

Letters to a Nun: Monastic Music in Early Modern Malta

by PETRA CARUANA DINGLI

University of Malta

E-mail: petra.caruana-dingli@um.edu.mt

This article examines the performance of music in a Maltese female Benedictine monastery in the early modern period in relation to prevailing attitudes towards monastic music and polyphony. By placing these letters in their social and cultural context, it also offers fresh insights into female literacy in early modern Malta. The discussion centres on a set of fifteen unpublished letters that provide a rare example of a woman in early eighteenth-century Malta engaged in a written exchange of theological and philosophical ideas.

In January 1734 a Maltese Benedictine nun received a reply to a letter that she had written. Her correspondent was the scholarly Dominican priest Enrico Ercole (c.1677–1764), who lived at the Porto Salvo convent in Valletta, Malta's capital city. In his response, Ercole praised the quality of her letter ('sua compitissima lettera'). High literacy skills were unusual among women in early eighteenth-century Malta.

Ercole's letter forms part of a series of correspondence that is the subject of this article. This consists of fifteen unpublished letters written between January 1734 and March 1737 which are held in the archive of the Monastery of St Peter in Mdina, the old capital of Malta.¹ The letters contain a discussion of the performance of music in monasteries. Only the letters received by the nun from Ercole and three other correspondents are held in the monastery archive and not her own letters so that only one side of the correspondence was available for examination. None the less the extant letters shed light on both sides of the discussion.

MCM = Metropolitan Cathedral, Mdina, Malta; ACM = Archivum Cathedralis Melitensis; CEM = Curia Episcopalis Melitensis; MSP = Monastery of St Peter; Sez. Amm. = Sezione Amministrazione; Sez. Mon. = Sezione Moniali; NLM = National Library of Malta, Valletta

All translations are the author's own.

¹ MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, fos 6r–21r.

The aims of this article are two-fold. First, it examines the performance of music in the chapel of a Maltese female Benedictine monastery in the early modern period. Secondly, by placing these letters in their social and cultural context, it also provides fresh insights into the literacy of women in eighteenth-century Malta.

These unpublished letters provide a rare example of an unusually high level of literacy for a woman in early eighteenth-century Malta, here engaged in an erudite, written exchange of theological and philosophical ideas on monastic music.

To sing or not to sing

In the typical architecture of European nunneries, the monastery chapel was segregated into two areas: an external main chapel used by the priest and the congregation, and an internal choir area for the cloistered nuns. Connecting windows covered by iron grilles enabled the nuns to listen to the prayers and mass being celebrated by the priest in the main church. The nuns were not visible to the public, but they could be heard outside through the grilles as they prayed and sang.

Both clerical and secular listeners valued highly the song emanating from the hidden, private spaces of the choir; it was often associated with the singing of angels in heaven. The nuns' voices embodied the spirituality which these cloistered women, who had devoted their lives to prayer, were tasked to strengthen and safeguard on behalf of the community. The allure and power of their music is reflected in repeated attempts by members of the clergy to regulate or restrict it.

Rules governing music performed in monasteries preoccupied the nuns as well as their religious superiors. From the medieval period onwards, Gregorian chant was customarily sung in nunneries in cities all over the Italian peninsula. This type of song, or plainchant, persisted throughout the early modern age, including in Sicily and Malta, while the growing popularity of polyphony and the use of musical instruments in monasteries was often contentious.²

As described by Peter Pesic, early Christian music favoured simple monophonic chant, seeking 'to lay the passions to rest, setting itself apart from pagan displays of emotion with their theatrical associations'.³ Yet polyphonic music also began to be used in medieval liturgy, provoking long-standing and tense debates. Plainchant consists of a single melodic line (monophonic) without other parts or accompaniments. Polyphonic music combines different musical lines and can include instruments.

² See P. Pesic, *Polyphonic minds: music of the hemispheres*, Cambridge, MA 2017.

³ *Ibid.* 31.

A growing number of studies on music in nunneries has been published in recent years. Laurie Stras focuses on music in early sixteenth-century Italian nunneries.⁴ Polyphony was performed by nuns in chapel, as well as for enjoyment in their daily lives. Some monasteries in Italy were well-known for fine music, with people attending their chapels especially to hear the nuns singing. Already in the sixteenth century there were organs in the inner choir areas of some female monasteries.

Yet polyphonic music performed by nuns was the object of polemic. Some attacked, while others defended it. Years before the Council of Trent, the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498) in Florence had denounced the use of organs by nuns. He advised Benedictine nuns ‘that this *canto figurato* was invented by Satan, that they should throw away those songbooks and organs’.⁵ Angelo da Vallombrosa (d. 1530), who decried Savonarola’s ideas, disagreed and asserted that polyphonic music served to praise God and to edify the congregation, and imitated the papal choir.⁶ Similar arguments and positions continued to underpin debates for and against polyphonic music and the use of musical instruments by nuns throughout the early modern period.

