

1 Introduction

This Element is inspired by a book: the Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript, MS 27766 of the Bibliothèque du Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles, a fragile but not insubstantial manuscript of music that was acquired in the early years of the twentieth century. Nothing is known of its whereabouts in the nineteenth century. Perhaps it changed hands more than once, circulating in private collections before it was purchased by the library. Nonetheless, we can be certain that it was created in Florence in the sixteenth century; it may have remained there until the early 1800s, when Napoleon's authorities abolished almost all of Italy's convents and confiscated their property.

The possessions of Renaissance religious institutions still in existence today are always precious, since so much has been lost or destroyed. Yet the Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript is even more special, since it is the only surviving volume of sixteenth-century polyphony that verifiably began its life in a convent. There are fewer than two dozen manuscripts of convent polyphony remaining from before the beginning of the sixteenth century, mostly from the fifteenth century; and about the same number of prints associated with nuns, mostly from the last quarter of the sixteenth century (Yardley 1986, 26–27; Stras 2017a, 196–97).

This scarcity of material makes any source consequential, but it also brings with it the danger of moving from the specific to the general: while it is possible to mine the manuscript for every scrap of information, what it tells us may be more relevant to the musical culture of its original institution than it is to sixteenth-century convent music in the wider sense. But at the very least, the manuscript becomes a proof of concept – that even a modest convent outside of a city centre could have a rich musical life.

1.1 The Manuscript and Its Origins

The Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript is bound in leather and copied on ruled and folded *carte reale*, approximately A3 size (420 mm x 280 mm). There are 170 leaves in the book, of which 166 have writing on at least one side. The front and back covers both once held an oval medallion, on which was painted a coat of arms (the back medallion is missing). Around each medallion space is embossed a name, in Latin: *Sorori Angiolete de Biffolis* and *Sorori Clementie de Sostegni* – ‘to Suor Agnoleta Biffoli’ and ‘to Suor Clemenzia Sostegni’. The manuscript is loosely organised into two sections, each beginning with a setting of the Mass Ordinary: sixty-six works in four voices (this section also interpolates a three-voice work), then ten three-voice works. A fragment of a two-voice work is copied on a page left blank

by the copyist at the end of the book.¹ The works range in complexity and length, from the strictly homophonic to dense polyphony, including vernacular song, antiphons, responsories, litanies, alternatim psalms and Magnificats for Vespers, and the masses.

The music is written in choirbook format, with beautiful filigree initials – called ‘cadels’ – at the beginning of each separate piece or section. Male grotesques adorn many cadels, but from a few, nuns’ faces peer out, some in the act of singing (Figure 1). Some cadels are decorated further with yellow colour, and on a single page, a larger pen and colour drawing depicts the women’s coats of arms hanging in an olive tree (Figure 2). Many cadels contain tiny inscriptions that both celebrate the nuns and give us further clues about the book’s genesis: the date 1560, and the principal copyist’s name, Antonius Morus – a Latinised form of Antonio Mori, or Moro.²

Most of the music is anonymous, with only three composers’ names attached to a handful of works – Moro himself, Francesco Bocchini, and Adriano Willaert. As beautiful as the manuscript is, however, its materials have not easily stood the test of time: the acid in the iron gall ink has eaten away the paper in many places, leaving patches of some pages disintegrating into dust.³ This damage has meant that, for the purposes of musicological study and performance, many of the pieces have needed reconstruction, ranging from single notes to extended passages in



Figure 1 B-Bc MS 27766, 64v: *Verbum caro factum est*, Tenor, singing nun (Bibliothèque du Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles).

¹ See Appendix A, Manuscript Contents.

² Musicological literature unanimously refers to Antonius Morus as Antonio Moro; however, the plural form of his family name, Mori, is by far more common in mid sixteenth-century Florence; see datasets provided by the DECIMA project, <https://decima-map.net>. A Suor Antonia di Niccolò Mori was present at San Matteo between 1545 and 1583.

³ The manuscript has been in conservation now since the 2010s and is not available for public consultation, so this Element has been written with the aid of high-resolution colour and black-and-white photographs.



