

Laurie Stras, *Women and Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara*. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Print. Xxiii + 391 pp., £75.00, ISBN: 9781107154070 (hardback).



Review

In Francisco de Zurbaran's painting *The Temptation of Saint Jerome* (1639), an elderly, emaciated man is depicted in a state of revulsion. Shrouded in darkness and kneeling in front of scripture, the man – who is the eponymous saint of the work – has his head turned away from the object of his aversion, his arms outstretched to prevent that which torments him from approaching nearer. What is the disconcerting presence causing this revered Church Father to recoil? Is it perhaps an otherworldly, sinister entity? Indeed, hagiographic literature describes many devout men and women who were afflicted by malevolent forces, and as such, Christian artists have long depicted saints and biblical figures in the midst of repelling demonic temptations, assailment, and even enticements from Satan himself. Yet, in Zurbaran's aforementioned work, the figures who are standing before Saint Jerome are neither visibly grotesque or revolting, nor are they outwardly performing acts of violence or sexual coercion. On the contrary, they are a group of five poised young women who are performing musical instruments.

As recorded in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* – a thirteenth-century compilation of the lives of Christian saints – Saint Jerome withdrew from society in order to pursue an ascetic life in the desert. During his sojourn, he was faced with a number of temptations including seductive dreams of dancing women he had once witnessed before departing from civilisation. These dancers are interpreted as female musicians in Zurbaran's *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*, whose music and voices are portrayed as being shunned and silenced by their pious male listener. Essentially, the purpose of including these women within the painting is to highlight Jerome's self-restraint; he is the piece's salient figure.

Like the musical ladies in Zurbaran's painting, women musicians have historically been a footnote in a larger androcentric story. In *The Temptation of Saint Jerome* they simply appear as a manifestation of Jerome's lustful fantasies; that is, we only see the musicians as Jerome sees them (as temptresses), not as who they are objectively. Similarly, throughout the history of Western art music, female musicians (as well as female patrons and listeners) have often been observed and described through the eyes of men, and their accomplishments – if documented and extant – have been eclipsed by those of their more celebrated male musical contemporaries.

While women have traditionally been overlooked in the history of Western music, over the past four decades, a number of musicologists – notably, those contributing to the branch known as 'new musicology' (that is, music research that is often situated within contemporary sociopolitical and cultural issues) – have made significant advances in giving female musicians an autonomous voice in musicological discourse. Among the most recent publications that have contributed to this burgeoning body of female-focused research is musicologist Laurie Stras' 2018 monograph *Women and Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara*. Traversing the worlds of both sacred and secular Ferrara, Stras – a Professor of Music and musicologist who specialises in sixteenth-century Italian music – delineates the important contributions that noblewomen and nuns of the princely House of Este made to late Renaissance music; she delves into their individual accomplishments and musical lives within the Ferrarese court and the convents that belonged to an expansive tradition of female musicking.

Musicologists have long been aware that women in sixteenth-century Ferrara were engaged in music-making, as the celebrated all-female vocal ensemble *concerto delle dame* were lauded for their virtuosity within Duke Alfonso II d'Este's court, and Este noblewomen generally received musical education; however, scholarship on Ferrara's musical accomplishments has often highlighted male composers (notably, Luzzasco Luzzaschi) and prominent musical patrons such as Duke Alfonso II. Furthermore, fewer studies have explored the musical activities within sixteenth-

century Ferrarese convents than music performed by women within the court (again, with strong connections to Duke Alfonso II). This is where Stras' book departs from the traditional Este male narrative. Instead, she presents an entirely novel approach to recounting the story of sixteenth-century Ferrarese music, an approach that, in her own words: 'puts the women at the centre rather than on the periphery. It recovers women's agency in music-making whether that be as performers, composers, or patrons' (p. 9).

Stras' undertaking to unearth the musical lives and accomplishments of Ferrarese women are organised into nine chapters that begin with an exploration of convent music and continue through musical developments within courtly life. While exploring and oscillating between the music of sacred and secular institutions, Stras concurrently addresses contemporaneous political, social, and environmental events that impacted the creation and development of music in Ferrara (such as the devastating earthquakes of 1570 and 1571). Stras' extensive, original, and thoroughly conducted research substantiates the importance of women within Ferrara's musical culture, and her impressive efforts to 'put women at the centre rather than on the periphery' of music history arguably begin prior to the book's first chapter; that is, the cover of *Women and Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara* also hints at an alternative female-focused perspective on a traditionally male-centred era in history.

The cover features Zurbaran's aforementioned painting *The Temptation of Saint Jerome*. While the painting's title emphasises Jerome, the first three words of the book's title – 'Women and Music' – draws attention to the painting's five female musicians, two of whom are confidently gazing at the reader as if prepared to share their own stories and songs that are distinct from the seductive narrative that Jerome has assigned to them. Similarly, the Ferrarese women examined within Stras' book – whose legacies have been inextricably tied to their prominent male family members and patrons, and whose personal musical achievements have largely been overlooked or diminished – are now framed as important historical figures in their own right.