In his study on the Santa Cristina della Fondazza nunnery in Bologna, Craig Monson explores how music performed in female cloisters in seventeenth-century Bologna was a controversial subject, with restrictions driven by certain zealous bishops.⁷ Jonathan Glixon describes discussions on polyphonic music at nuns’ convents in early modern Venice.⁸ Colleen Reardon notes that in Siena, as in other Italian cities like Bologna, Milan and Rome, ‘many of the most skilled female musicians lived in convents. And, as in those cities, the supposedly impregnable cloister was permeable too, allowing music to flow through the fissures and to connect nuns with their families, friends, patrons and admirers in the outside world’. Reardon shows that nuns in Siena did not have the same restrictions imposed upon them as some nuns did elsewhere on the Italian peninsula, and that ‘musical performance by holy women in early modern Italy was not always characterised by conflict and subject to repression’.⁹

⁴ L. Stras, ‘The performance of polyphony in early 16th-century Italian convents’, *Early Music* xl (2017), 195–215.

⁵ Cited in Pesic, *Polyphonic minds*, 86.

⁶ Stras, ‘Performance of polyphony’, 199.

⁷ C. Monson, *Divas in the convent: nuns, music and defiance in 17th-century Italy*, 2nd edn, Chicago–London 2012.

⁸ J. E. Glixon, *Mirrors of heaven or worldly theaters? Venetian nunneries and their music*, Oxford 2017.

⁹ C. Reardon, *Holy concord within sacred walls: nuns and music in Siena, 1575–1700*, New York–Oxford 2002, 3–4.

Music at the Monastery of St Peter

The Monastery of St Peter is a Benedictine nunnery which was formally established by Pope Callixtus III in 1455,¹⁰ on the site of a small hospital dedicated to St Peter which had existed in Mdina since at least the early fifteenth century. Its community thrived and grew and it still functions today as a cloistered religious house, the oldest female religious house in Malta. The number of nuns had grown substantially by the mid-seventeenth century, rising to over forty women, and extensive building works were carried out to accommodate the expanding community. Many of the nuns came from established, land-owning Maltese families, and the monastery's income and possessions mainly derived from the dowries which the girls brought with them when they first entered, as well as from other legacies left to the monastery.

The use of instruments is already in evidence at the monastery in the seventeenth century. In his pastoral visit of 1635, Bishop Miguel Juan Balaguer Camarosa took note of a stringed instrument ('un violone sive basso') in the chapel inventory. Following his pastoral visit of 1678, Bishop Miguel de Molina specifically forbade the keeping of musical instruments by individual nuns, which suggests that some nuns must have done or perhaps wished to do so. Such regulations, following Tridentine reforms, also existed in female monasteries in Italy. Angela Fiore notes, for example, that at the turn of the seventeenth century the nuns of the Monastery of Santa Chiara in Naples faced a similar restriction forbidding them to keep musical instruments in their cells.¹¹

As noted by Frederick Aquilina, due to the presence in the medieval citadel of Mdina of the Cathedral of St Paul with its long-standing musical traditions, this old town was a centre for professionally performed sacred music in Malta.¹² In the seventeenth century Maltese composers or directors of music at the cathedral were mainly influenced by a Sicilian background and network. The focus of their musical training shifted to Naples in the early eighteenth century.

At St Peter's an organ with a date of manufacture of 1730¹³ is today still situated in the choir area, above the main door of the chapel and facing the altar. This is the smaller, upper choir, within the main church, where the

¹⁰ G. Aquilina and S. Fiorini (eds), *Documentary sources of Maltese history*, IV: *Documents at the Vatican*, ii, Msida, Malta 2005, 259–61.

¹¹ A. Fiore, 'La tradizione musicale del monastero delle Clarisse di Santa Chiara in Napoli', *Rivista italiana di musicologia* 1 (2015), 33–60.

¹² F. Aquilina, *Benigno Zerafa (1726–1804) and the Neapolitan galant style*, Woodbridge 2016, 4.