Figure 2 B-Cc MS 27766, 23v: the Biffoli and Sostegni coats of arms (Bibliothèque du Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles).

multiple parts: in the music examples, editorial reconstruction is indicated by vertical square brackets.

The manuscript is not a new discovery: nearly 100 years ago, Charles van den Borren, librarian of the Brussels Conservatoire, noticed the names of the two nuns on its binding and surmised that it came from a Florentine convent (van den Borren 1934, 23–26). In 1996, the Italian musicologist Lucia Boscolo published a detailed codicological study, together with an expanded inventory identifying liturgical usage and concordances (Boscolo 1996).⁴ British scholar Iain Fenlon and American scholar James Haar identified that the copyist, Antonio Moro, had also produced a handful of other important sources of early sixteenth-century secular and sacred music (Fenlon and Haar 1988, 127).

I began looking at the Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript in 2015, when I was trying to understand the musical context for another group of works I felt sure had been composed for nuns (Stras 2017a; 2017b; 2018). The names of the two nuns on the binding are from Florentine families, and the set of antiphons for St Clare convinced everyone who had written about the book that it was prepared for a convent of Poor Clares – the second, female order of the Franciscans. However, no further work had been done to establish which Florentine Clarissan convent was home to Suor Agnoleta and Suor Clemenzia.

Close to the beginning of the manuscript, the copyist placed music that suggested the convent could be dedicated to an Apostle: a hymn for the feasts of the Apostles and the Vespers psalms for the Common of Saints. Only two Clarissan convents in Florence fit this description: the rich San Jacopo in via Ghibbelina, right in the centre of town, and the less prestigious San Matteo in Arcetri, which was some distance outside the city. Close to the end of the manuscript, however, is a setting of the Gospel reading for the Feast of St Matthew, which is a rather more substantial clue, as convents would have wanted dedicated music to use for their patronal feast. And indeed, in 2020 I found both Suor Clemenzia and Suor Agnoleta in what remains of San Matteo's papers. Having identified the manuscript's origins, I could use other materials preserved in other archives to learn who Suor Agnoleta and Suor Clemenzia were, to understand the world in which they lived, and to place their music in a much clearer context.

The manuscript's connection to San Matteo also links it to one of the convent's, and Florence's, most famous nuns, Suor Maria Celeste Galilei, the eldest daughter of Galileo Galilei. Although Galileo was a scientist, most of his family, including Suor Maria Celeste, were musicians. From the time she

⁴ Boscolo and Giulio Cattin also produced two much shorter studies on specific pieces in the manuscript (Boscolo 2002; Cattin 2003).

entered San Matteo in 1612, Suor Maria Celeste would have been part of the convent's musical forces, and towards the end of her life she was responsible for the choir. The music of the Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript provides more insight into Suor Maria Celeste's daily existence and the few references to music in the letters she wrote to her father.

While the manuscript's historical implications are fascinating in themselves, its contents are also hugely important to the understanding of women's music-making at the end of the European Renaissance. The works relate to a full range of musical events, from everyday prayers and hymns to the most solemn of the convent's feasts. There is also a wide range of compositional styles and performance requirements, from very simple harmonisations suitable for people with only the most basic training, to complex polyphony only within the reach of virtuoso singers. The manuscript is clearly dated 1560, but some of the works were composed decades earlier, perhaps even in the fifteenth century. All are for either three or four equal voices, that is, to be sung by a single-sex ensemble of equal maturity, and many appear to have been composed specifically for nuns – perhaps even for (or by) the nuns of San Matteo.

1.2 The Other Primary Sources

The archive of San Matteo in Arcetri is now held by the Archivio di Stato in Florence. It is not large and consists mostly of documents relating to legal disputes from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the dissolution of the convent by the Napoleonic authorities in 1808. One of the two remaining bundles of exclusively sixteenth-century documents was irretrievably damaged by the disastrous flood of the Arno in 1966. However, the other, a large vellum-bound volume with the word *Ricordanze* embellished on its cover, is well preserved.⁵ It contains *ricordi* (or memos) of major financial transactions dating from as early as 1519, with a more organised, itemised ledger beginning in 1530 and ending in 1563. There are further random entries dated into the 1570s, as if the scribe had run out of space elsewhere and just needed a place to preserve some notes.