In Chapter One, Stras takes the reader into the world of Ferrarese nuns during the first half of the sixteenth century where music was integral to the recitation of the daily Office. Here, the history of Ferrara's most notable convents and their relationships to the Estes is examined with emphasis on Suor Leonora d'Este (abbess of the Clarissan convent Corpus Domini) who was the daughter of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso I. In her investigation of Suor Leonora's musical pursuits, Stras contends that the princess-abbess was not only a virtuosic keyboardist, but also possessed a strong understanding of music theory. She corroborates her hypotheses with several convincing sources including testimonies by prominent and influential music theorists such as Nicola Vicentino and Gioseffo Zarlino; the latter Stras conjectures had a close and enduring friendship with Suor Leonora. Indeed, as Stras notes, Zarlino dedicated his treatise *Utilissimo trattato della patientia* (1561) to Suor Leonora and later credited her with inspiring his theoretical work *Sopplimenti musicali* (1588).

In the subsequent chapters, Stras explores the musical lives of Este women at court while continuing to revisit music within the convents. Chapter Two examines the manner in which musical skill – primarily, as Stras indicates, singing and accompanying oneself while singing – was viewed as an expression of Este women's feminine qualities and their elite social status. In Stras' words: 'their [Este princesses] singing projected both princely virtue and queenly decorum and was crucial in the family's expression of its own identity and value.' (p. 55) Stras also introduces the music of courtesans and contrasts the expectations surrounding their performance practices with the limits imposed on noblewomen's performances (for example, noblewomen were expected to remain 'modest' when performing by minimising the use of florid ornamentation; however, courtesans were free and encouraged to implement such musical flourishes).

Chapters Three and Four are situated in the 1550s and 1560s and focus on the Este princesses Anna, Lucrezia, and Leonora. In Chapter Three, attention is given to Anna's marriage negotiations and wedding. Stras uses Anna's wedding as an opportunity to examine how Bradamante – a fictional female Christian knight from

Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* – was an allegorical figure for Este brides. Preceding Chapter Five, Stras recounts the disastrous earthquakes that struck Ferrara in 1570 and 1571 which resulted in extensive damage to the city. Because of the earthquakes, Duke Alfonso reconfigured the musical activities and traditions of the court which led him to utilise female courtiers for musical entertainment instead of males. Following the residual effects of Ferrara's earthquakes, Stras uses Chapter Five to delve into the court life of the 1570s, a time when female courtiers were becoming increasingly prevalent in the court's musical sphere. Additionally, She explores the way that Roman and Neapolitan musical traditions impacted the development of Ferrarese songs and polyphony.

The book's last four chapters are written as, what Stras calls, 'counter-narratives' (p.10) to Ferrara's already familiar history in the late sixteenth century. Chapter Six revisits Ferrarese convents in the 1580s, where Este noblewomen found serenity away from court life. Stras explains that noblewomen would occasionally stay at convents as a type of retreat at which times they would experience, enjoy, and possibly partake in the nuns' musical practices. In Chapter Seven, Stras focuses on three 'commemorative volumes' that, in her words, 'document musical life at the centre of the court:' (p. 11) Modena Mus. MS F. 1358, Lodovico Agostini's *Il nuovo Echo* (1583), and De Wert's *Ottavo libro* (1586). These works were created to highlight the magnificence of the *concerto delle dame* and Ferrara's musical traditions. In the book's last two chapters, Stras ventures into the last years of Alfonso II's reign and continues after his death to Ferrara's devolution to the Papal States. She demonstrates that during the shift in the political climate of the late 1590s, musical practices continued within Ferrara's convents and were subsequently transmitted to Mantua.

Overall, Stras' monograph is an excellent and compelling study that effectively and conscientiously brings marginalised sixteenth-century noblewomen—who have frequently been relegated to the position of the political pawn in certain historiographies—and women religious to the forefront of music history. Her work is particularly strong in its varied methodological approach that ranges from consulting

a plethora of primary sources—notably, novel archival evidence—to analysing musical excerpts with precision, and examining the connections between prominent music theorists, composers, and the musical women presented throughout the book. While *Women and Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara* is intended to ‘appeal to musicians and scholars alike,’ (p. i) those who are less familiar with early music or the sociopolitical landscape of sixteenth-century Italy may feel it necessary to consult supplemental sources when navigating Stras’ work; however, those well-versed in the aforementioned areas of study will find Stras’ monograph very accessible and comprehensive. Fundamentally, in her attempt to recover these great musical women from ‘the male gaze of both documentation and scholarship’ (p. 9), Stras successfully shines a light on the previously silenced female voices that have been concealed in the shadows of an antiquated musical patriarchy.

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