¹³ A note on this organ states: 'Thomas de Martino Neapolitanus Regiae Cappellae Caesarae et Catholicae Majestatis Urbis Neapolitanae Organarius Fecit Anno DNI MDCXXX'.

nuns are hidden from public view by latticed wooden screens; the main choir area is concealed by iron grilles behind the altar on the ground floor. As Frederick Aquilina points out, the Neapolitan influence on music in eighteenth-century Malta is also reflected in the purchase of instruments. The monastery's organ was manufactured by the Neapolitan organ-builder Tomaso de Martino, who also supplied organs to the Mdina cathedral and to the church of St Publius in Rabat, the suburb of the citadel, in the 1720s.¹⁴ Most parish churches and other convents in Malta had organs, and the price of a new organ is noted in the eighteenth century as being between 400 and 500 scudi.¹⁵

Payments made for the services of organ-blowers ('alزامantici') are recorded in the monastery's account books before 1730,¹⁶ and are presumably related to the use of a portable organ within the public area of the chapel rather than to the main fixed organ. As the main organ is positioned within the upper choir of the monastery this would only have been accessible to the nuns themselves, while a portable organ could have been played within the main chapel by male musicians. A full century earlier, in the 1630s, a portable organ was brought to the monastery chapel on feast days.¹⁷

St Peter's monastery possesses its own portable organ dated 1774.¹⁸ It is possible that music may have been played by the nuns in different locations within the monastery besides the main chapel, such as in the eighteenth-century oratory dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows in the private interior of the complex.¹⁹ This portable organ was manufactured by the organ-builder Domenico Antonio Rossi who, like Tomaso de Martino, was from Naples. Rossi also provided an organ for Mdina Cathedral in 1774 on the advice of its *maestro di cappella*, the priest-composer Benigno Zerafa (1726–1804). Like his predecessor at Mdina Cathedral, the priest-composer Pietro Gristi (1696–1738), Zerafa had studied at the Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo in Naples and his music was primarily Neapolitan in style.²⁰ It seems likely that the advice of Zerafa may also

¹⁴ Aquilina, *Benigno Zerafa*, 57.

¹⁵ See F. Ciappara, 'The parish community in eighteenth-century Malta', *Catholic Historical Review* xciv (2008), 691.

¹⁶ MCM, CEM, C69 (1720), fo. 585r; C72 (1713), fo. 141r; C82 (1728), fo. 90r; cited in M. Buhagiar and S. Fiorini, *Mdina: the cathedral city of Malta*, i, Valletta, Malta 1996, ch v. ¹⁷ MCM, CEM, C69 (1636), fos 82v, 90v; C69 (1639), fo. 134r-v.

¹⁸ An inscription on the monastery's portable organ states: 'Dominicus Antonius Rossi Neapolitanus Regiae Cappellae Suae Maiestatis Organarius Fecit AD 1774'.

¹⁹ A first-floor private chapel in the back corner of the monastery was constructed in the early eighteenth century but never completed, presumably due to lack of funds. It was later used as the chapter room. Its adjoining oratory, however, was embellished with wall paintings and an altar, and furnished with reliquaries and other precious items.

²⁰ Aquilina, *Benigno Zerafa*, 37.

have been sought when Rossi's portable organ was purchased for St Peter's. These two organs, together with the correspondence with the abbess which is the subject of this essay, attest to a lively interest in music at St Peter's in the eighteenth century.

Music is recorded in the monastery accounts books as an important component of annual festivities in the monastery chapel on three feast days in the early 1700s, those of St Scholastica in February, St Benedict in March and SS Peter and Paul in June. The monthly accounts list the cost of the music performed at the 'messa cantata' or 'vesperi' every year to celebrate these feasts. Total expenditure on each feast day was typically around eight or nine scudi during this period, with six scudi spent on the musicians.²¹ To put this amount into context, the monastery's monthly expenditure on food and provisions then averaged around 120 scudi. This practice continued into the 1730s, with a payment for music ('per limosina della musica') listed as six scudi on the feast day of SS Peter and Paul in June 1732.²² During his pastoral visit in July 1729, Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan noted that each year the monastery celebrated the feasts of SS Peter and Paul on 29 June and of St Benedict on 21 March with a sung mass and music, at the expense of the monastery. Music was also played for the feast of St Scholastica.²³

The *maestro di cappella* who directed music in the monastery chapel in 1681 was Ortensio Benini, followed by Bernardino Zannetti in 1711²⁴ and Pietro Gristi in 1728.²⁵ It is recorded in the monastery archive that the nuns themselves played the music ('musica fatta dalle medisme religiose') in 1739. The Maltese composer Benigno Zerafa succeeded Gristi as *maestro di cappella* of the Mdina cathedral and also directed polyphonic music played at the monastery chapel on feast days. Frederick Aquilina suggests that Zerafa's first commitment at the monastery may have been on 17 November 1744 when the nuns celebrated the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Pilar in their chapel. On this occasion musicians from the *cappella musicale* of the cathedral were seated at the back of the chapel, on wooden platforms ('palchi dei musici e suonadori') positioned on either side of the main external door.²⁶ In 1748 a wooden balcony or gallery for musicians was constructed above the main door within the chapel, beneath the upper choir, and was paid for by the nuns out of their own funds.²⁷

Zerafa once brought the castrato singer Gaetano Marino to this chapel for the feast of St Benedict, in order to provide the members of the Mdina

²¹ MSP, Sez. Amm., K2 (1716, 1720).

