

Echoing Helicon: Music, Art and Identity in the Este Studioli, 1440–1530.

Tim Shephard.

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The use of cultural artifacts in the self-fashioning of early modern Italian aristocracy has long been recognized. Both music and the private space of the *studiolo* allowed the performance of a ruler's personal qualities — the *studiolo* as stage for the outward, material expression of intellectual virtues; music, as the patron's voice, an intimate vehicle for the verbalization of refinement and grace. In *Echoing Helicon*, Shephard explores the rich meanings generated by their interaction, analyzing the representation of music in the iconography of three *studioli* whose owners, Leonello, Isabella, and Alfonso I d'Este, sought different solutions to the problem of representing their identities and ideological agendas in the sometimes fraught public sphere of Renaissance culture and politics.

The choice of three Estensi reflects the family's cultural prominence as models for the Italian aristocracy, from Leonello in the fifteenth century until the heirless Alfonso II, whose death in 1597 marks the end of the dynasty and the devolution of Ferrara to the papacy. Educated by Guarino da Verona, Leonello became the paragon of his class, one of the most learned nobles of the mid-fifteenth century, patron to artists, humanists, and musicians. His *studiolo* at Belfiore was imitated by his peers, including Guidobaldo and Federico da Montefeltro; it was destroyed in 1622, and only a few of its decorative panels survive. Isabella, daughter of Ercole I, built her *studiolo* in Mantua, where she had become marchesa in 1490. The rooms, which she planned as early as 1491, went through a series of modifications and changes of location — in 1495–96, 1504–05, and 1522. Isabella's brother, Alfonso I, became Duke of Ferrara in 1505; his *studiolo* remained a work in progress throughout his life.

Shephard focuses on how music inflects the meaning of the three iconographic programs. Despite the loss of most paintings for Leonello's *studiolo*, the disparity between the surviving images and Guarino's original instructions for the decorations attests, in Shepherd's interpretation, to Leonello's rejection of his teacher's idealized and moralistic agenda in favor of greater sensuality. In "Leonello and the Erotics of Song," he argues that the musical iconography in two panels representing the Muses Erato and Euterpe — the

latter is Shephard's own identification, convincingly argued on the basis of iconographic details, which differs with its generally accepted identification as Calliope — points to the significance of music at Belfiore. Seen in light of Leonello's own poetry, of his patronage of the improviser Pietrobono, of the prominence of music making in the *studiolo* (as reported by Ciriaco d'Ancona), and of images preserved on medals struck for Leonello that link him with music making, and music with Eros, Shephard argues that a strong current of eroticism associated with poetry and music characterized Leonello's self-representation at Belfiore.

Isabella, who made no secret of her talents as a musical amateur and avid intellectual, projected a very different persona to the visitors to her *studiolo*. She emphasized morality, virtue, and wisdom in the decorative program of her *grotta*, in response to the criticism that her musical and literary interests overstepped the bounds of gender decorum. Shephard bolsters this view by offering fresh interpretations of Mantegna's *Parnassus* and *Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue*. The former he convincingly reads, in light of a description in the *Imagines* of Philostratus, as focusing not on the story of Mars and Venus, but on the Muses who sing the love of the two gods and, by conjuring the picture itself, mediate its interpretation for the viewer; Isabella figures in the painting as an absent Muse. *Pallas Expelling the Vices* associates Isabella with the wisdom of Minerva, whose artistic attributes include song. In this context, the famous *impresa delle pause* emerges as an emblem of prudence — Isabella knows when to keep silent, “when not to sing” to protect her reputation.

If Isabella sought to underscore feminine decorum and wisdom, Alfonso deflected possible charges of effeminacy. His *studiolo*, probably conceived in a spirit of lighthearted sibling rivalry, emphasized music's role in the construction of masculinity by associating it with Bacchus. Shephard treats Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* and *Bacchanalian of the Andrians* as inversions of Mantegna's paintings for Isabella. Reading the *Andrians* through Philostratus's ekphrastic writing, he focuses on its notated canon, linking it with Willaert's famous drinking song “*Qui non ebrietas*,” and drawing attention to its place in Ferrarese musical culture. *Echoing Helicon* cogently argues for the symbolic centrality of music in the Este *studioli* and in the construction of their patrons' identity, enriching our understanding of Renaissance court culture.

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