The *Ricordanze* contains details of the convent's household income and expenses, recorded by the convent's chamberlains (*camerlinghe*). Crucially, this includes the names of girls entering the convent as choir nuns (*monache*), servant nuns (*serviglie*), and boarders (*in serbanza*).⁶ These entries contain

⁵ Archivio di Stato Firenze (I-Fas), Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal governo francese (CRSGF) 6 – San Matteo, *pezzo* 35; hereafter the *Ricordanze*.

⁶ The terms *per servigia* and *in serbanza* (or *serbo*) are linguistically related but generally mean different things in sixteenth-century convents. *Servigia* suggests servitude, but accepting a girl *in serbo* can also mean that she was to be placed in the convent for education, as an *educanda* (Strocchia 2003).

information about the date and, the girl's family – generally the name of the parent, grandparent, uncle, or aunt placing her in the convent and making her dowry payment. Sometimes, additional payments were made for the girl to have a *maestra* – a nun who provided for her spiritual and pastoral needs, as well as her education – or for the clothing ceremony, or vestition, in which she received the habit (and perhaps a new name) and took the vows of a novice, and by which she officially moved from her secular to her religious family.

The *Ricordanze* also provides a vivid record of the expenses for feast days, and for the convent's testatory obligations: prayers, masses, and other devotions said on behalf of individuals who had given money or property to the convent, normally in their wills, to ensure their souls' swift passage through purgatory and on to Heaven after death. A much later *Sbozzo degli Obblighi* (literally, Sketch of Obligations) compiled in 1694 gives details of all the obligations still celebrated by the convent, some of which were established in the fifteenth century.⁷ It serves as a useful cross-reference to some of the entries in the *Ricordanze*, as well as proof that the nuns were still musically active into the late seventeenth century.

Apart from these two separately bound sources, the records of the *Deputati sopra i monasteri* and loose bundles of legal documents from San Matteo, also housed in the Archivio di Stato, have helped me to understand the chronology of some of the nuns at the convent. The records of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century convents' admissions, professions (the solemnisation of a nun's vows), and visitations (diocesan inspections) in the Archivio Arcivescovile in Florence are far from complete, but still provide essential information. Various writings by Alessandro de' Medici, who was Archbishop of Florence between 1574 and 1605, outline the ever more constricting rules for convent life and worship; these include both loose memos and his 1601 *Trattato sopra il governo dei monasteri*, distributed in manuscript, which formed the practical and ideological basis for many subsequent restrictions on Florence's convents.⁸

The letters of Suor Maria Celeste Galilei, which span the years between 1623 and her death in 1634, provide detail and context. They exist in various different editions, both Italian and English, as well as digital photographs in an online resource hosted by the Museo Galileo.⁹ The latest source I have used is San

⁷ I-Fas, CRSGF 6, pezzo 48; hereafter the *Sbozzo*.

⁸ Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat.lat.10444, 333r-348r, *Trattato sopra il governo dei monasteri fatto dal cardinale di firenze per il suo vicario generale l'anno MDCi*; hereafter the *Trattato*. Another copy is in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Firenze (I-Fn), MS Gino Capponi, CIV.

⁹ Citations in this Element will be from *Le opere di Galileo Galilei – edizione nazionale*, edited by Antonio Favaro, 20 vols. (1890–1909). Other commercial transcriptions and translation are available; see, for instance, (S. M. C. Galilei 1983; 2000; 2001). The Museo Galileo resource contains both images and transcriptions: <https://galileioteca.museogalileo.it/GalManus/?lang=en>.

Matteo's *Costituzioni*, newly printed in 1713; while this version introduces a seventeenth-century theological concept, the nun's individual Guardian Angel, that would not have been familiar to Suor Agnoleta and Suor Clemenzia, it outlines rules and behaviours consistent with similar sixteenth-century constitutions (Francescani 1713).