²² Ibid. K2 (1732).

²³ Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta, visitationes pastorales, 32, Paulus Alpheran de Bussan, 1728–9, fos 600r, 601v.

²⁴ Buhagiar and Fiorini, *Mdina*, 318.

²⁵ MCM, CEM, C82 (1728), fo. 101r.

²⁶ MCM, ACM, Miscellanea (Misc.), MS 63, i. 182.

²⁷ NLM, MS 721 (n.d.), fo. 104v.

cathedral chapter, who attended the occasion, with an opportunity to assess Marino's abilities.²⁸ In further examples, Zerafa is recorded as directing music in the monastery chapel for the feast of St Scholastica and again at the end of Carnival in February 1770. On both occasions the music was paid for by the nuns and constituted the greatest expense of the occasion. On the feast of St Benedict in March 1770, the cost of the music was reduced due to the indisposition of the tenor.²⁹ In June 1775 eleven scudi were paid for musicians on the feast day of SS Peter and Paul.³⁰

A similar pattern of musical practice to that at St Peter can be seen at the Ursuline monastery in Valletta. For example, in the seventeenth century the Ursuline nuns borrowed portable organs to celebrate feast days, to be used by musicians in the public space of their chapel. Gorg Aquilina notes that the Ursulines borrowed an organ from the church of St Paul in Valletta in 1640, and one from the Madalena chapel in 1641, to celebrate the October feast of St Ursula.³¹ Payments for works on organ pipes in the Ursuline chapel are recorded in 1633, and an organ is noted in the private upper choir in 1652. A cymbal is noted in the Ursuline nuns' inventory in 1641.³² The *maestro di cappella* of the conventual church of the Order of St John directed music at the Ursuline chapel in 1699, with four voices and at least eight instruments besides the organ ('quattro voci, tre violini, due corni, obuè, violincello, contrabasso, organo'). In the early eighteenth century, a stage for musicians was erected in the chapel ('palco delli musici').³³ The *maestro di cappella* also taught *canto fermo* (polyphony) to the Ursulines.

The letters on music, 1734–7

Social roles for men and women were firmly separated throughout early modern Europe. Women were generally only provided with the level of literacy necessary to fulfil their roles, which were largely domestic. Nuns were supposed to learn how to read in order to be allowed to profess. Carmel Cassar points out the example of a Maltese nun who, when still a novice in around 1604, had resisted learning to read as she did not want to take her vows.³⁴

²⁸ J. Azzopardi and M. Sansone, 'The music archives at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta: their contents, provenance and study', in J. Azzopardi and M. Sansone, *Italian and Maltese music in the archives at the Cathedral Museum of Malta*, i, Collegeville, MI 2001, 30. ²⁹ MSP, Sez. Amm., K5 (1770). ³⁰ Ibid. C1 (1775).

³¹ Cited in G. Aquilina, *Is-sorijiet Gerosolimitani: il-knisja u l-monasteru ta' Sant'Ursula Valletta*, San Gwann, Malta 2004, 144. ³² Ibid. 164. ³³ Ibid. 145.

³⁴ MCM, ACM, Misc., MS 454 (1626), i. 258, cited in C. Cassar, *Daughters of Eve: women, gender roles, and the impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta*, Msida, Malta 2002, 184.

Being able to read did not imply being able to write as the two skills were distinct and taught separately. Besides reading, some early modern women with a relatively good level of education could sign their names, which was already a notable achievement at a time when a large proportion of the general population, including men, were illiterate.

Very few girls in eighteenth-century Malta received any formal schooling at all.³⁵ The monastic life, however, could offer educational opportunities more extensive than those available to other women.³⁶ Young girls were sent to nuns to be educated, including at the Monastery of St Peter in Mdina, as pupils (*educande*), and were taught to read and possibly to write, among other skills, without always being committed to taking religious vows later.³⁷ It can therefore be assumed that a small number of nuns were relatively literate when compared to many laywomen in this period.³⁸

The exchange of letters on music of 1734–7, between a nun at St Peter's and Enrico Ercole at Porto Salvo in Valletta, took place in the years directly after the new organ had been installed in the monastery chapel. The nun is not named but the letters are addressed to 'Reverenda Madre', the title most used for an abbess or perhaps a senior nun such as the deputy abbess (*vicaria*) or novice mistress.³⁹

In her letter, the nun requests Ercole's opinion on the performance of *canto armonico* at the monastery. As Ercole's reply indicates, in her letter she explained that the usual *novena* prayers devoted to the infant Jesus before Christmas had been suspended.

