borsetti, *Supplemento* (Ferrara: Giglio, 1670).

[7] Burney, *A General History of Music*, 174. The nuns of Ferrara were included in a German dissertation published in 1917, although its author, Kathi Meyer-Baer, was never able to see it translated into English and put into wider circulation: Meyer-Baer, *Der chorische Gesang der Frauen*; Josephson, "Why Then All the Difficulties!," 257.

[8] SolertiFer.

[9] Solerti transcribed and edited the manuscript in *Le origini del melodramma*, 98–140. The most recent edition by Anna Banti is GiustinianiD, 13–36.

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Peverara – even though there is still no evidence that these three women ever sang together in ensemble.

When Alfred Einstein came to write *The Italian Madrigal*, he matched the accounts published by Solerti with the contemporaneous musical record, thereby establishing the *concerto*'s position in one of the grand modern narratives of musical history.[10] Einstein's distaste for female singers verged on horror, and he characterized them as incontinent sirens – "the virtuoso, the singer with a cunning throat and a flowing coloratura, is the deadly enemy of the creative musician whose chief concern is expression" – supporting his critique (not always soundly) with appeals to both Gioseffo Zarlino and Torquato Tasso.[11] However, he had a particular use for the ensemble: although the notion of an ineluctably corrosive female voice surfaces throughout his account, in the chapter "Concento and Concerto" he lays the responsibility for the decline of polyphony squarely at their feet. Vulgar ornamentation and an emphasis on multiple high voices were its death knell:

> The *concento* is forced to make the transition to the *concerto* when to the competition of the sopranos there is added the element of virtuosity. And this addition coincided with the appearance at the court of Ferrara under Alfonso II of those three celebrated ladies, so often praised in song.[12]

Adriano Cavicchi's modern edition of Luzzaschi's 1601 *Madrigali* appeared in the 1960s, but Einstein's summary of the *concerto*'s legacy remained unchallenged for decades, until the publication of two book-length studies (one in Italian and one in English) within two years of each other, in 1979 and 1981.[13] Elio Durante and Anna Martellotti's *Cronistoria del concerto delle dame principalissime di Margherita Gonzaga d'Este* (1979) was a historical account based exclusively on contemporary sources; its appendices reproduced hundreds of letters, chronicles, dispatches, and poetic texts regarding the women of the *concerto* in the 1580s. Anthony Newcomb's *The Madrigal at Ferrara* (1981) juxtaposed his own fresh examination of the archival material with a more thorough consideration of the musical documents; the appendices included musical transcriptions, payment records, and an analysis of the court music library. Taken together,

[10] Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, 821ff.

[11] Ibid., 663, 842.

[12] Ibid., 825.

[13] Luzzaschi, *Madrigali*, modern edition ed. Cavicchi, 1965; Durante and Martellotti, *Cronistoria* (1st edn.); NewcombMF. The *Cronistoria* was revised and expanded in a second edition in 1989 (DurMarCron). Durante and Martellotti also published a critical edition of a music manuscript associated with the ensemble, together with biographies of the composers, and a further book-length study on Laura Peverara: DurMarMS; DurMarPep.

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these three volumes amplified in both depth and scope the historical, cultural, and musical knowledge of Ferrara in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, and became an invaluable collective resource as musicology began to embrace the compensatory history of Renaissance women begun by feminist scholars in the 1970s.[14] But in seeking to correct Solerti's erroneous identifications, the corpus established a new paradigm: that the ladies of the 1580s were a distinct group, assembled by Alfonso II d'Este and employed at the court – only ostensibly as ladies-in-waiting but in reality as musicians – who were there to satisfy the duke's melomania and his obsession with the female voice. Thus the ladies of *concerto* were simultaneously established as objects of the male gaze, and also granted a form of anachronistic dignity through the professionalization of their craft.