Many of the convent's sources have a memorialising function, both in terms of preserving information and stimulating the memory of people and events. The liturgy works like this, too: not only does the Divine Office repeat daily and weekly, and the whole liturgical cycle return annually, but also the chant melodies and reciting tones are shared, repeated, transformed, so that the nuns' singing bodies and minds were constantly stimulated by a musical and textual resonance. Sound and memory are constants in religious discipline. With sources spanning over 200 years, any unified concept of daily life at the convent is bound to be wildly conjectural, but I am reminded of the time I spent at the convent of Poor Clares in Arundel in the 2010s, to which I retreated once a month to write my book on women and music in sixteenth-century Ferrara. So much seemed familiar from my sixteenth-century sources. While the hours of the Divine Office now happen at different times of the day, they are still manifested by voices and instruments. When sitting in an external parlour, I could sometimes hear a single nun practising her singing. The sisters still play games of their own devising at community celebrations; they still put on dramatisations of saints' lives for their most important feasts. There is still a Great Silence, and there is still an Angelus bell.

2 Historical Context for the Biffoli-Sostegni Manuscript

The ex-convent of San Matteo, once governed by the Franciscan rule of St Clare, sits in the hills of Arcetri about a mile south of the medieval walls of Florence. Only the church exterior and a small courtyard remain of the original buildings. It is hard to overemphasise the bucolic peace of the landscape, barely a forty-five-minute walk from the busy city centre. For centuries, the area has been known for its Verdea wine, produced in the vineyards once worked by the convent. In the 1980s, the historian Giovanni Spadolini said: 'It is a hill that has remained more or less as it was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With the same cramped and impassable streets: it is impossible to move forward, in two senses. ... A place dear to youthful amazement and enchantment' (Spadolini 1984, 140).

In the sixteenth century, Arcetri provided several important Florentine families with a place of repose, and an opportunity to indulge cultural pursuits.¹⁰ In

¹⁰ Benedetto Varchi named villas owned by the Della Luna, the Barducci, the Neri, the Giuccardini, the Lanfredini, and the Benivieni (Varchi 1721, 255). The Villa Buonaccorsi was on the road to Arcetri; there are Buonaccorsi nuns at San Matteo throughout the recorded period. The Villa del

1565, the composer Giovanni Animuccia dedicated a book of madrigals to two sons of the Neri family, suggesting the boys could sing through them while escaping the heat of the summer city: ‘When you are, in this hot season, either wearied by more serious study or exhausted by more tiring activities, or when you are truly transported to that Paradise of Arcetri, [these works] will give you some relaxation’ (Animuccia 1565, Aii).¹¹ In the same year, the Villa del Poggio Baroncelli, half a mile from San Matteo, was given by Cosimo I de’ Medici to his daughter Isabella de’ Medici Orsini, an accomplished musician and patron of the composer Maddalena Casulana, and it soon became her favoured residence and a hub of creative activity.

The Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript shows that these echoes of secular music-making in Arcetri of the mid sixteenth century were complemented by the sound of women singing chant and polyphony behind the enclosed walls of San Matteo. Suor Clemenzia and Suor Agnoleta arrived at the convent at a time when it was undergoing renewal and expansion in the 1540s, as Florence itself settled into what would become almost two more centuries of Medici rule. Like many of the choir nuns at their convent, Suor Clemenzia and Suor Agnoleta came from Florentine minor nobility: Suor Clemenzia’s father Roberto was a Medicean administrator, and Suor Agnoleta’s father Francesco was a merchant. The manuscript does not make clear the relationship between the two women, although an inscription in the decorations, ‘ambo felice, C. A. S.’ (‘both happy, Clemenzia, Agnoleta Sorores’) – at the beginning of the hymn of thanksgiving *Te Deum laudamus* – suggests that it was close (Figure 3). Created almost twenty years after Suor Clemenzia’s entry, the manuscript may have been a collective gift to the community from the two nuns, one that commemorated their friendship, the convent’s mid century prosperity, and its musical identity.¹² Understanding its music requires a brief summary of the convent’s history in the decades prior to the manuscript’s commission, establishing a context for the works and their potential meanings for the nuns.

2.1 A Decade of Recovery: San Matteo in the 1530s

In late summer 1529, the peace of Arcetri was shattered by the arrival of Spanish and Imperial troops, who set camp all along the southern hills. They began the

Poggio Baroncelli, which in the sixteenth century was owned by the Pandolfini and then the Salviati, was confiscated by Cosimo I de’ Medici in 1565.