In the 1720s, the scholarly Ercole was prior provincial of the Dominican province of Sicily, which included the island of Malta; he was the first Maltese prelate to hold this post. He returned to Valletta and in 1734 he became prior of the Dominican community there. The reasons why a Benedictine nun would write to a Dominican priest for advice on correct behaviour at her monastery are not immediately obvious. It is relevant,

³⁵ See C. Cassar, 'Education in Hospitaller Malta', in R. G. Sultana (ed.), *Yesterday's schools: readings in Maltese educational history*, Msida, Malta 2001, 15–29, and Y. Vella, *Women in eighteenth-century Malta*, Hamrun, Malta 2017, ch iii.

³⁶ See S. Evangelisti, *Nuns: a history of convent life*, Oxford 2007.

³⁷ One example is Prassede Zahra who was a pupil (*educanda*) at St Peter's in 1761, but did not become a nun. She was the daughter of the renowned Maltese artist Francesco Zahra (1710–73), some of whose paintings are in the monastery chapel.

³⁸ D. M. Robin, A. R. Larsen and C. Levin (eds), *Encyclopedia of women in the Renaissance: Italy, France and England*, Santa Barbara, CA 2007, 215.

³⁹ The abbess (*abbadessa*) was elected by the nuns in January every two years. She then chose her deputy (*vicaria*) and the rest of the monastery chapter. Both the *abbadessa* and the *vicaria* changed over the period of these letters. It was not possible to confirm the identity of this nun.

however, that no male branch of the Benedictine order existed in Malta at this period.

The personal, family connection which Ercole had with another nun at the monastery, Melania Platamone, may also have played a part in establishing contact with him.⁴⁰ In his letters Ercole repeatedly sends his regards to Melania, remembering her as a young girl at her father Vincenzo Platamone's house where, he says, she was like a daughter to him: 'Signora Donna Melania my dear daughter, as I am able to call her, having (so to speak) nourished her as a small girl in her paternal home.'⁴¹ The network of ties between the nuns of St Peter's and senior members of the Maltese clergy was closely knit in the early modern period, and many of the nuns were related to one another too.

Enrico Ercole taught philosophy and theology, and also wrote on these subjects.⁴² One of his works was on the shipwreck of St Paul, chiming in with the heated controversy of the day on whether the event took place on Malta or elsewhere. It consists of a series of letters in a bound, hand-written volume of 1740 held at the National Library of Malta, and dedicated to *Bali Fra* Emmanuele Pinto of the Order of St John, who was elected as grand master a year later.⁴³ In this work, Ercole disputes facts and arguments about the location of the shipwreck, working through them point by point. His academic training in scholastic philosophy and dialectical reasoning is evident.

In his letters on monastic music addressed to the nun, Ercole uses a similar method, rigorously presenting and dissecting the details and logic of arguments for and against the performance of *canto figurato* (polyphony) in monasteries. The terms used in these letters are 'canto fermo', and 'canto figurato' or 'canto armonico'. *Canto fermo* is structured around a single melody as in Gregorian chant, while *canto figurato* is polyphonic.

Ercole's first extant letter to the nun is dated 22 January 1734. He begins by stating that he had already explained his views to her on a previous occasion, and notes that similar qualms had arisen at the monastery before. He points out, in a somewhat vexed tone, that those who opposed the nuns' music in the Christmas *novena* at the monastery were confusing ecclesiastical music with theatrical music. He explains that, while he had heard

⁴⁰ Like other nuns at St Peter's, Melania Platamone (c.1702–65) came from a prominent Maltese family within important social networks on the island. She was the daughter of Vincenzo Platamone and Maria *née* Gimbert of Valletta. Her secular name was Eufemia, and she was professed on 24 September 1718.

⁴¹ 'Sig. D. Melania mia carissima Figlia, che tale veramente la posso chiamare, havendola (per dire cosi) nutrita piccola nella sua paterna casa': Enrico Ercole to 'Reverenda Madre', letter no. 3, 23 Mar. 1734, MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, fo. 8.

⁴² G. F. Abela, *Malta illustrata ovvero descrizione di Malta*, ed. G. A. Ciantar, iii–iv, Valletta, Malta 1780, 589–90.

⁴³ E. Ercole, 'Lettere famigliari', NLM, MS 759 (1740).

certain secular and theatrical arias sung in some churches outside Malta, this was thankfully not the practice in Malta. He asserts, however, that *canto figurato* in religious music was widely practised in Maltese monasteries:

the abusive inclusion of profane and theatrical arias is not practised in Malta, and this is attested by the fact that these Reverend Mothers do not sing anything but psalms, litany and motets, as these are not easily rendered in theatrical arias, and are above certain types of poetry composed of brief verses ... The more recitative style of motet, while being practised in theatres, is also permissible in church, since it keeps within the level of sobriety appropriate to the sacred place.⁴⁴