This dichotomy was explored in the seminal collection *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, by Newcomb himself, summarizing the problem in the title of his chapter, "Courtesans, Muses, or Musicians? Professional Women Musicians in Sixteenth-Century Italy." *Women Making Music* also allowed the *concerto* to be considered by the reader with their fifteenth-century forbears (in a chapter by Howard Mayer Brown) and their sixteenth-century contemporaries (in a chapter by Jane Bowers) in a Ferrarese context.[15] Bowers's chapter brought the nuns of San Vito into anglophone published scholarship for the first time, highlighting the achievements of San Vito's most illustrious musical figure, Suor Raffaella Aleotti, who was the first nun, and only the second woman, to have a musical volume published in her own name. Yet for all their contemporaneous fame, in some respects surpassing that of their secular sisters, the women religious of Ferrara have not inspired the same interest as the *concerto*: there exist only two relatively recent dissertations, one on Ferrarese music post-1597 (with a chapter on the convents) and another on Aleotti herself; an extended journal article on convent organs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and a single recording of Aleotti's motets.[16] Moreover, Ferrara's nuns are considered alongside the *concerto* only twice, and then only tangentially to Artusi and Monteverdi, in a discussion of a dispute between male musicians.[17] This may, of course, be the result of another archival fiction, reflected more widely in

14 Lerner, "Placing Women in History"; Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?"

15 Brown, "Women Singers"; Bowers, "The Emergence of Women Composers."

16 Franklin, "Musical Activity"; Carruthers-Clement, "Vittoria/Raphaella Aleotti"; PeveradaDoc. Carruthers-Clement produced editions of Suor Raffaella's madrigals and motets, with the prefatory material extended and refined by Massimo Ossi and Thomas Bridges; Vittoria Aleotti, *Ghirlanda de madrigali*, modern edition, 1994; Raffaella Aleotti, *Sacrae cantiones*, modern edition, 2006. The recording is by Cappella Artemisia, directed by Candace Smith, *Raphaella Aleotti: Le Monache di San Vito*, Tactus TC.570101 (2005).

17 Cusick, "Gendering Modern Music," 6; Carter, "'E in rileggendo,'" 142.

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the lack of scholarship on sixteenth-century convent music in general.[18] The office that became the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars was first conceived only in 1586 as a part of Sixtus V's post-Tridentine reforms, and Vatican records only become reliable from around 1598; institutional documentation prior to that date is sparse and dispersed.

Luzzaschi's 1601 *Madrigali* have been recorded individually and in their entirety a number of times, with varying degrees of attention paid to Newcomb's careful summary of the *concerto*'s performing style.[19] But the publications of the 1970s also provided inspiration for a pair of scholarly performers, willing to consider in both print and performance the implications of the rich archival material they contained. Richard Wistreich has explored the military and musical career of Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, the Neapolitan mercenary who had a troubled relationship with the Ferrarese court; and Nina Treadwell has considered the implications of late-sixteenth-century performance practice in the context of the famous *intermedii* performed in Florence in 1589.[20] Both studies are richly informed by knowledge of the *concerto* and accounts of their performances, but neither investigate the *concerto*'s own repertoire.

The third group of women that populate this book are perhaps the least well served in the musicological literature. Ferrarese courtly women are relatively well documented in historical scholarship, and have been generously theorized in literary studies, particularly pertaining to Lodovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, but – with the notable exception of Isabella d'Este – we are insufficiently aware of the musical activities of the duchesses and princesses of Ferrara.[21] While two figures at either end of the century – Lucrezia Borgia and Margherita Gonzaga d'Este – have received reasonable attention as patrons and particularly as patrons of dance, the female relatives

[18] Studies of musical convents in other Italian cities often begin at the end of the sixteenth century, focusing attention on the seventeenth: Monson, *Disembodied Voices*; Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*; Montford, "Music in the Convents of Counter-Reformation Rome"; Reardon, *Holy Concord*. The music of Florentine nuns has been considered more holistically, but still only supplementing the study of other aspects of the city's culture: Macey, *Bonfire Songs*; Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*; Harness, *Echoes of Women's Voices*; Cusick, *Francesca Caccini*.