¹¹ Source Text 1; original texts from primary sources are included in the Supplementary Material provided online. The book contains three-voice madrigals and motets, mostly for high voices.

¹² Nuns and their families might use personal wealth to endow masses, to commission objects for worship, or to contribute to the convent’s buildings in a way that did not confer ownership on an individual nun.

Music at a Florentine Convent

9



Figure 3 B-Bc 27766, 36v: *Te Deum laudamus*, Cantus, ‘T’ inscription ‘Ambo felice, C. A. S.’ (Bibliothèque du Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles).



Figure 4 Giorgio Vasari, *The Siege of Florence* (1556–1562), Sala di Clemente VII, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence (public domain).

ten-month long Siege of Florence, which eventually restored the Medici family to power. Giorgio Vasari’s painting of the siege, housed in the Palazzo Vecchio, clearly shows San Matteo in the foreground, with troops exercising outside its walls (Figure 4). While some convents closer to the city were destroyed to prevent them providing shelter to enemy troops, San Matteo was merely evacuated to the house of Medici loyalist Bartolomeo Capponi, which had been commandeered by the republicans.¹³

¹³ I-Fas, CRSGF 6, pezzo 35, from both credit and debit ledgers, 1530: [37] ‘Item: from Bartolomeo Capponi 100 florins and 7 lire, the florins being what we begged for living and to repair the house’; [188] ‘Item: to clean the street in front of the Capponi house where we were in Florence’; [213] ‘Item: to Bartolomeo Capponi for the return of the 100 gold florins and 7 lire, the florins are those begged from him before, and for the principal of the rent when we were in his house during the siege’. Source Text 2.

When the nuns returned to Arcetri at the end of summer 1530, there was significant work to do on the convent estate, cleaning everything, emptying the wells, reroofing properties, and rebuilding boundary walls. But they also had to bury and commemorate their dead: seven nuns, including the abbess Piera dei Giardelli, died of the plague between 16 August and 15 September, probably brought back from their shelter in Florence. The entries for their masses and offices are the first potential indications of music in the convent's *Ricordanze*. In subsequent years, masses are itemised by the name of the deceased nun: here, there are just too many.

In the first eight months after their return, the nuns relied financially on alms from city government, borrowing or begging from donors, a small number of rents, and the sale of a pair of chickens, walnuts and almonds from the remaining trees, and, disturbingly, the mattresses and bedlinen of the dead nuns. Portions of two dowries, for Chiara Rondinelli and Caterina Anselmi, are also recorded, suggesting that these two girls had only recently joined the convent. The expenses to the end of the year (the Florentine new year began on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary) are heavy with the costs of moving, rededicating the church, and repairs across the convent's entire estate, including all the farms, cottages, and commercial buildings, and – of course – the costs of burials and commemorations. The entries for 1531 show some early signs of recovery: the nuns add earnings from the sale of grain and livestock, from unspecified manual labour, and from spinning. And alongside the funeral masses, the nuns begin again to celebrate their most important sacred feasts: the joint celebration of San Lorenzo and Santa Chiara in August 1531, at which the friars – who had come to celebrate Mass – and the nuns are served eggs, cheese, salad, and beans, with a special ounce of pepper; and the following month when the friars return to celebrate the Feast of San Matteo, they extend resources to buy veal.

A sense of continuity emerges from the pages of the *Ricordanze* which, as surely as the liturgy turns and renews through the church year, charts the convent's feast days, greater and lesser, with details of the food and provisions purchased for the nuns, the convent's *famiglia* (the seculars who served the convent), and the friars who came to celebrate Mass. As the decade progresses, and their debts accrued during the siege are paid off, expenses for more feasts appear in the books: New Year at Annunciation; Passion Sunday; Palm Sunday; Maundy Thursday, Easter and its Octave; Pentecost, San Giovanni Battista; San Lorenzo and Santa Chiara (on consecutive days, but Chiara is a double feast); the Assumption; San Matteo; San Francesco; the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (hereafter BVM); and Christmas. They note more local and non-liturgical celebrations, such as Berlinghaccio (Maundy Thursday),