Ercole disagreed with the banning of polyphony at the monastery and referred the abbess to the works of Pompeo Sarnelli (1649–1724). In particular, he refers to Sarnelli's published ecclesiastical letter of 1685 entitled 'Qual debbe essere la musica nelle chiese.'⁴⁵

Ercole's main defence of harmonic music was that, since it was played in churches throughout the world to enhance the adoration of God, he could not agree that it should not also be performed in monasteries and their chapels. It is either bad or good in all cases, Ercole declares. Music itself is not fundamentally bad; it depends on how and to what purpose it is used. He concludes that, as the nuns' intention is prayer, therefore their use of music is fine. Ercole admits that while music can be misused by others, that is not the fault of the nuns.⁴⁶ It is the abuse, and not the proper use, of music which can present a problem. This is also his response to the nun's concern that some people maintain that 'a woman who sings entices men'. To support his argument further, he notes that customs and rules change over time:

the Reformed Franciscans who, in line with their ancient institution, used to recite the divine office with plain reading, today have abandoned this ancient custom of theirs and employ the organ and song, no less than many other regular clergy. Not that this should cause any wonder, in the sense that, in religious orders, in relation to the discipline of the rule and not of precepts, it is possible to vary according to the exigencies of the time and place and of other circumstances:

⁴⁴ 'l'abuso d'accommodare l'arie profane e di teatro non si pratica in Malta, e tanto piu resto certificato in ciò dal vedere, che coteste R.de Madri non cantano altro, che salmi, litanie mottetti per che non si rendono troppo accomodabili all'arie teatrali, che vanno sopra certa specie di particular poesia di brevi versi ... Il stile poi recitativo dei mottetti, ancorche si pratica nei teatri si puo permettere anche in Chiesa, perche porta un modo, che si contiene nei limiti della gravità dovuta al sacro luogo': Ercole to 'Reverenda Madre', letter no. 3, 23 Mar. 1734, MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, fo. 8.

⁴⁵ P. Sarnelli, *Lettere ecclesiastiche di Monsignor Pompeo Sarnelli*, i, Venice 1716, 30–5. Sarnelli was based in Naples. On music in Naples at this period and Sarnelli's letter see D. Fabris, *Music in seventeenth-century Naples: Francesco Provenzale, 1624–1704*, Aldershot 2007, 154.

⁴⁶ On similar arguments in favour of music see Pesic, *Polyphonic minds*, 90–1.

moreover, the same universal Church does not observe many of the disciplinary points which were observed in the primitive Church: I say the same of all other religious orders; we Dominicans have more points in the text of our laws than are moderated in the chapters general.⁴⁷

Ercole advises the nun to continue singing, accompanied by the organ, at the monastery: 'My advice is that these reverend nuns should put aside all scruples, and strive to adore God with fervour, using the organ and song to render more solemn the glory of God, and to intensify their devotion.'⁴⁸

The nun was however not fully convinced and wrote to him again, and the correspondence continues back and forth. Ercole provides a detailed rebuttal, point by point, of the various opinions cited against polyphony in nunneries. He points out that the Sagra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari in Rome, under Pope Gregory XIII, had prohibited secular music in monastery chapels but, significantly, did not limit *canto figurato* or instruments in ecclesiastical music. Such music was also played in monasteries in Valletta, and he points out that the nun was quite aware of this already. The misgivings about music at St Peter's were evidently not general among Maltese monastic communities. Ercole also confirms, in reply to another question from the nun, that on his visits to the monastery the bishop did indeed have the authority to permit the nuns to use the organ and to perform *canto figurato*.

Besides Ercole, two other Maltese friars were solicited for their views on the permissibility of *canto figurato* in monasteries. One of these was Carlo Marini (c.1667–1747), who wrote two letters in which he supported Ercole's position. These are also preserved in the monastery archive.

Marini was a member of the Franciscan Conventuals in Malta, and studied theology in Perugia and Assisi in Italy. He held senior positions within the Franciscan order in Italy, Sicily and Valletta. At the time when he wrote these two letters on music, Marini was based at the Franciscan convent in Strada San Giorgio (today Republic Street) in Valletta. Marini also wrote poetry, including verses to honour and commemorate public occasions.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ 'i Religiosi riformati di S. Francesco, che prima recitavano il divino officio secondo il loro antico istituto à semplice lettura, in hoggi abbandonando quel loro antico costume si servono del organo e del canto, non meno che molti altri Regolari. Ne ciò deve apportare maraviglia, impercioche nelle Religioni, cio che spetta a disciplina regolare, e non a precetto, si può variare secondo la varia esigenza del tempo e del luogo e d'altre circostanze: anzi l'istessa Chiesa universale non osserva hoggi molte cose di disciplina, che s'osservavano nella primitiva Chiesa: l'istesso dico di tutte l'altre Religioni, più cose habbiamo noi Dominicani nel testo della nostre leggi, che sono moderate nei Capitoli generali': Ercole to 'Reverenda Madre', letter no. 2, 19 Mar. 1734, MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, fo. 7.