[19] *Luzzaschi: Concerto delle dame di Ferrara: Madrigali a uno, due e tre soprani (1601)*, Sergio Vartolo, Harmonia Mundi 901136 (1985); *Concerto delle donne,* Consort of Musicke, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 77154 (1986); *The Secret Music of Luzzasco Luzzaschi, Madrigali a uno, due e tre soprani (1601*), Musica Secreta, Amon Ra 58 (1991); *Le concert secret des dames de Ferrare: Madrigaux de Luzzaschi et Agostini*, Doulce Memoire, ZigZag 71001 (2008); *Luzzaschi: Concerto delle dame*, La Venexiana, Glossa 920919 (2009).

[20] Wistreich, *Warrior, Courtier, Singer*; Treadwell, *Music and Wonder*.

[21] Prizer, *Courtly Pastimes*; Prizer, "Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia"; Prizer, "Games of Venus"; Prizer, "Una 'virtù molto conveniente' "; Fenlon, "Music and Learning"; Shephard, *Echoing Helicon*.

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that fall between them in the Este genealogy are overshadowed by their fathers, husbands, and brothers.[22] Borgia's daughter, Suor Leonora, was an accomplished musician and potentially also a composer; her granddaughters Anna, Lucrezia, and Leonora were experienced performers even before they had entered their teens.[23] This is not to say that their activities are unacknowledged or even unexpected, for the musicological consensus has long been that women, particularly noblewomen, were expected to be able to sing *a bit* – but there is little apart from scant notice that this princess played the harpsichord, or that one had lessons with a composer better known that she. In fact, the princesses grew up in a culture that fostered and celebrated both their learning and virtuosity as a manifestation of Este magnificence. But perhaps more pernicious even than their invisibility as musicians themselves is the downplaying of their role in animating musical production and performance at court. By denying Ferrarese noblewomen's musical agency throughout the sixteenth century, the accepted narrative puts the city's female musicians exclusively at the behest of male control. Too often, their position, organization, and continued success are attributed solely to the patronage of Duke Alfonso II. The real story is more complex.

Secret Combinations: Putting the Histories Together

This book was inspired by a series of archival discoveries, made during the fall and winter of 2009, which functioned like the crucial missing pieces of a jigsaw, connecting disparate strands of scholarly enquiry to form a startling new picture. The Luzzaschi letters already mentioned provided an endpoint for the *concerto*, but I also found a wealth of references to Duchess Margherita and her ladies in relation to the city's convents.[24] As performers, my ensemble Musica Secreta had already hypothesized a relationship between the performance practice of the *concerto* and that of early seventeenth-century convent choirs.[25] This new evidence made that theory more credible, but it also required me then to think more about what

[22] Treadwell, "'Simil combattimento fatto de Dame'"; Bosi, "Leone Tolosa"; Bosi, "More Documentation."

[23] Biographical studies of the Este princesses and duchesses include Campori and Solerti, *Luigi, Lucrezia e Leonora d'Este*; Lazzari, *Le ultime tre duchesse di Ferrara*; BlaisRen; Carpinello, *Lucrezia d'Este*; CoesterSV.

[24] These included two manuscripts of convent entertainments that belonged to Duchess Margherita; Stras, "The '*Ricreationi*.'"

[25] The project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, resulted in a recording: *Dangerous Graces: Music by Cipriano de Rore and His Pupils,* Musica Secreta, Linn CKD 169 (2002).

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sixteenth-century nuns actually sang. Hunting for repertoire for my amateur choir had previously inspired me to investigate the equal-voice repertoire more closely and this, in turn, led me to the mysterious anonymous motet collections of the early 1540s.[26] The circumstantial links in these books to Ferrarese music brought me back to the city in an unexpected and utterly serendipitous fashion. What had begun (in my research plans, at least) as a scholarly performer's critical contemplation of the late-sixteenth-century *concerto* suddenly expanded into an investigation of more than sixty years of mostly untranscribed repertoire and scantily reported historical events. After several false starts trying to organize the material I already had into a coherent whole, I accepted I needed a chronological anchor, and that in turn required me to return to the archives and the musical sources to try to fill in the gaps.