⁴⁸ 'In tanto sono io di parere, che costese Reverende Moniali debbano deponere ogni scrupolo, et attendere a lodare Dio con fervore, e servizi del organo e del canto per rendere più solenne la gloria di Dio, e piu calda la loro devozione': *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Thanks are due to Arthur J. Saliba OFM for this information.

In a manner similar to Ercole, Marini rebuts arguments against *canto figurato*, point by point. He makes reference to numerous opinions of Church Fathers and scholarly works in his arguments, particularly St Thomas Aquinas. In his letter to the nun of 4 February 1735, he notes that Pope Urban VIII (1623–44) had set up a confraternity of musicians for the Church of San Giovanni Decollato in Rome in order to imitate here on earth the music of the angels:

the principal motive of Urban VIII in approving the Confraternity of Musicians, founded in Rome in the church of San Giovanni Decollato, was to imitate in some way here on earth, the melody created in heaven by the angels adoring God, and therefore this pope enriched this confraternity with many indulgences, favours and privileges, as can be seen in his Constitution 32 which begins with *Pietatis*; and furthermore in the Constitution of Alexander VII which begins with *Piae sollicitudinis*, dated 23 April 1657, where this pope prescribes the conditions to be observed by the musicians of this confraternity, delegated or requested to sing in churches.⁵⁰

Another letter in the set of correspondence is from Girolamo Leocata (c.1664–1745) who, like Ercole, was an erudite Maltese Dominican theologian and philosopher based at the Porto Salvo convent in Valletta. His letter deals with the same questions on music in monasteries. Leocata adopts a similar style to Ercole and Marini, presenting arguments for and against music at the monastery. He also quotes extensively in Latin, so it can be assumed that the nun, or her fellow-nuns at the monastery, may have had some knowledge of Latin. Leocata finds no argument sufficient to persuade him against the performance of *canto figurato* at the monastery.

A fourth correspondent was *Commendatore* Don Rodriguez de Abarca, who supported Ercole's position and reassured the nun that he had heard polyphonic music played in two Benedictine monasteries in Spain: 'I can also tell you that in two Benedictine nunneries in Spain I heard *canto figurato* accompanied by the organ, violin, bass, and other instruments all played by the nuns.'⁵¹

⁵⁰ 'il motivo principalissimo di Urbano 8 in approvar la Confraternità dé Musici, eretta in Roma nella Chiesa di San Giovanni decollato; fù affincbe si imitasse in qualche maniera qui in terra la melodia, che fanno in Cielo gl'Angeli lodando Dio, e per ciò il sudetto Pontefice arricchì questa Confraternità di molte indulgenze, Grazie, e Privilegi, come si vede nella sua Costituzione trentaduesima, che incomincia Pietatis: Così pure nella Costituzione di Alessandro settimo, che incomincia Piae sollicitudinis data li 23 Aprile 1657: ove prescrive detto Pontefice le condizioni comminate, che avran da osservare i Musici di cotesta Confraternità, deputati, or richiamati à cantar nelle Chiese': Carlo Marini to 'Reverenda Madre', letter no. 9, 4 Feb. 1735, MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, fo. 14.

⁵¹ 'Posso anche dirle d'aver sentito in Spagna in due Monasteri di Monache Benedittine cantarsi sul canto figurato con accompagnamenti d'organo, violino,

The letters from Ercole, Rodriguez, Marini and Leocata all have the tone of scholarly disquisitions, adopting a semi-formal style which suggests that they were aware that their opinions might be read by other persons. The letters resemble philosophical or theological essays, in the manner of Sarnelli's published letters. Letter-writing was practised by early modern intellectuals to define and present themselves as scholars. Thus private letters were intentionally composed as a form of public statement.⁵² Ercole informs the nun twice that she can feel free to show his letters to others.

The letters include some personal comments too, particularly in their opening and closing lines. Besides sending greetings to Signora Melania, Ercole also refers to his daily commitments as he writes, placing his letters in an everyday context. In his first letter he excuses his delayed response, as he had received the nun's letter of 18 January just when his community in Valletta was taken up with the funeral of their deceased chaplain. His reply is dated 22 January, which is actually an interval of only four days. Marini also excuses his delayed reply as he had been sent to visit the Franciscan convent in Gozo. These comments give the letters a conversational tone, with expectations of quick replies back and forth between the correspondents. There is a gap of only two days between some of them.

The exchange between the nun and her correspondents was moving back and forth between Mdina and Valletta, some eight miles on the roads. An official postal service, the Commissary of Posts, was established in Malta in 1708 by the Order of St John, and was based in Valletta. Prior to this, letters and packages were sent privately. In one of Ercole's letters, he writes that he must now rush and conclude as the courier ('il corriere') is waiting.