What the book has become, then, is a new history of Ferrarese music in the sixteenth century, one that puts the women at the center rather than on the periphery. It recovers women's agency in music-making, whether that be as performers, composers, or patrons. It considers seriously the role that performance practice played in the development of polyphonic composition, and never assumes that the music we see was always the music they played and heard. It attempts to highlight the women's achievements without glossing over the details of their lives, acknowledging them as actors on the historical, political, and cultural stage, but recognizing the limitations on their powers for self-determination. Consciously and subconsciously I have tried to recover them from the male gaze of both documentation and scholarship; if at times I appear to have stepped back from feminist critique, it is because the book's first purpose is to place all their stories together. There remains much more to be said about *how* their stories have been told – the emphasis in the documents on physical appearance, the language used to describe the women and their actions, the brutal and sorry reality of female subjugation that is often accepted *tout court* – but there is only so long that a single academic study can be.

The opening two chapters of this book examine Ferrarese musical women in the first half of the sixteenth century. Chapter 1 introduces the city's main convents and their musical lives, and describes their relationship with the Este family, particularly through the story of Suor Leonora d'Este, abbess of Corpus Domini and the daughter of Duke Alfonso I and Lucrezia Borgia. Chapter 2 revisits female musical performance and virtuosity in courtly environments at the beginning of the

[26] StrasVP. See also *Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter*, Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens, Obsidian CD717 (2017).

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century, particularly as a manifestation of civic magnificence. It considers the early education of the Este princesses, and the role of Este women – Ercole II's wife Renée and Alfonso I's mistress Laura Dianti – as patrons of secular song and the early madrigal.

Chapters 3 and 4 continue this narrative, and follow the Princesses Anna, Lucrezia, and Leonora into young adulthood in the 1550s and 1560s.[27] Anna's marriage celebrations provide the opportunity to examine the use of Bradamante, the central female character of Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, as a symbol for Este brides. The tropes associated with Bradamante – warrior princess, lamenting *abbandonnata* – are enmeshed in the cultural production associated with Anna's wedding, and begin a trajectory that can be traced through family marriage celebrations for the remainder of the century. Chapter 3 also considers the effect of Duchess Renée's religious convictions on her daughters, and on cultural activity in Ferrara in the second half of the 1550s. Chapter 4 examines the cultural manifestation of the Este's dynastic instability, with both Duke Alfonso II and Princess Lucrezia seeking to establish themselves through marriage throughout the 1560s. Ariostean themes dominated court spectacle, but as the princesses aged, a new generation of female performers assumed the responsibility for providing musical entertainment at the heart of the court.

The catastrophic earthquakes that struck Ferrara in late 1570 and 1571 come at the midpoint of the book's chronological span, when the city's fortunes were changed forever by the physical and political consequences of the disaster. Forced to maintain equilibrium between rival states and the Church, abandoned by many of his male courtiers, Duke Alfonso turned to his sisters' households and the city itself for the resources to project Ferrara's superiority, even in times of calamity. Chapter 5 tells the story of the 1570s, when female courtiers were actively recruited to court spectacle more publicly and more frequently than before. It charts the development of Ferrarese song and polyphony as it absorbed the Roman-Neapolitan influences imported by the "foreign" courtiers Leonora Sanvitale and Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, and considers how composers from Ferrara's ecclesiastical institutions, Paolo Isnardi and Lodovico Agostini, brought their polyphonic skills to bear in the secular court repertoire.

The final four chapters provide counter-narratives to the well-known stories already found in the literature. Chapter 6 describes the Este women's relationships with the city's convents during the heyday of the *concerto* in the 1580s, showing how they treated the convents as extensions of their

[27] Two studies, not specifically focused on female music-making, also inform these chapters: WaismanFM; Owens and Schiltz, *Cipriano de Rore*.

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court environment – primarily but not always strictly gynesocial retreats. Chapter 7 re-examines the music of the 1580s in the light of the discoveries in the rest of this book, concentrating on three commemorative volumes that document musical life at the center of the court: Modena Mus. MS F.1358, Lodovico Agostini's *Il nuovo Echo* (Ferrara: Baldini, 1583), and De Wert's *Ottavo libro* of 1586. It looks at how the adaptive performance practices documented in the convents – instrumental accompaniment, selective transposition, ensemble ornamentation – can be applied to the *concerto*'s repertoire, and how traces of these practices can be found in the music itself. Chapters 8 and 9 extend the musical and historical narratives up to and beyond the devolution of Ferrara to the Papal States in 1598, adding to the biographies of the singing women and the dowager Duchess Margherita. They clarify the role of the convents in Ferrara's cultural self-fashioning after devolution, and show how Ferrara's musical legacy was transmuted and transformed in early seventeenth-century Mantua.

Doing Music History

While always aware of the fiction in the archives, I am just as aware of the "fictive element" or narrative impulse that drives all historians to "fill in and weed out."[28] Many details of the Ferrarese women's stories, particularly their performance stories, are still lost to us, but the experience of working with Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens is fundamental to the conclusions presented here. We have immersed ourselves in the world of equal-voice polyphony, and have also attempted to solve the conundrum of decorating and performing the open-scored polyphony composed for the *concerto* and the convents with female voices and instruments alone. Practical investigation demands solutions: as Bruce Haynes put it, "Because musicians perform concerts, they can't skip over the bits they are not sure about."[29] Working with the novelist Sarah Dunant on the *Sacred Hearts* project, on the other hand, made me think hard about how every aspect of the women's lives would have had an impact on their music, whether as performers or patrons: illness, pregnancy, marriage, bereavement, the daily chanting of the Office, the necessity of diplomacy and hospitality, even in the midst of crisis.[30] So I have taken comfort in the words of the novelist Ursula Le Guin, who said:

[28] Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination*, 39.
[29] Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 128.
[30] Sarah Dunant drew on my research for her novel *Sacred Hearts* (London: Virago, 2009). Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens recorded a "soundtrack" that accompanied the book: *Sacred Hearts, Secret Music*, Divine Arts 25077 (2009).

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Excerpt
More Information

> The way one does research into nonexistent history is to tell the story and find out what happened. I believe this isn't very different from what historians of the so-called real world do … You look at what happens and try to see why it happens, you listen to what the people there tell you and watch what they do, you think about it seriously, and you try to tell it honestly, so that the story will have weight and make sense.[31]

This description seems to me to have deep resonances with what musicians do, whether or not they are working with materials from the distant past. It suggests that we are intellectually, even morally, obliged to support our performance decisions with arguments that have considered all the evidence available. But more importantly, to accept Le Guin's model is to accept that in order to research music history, one must "do" music history, even if there is only an incomplete, inaccurate, or contradictory set of data there in the first place.

Although this book has been many years in the making, there is still plenty more to do – in terms of archival recovery, musical experimentation, analysis, and contextualization – for anyone wishing to expand its work. The archival record is still relatively untapped regarding the musical activities of Ferrarese convents, before and after devolution. Moreover, aside from the court and convents, the musical institutions of Ferrara were numerous – confraternities, academies, monastic houses, synagogues, the cathedral chapter – and a record of their activities and influences is crucial to a comprehensive cultural biography of Ferrarese music. Laura Dianti and Lucrezia d'Este, Duchess of Urbino, are still woefully under-researched as patrons and as political players. Marfisa d'Este is an equally fascinating figure, at once a name instantly recognizable to any student of Ferrarese culture, and yet difficult to pin down in terms of her musical patronage. Indeed, the activities of many female members of the ruling families of Northern Italy are waiting to be explored and revealed, particularly as they are so inextricably bound with the networks of convents that were home to their sisters, aunts, and widowed mothers – so that we may tenderly rehabilitate them to the historical narrative. But we must also recognize that all of these women, whether enclosed in a convent or out in the secular world, would have actively "done" music. Perhaps they were not always readers or singers of polyphony, paid musicians, or published composers – but that does not diminish the importance of music to their lives.

[31] Le Guin, *Tales from Earthsea*, xii.

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