In another letter, Ercole begins by describing how he had returned home late from the bishop's palace, and immediately sat down to pick up his pen and reply to her letter. In April 1734 he writes that he is planning to board the next ship to Sicily, immediately after Easter. His letters to her resume the following year, in March 1735.

The nun persists with detailed questions on the vow of obedience, seeking further confirmation on the powers of the bishop over daily monastery life, as well as on the authority of the abbess. One of the main questions in the discussion is whether an abbess can oblige a nun to participate

basso, ed altri instrumenti suonando il tutto esse Monache': Rodriguez de Abarca to 'Reverenda Madre', letter no. 8, 26 Aug. 1734, *ibid.* fo. 13.

⁵² See J. R. Henderson, 'Humanist letter writing: private conversation or public forum?', in T. van Houdt, J. Papy, G. Tournoy and C. Matheussen (eds), *Self-presentation and social identification: the rhetoric and pragmatics of letter writing in early modern times*, Leuven 2002, 17–38.

in *canto figurato*, even if the nun claims that it goes against her conscience and she is supported in this by her confessor? Many of the questions and answers in the correspondence probe the concepts of authority and obedience. ‘Santa Obediienza! Santa Obediienza!’, the bemused Ercole is driven to exclaim.

This example of a Benedictine nun in Malta reflects the activity and interests of nuns elsewhere. As noted by Jenna Lay, for example, the writings of the English Benedictine nun Gertrude More (1606–33) in France show that ‘clerical authority did not produce unthinking obedience on the part of female monastics and that nuns remained central to the concept, the practice and the subversion of obedience long after the Reformation’.⁵³

The nun in Mdina sought further reassurance. In 1736 she wrote to Ercole again, now citing a new book on the life of Maria Antonia della Concezione, a Benedictine nun of SS Rosario at Palma di Montechiaro, near Agrigento in Sicily.⁵⁴ She feared that this recent biography, written by the priest Francesco Comici, contradicted Ercole’s views on music – a misgiving which Ercole flatly denied. Ercole was evidently also familiar with this work, which had been published in Palermo in Sicily only a year earlier, in 1735. He referred to its text in some detail in his reply, also encouraging her to read certain sections and paragraphs more carefully.

In this letter of July 1736 it emerges that some nuns at the monastery were opposing the nun as she was learning to play musical instruments. Ercole regrets that opposition to music persists at the monastery:

I am disappointed to hear of the obstinate opposition, emanating from I do not know whom, to the lessons which you, as obediently directed, are taking in the playing of instruments, which will render good service to the Church and the glory of God. On this point there is no need to say more than I have written already. That some good religious prefer to take the opposite view, and do not want either song or music, is fine: each regulates her conscience as she deems fit; and it may be that what is good for one is not so for another ... But for them to expect their opinion to dictate the conscience of others, that is too much: and for them to expect to oblige their superior in this, whom they should obey, that I cannot contemplate or approve ... The legitimate conclusion, as I have already written, is that your conscience is relieved, as lessons in the playing of instruments are carried out with the good knowledge of the illustrious prelate, and of your superior.⁵⁵

⁵³ J. Lay, *Beyond the cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and early modern literary culture*, Philadelphia, PA 2016, 20.

⁵⁴ F. Comaci, *Vita dell’ umil serva del Signore suor Maria Antonia della Concezione della Città di Licata, monaca nel venerabile monastero della Terra di Palma*, Palermo 1735.

⁵⁵ ‘Mi dispiace poi sentire l’ostinata opposizione, che si fa da non so chi, alla lezione che V.S. sotto la direzione del obediienza prende nel sono dell’istrumenti, che conducono al buon servizio della Chiesa e gloria di Dio. Su questo punto non occorre dirgli

This illustrates that it was not always male religious superiors who imposed restrictions on female monastic life from the outside. Disputes on whether to follow more or less strict monastic rules also arose internally, among the nuns. As noted by Silvia Evangelisti, after the Council of Trent, ‘the history of nuns seems to have been characterised by a kind of continuous tension between enclosure and the push towards a more open model of religious life’.⁵⁶

Craig Monson highlights how important music was to the nuns in at the Santa Cristina della Fondazza monastery in Bologna. He shows how decades of conflict between the women at this nunnery in the seventeenth century originated in disputes about music. These nuns resisted restrictions on convent music imposed by the local bishop, and Monson notes that the nuns in Bologna ‘never enjoyed the artistic encouragement of a pastor such as Archbishop Federico Borromeo of Milan’.⁵⁷ In Mdina, while the nuns do not appear to have faced any serious opposition towards music from the bishop in the 1730s, the nuns opposing music at the monastery appear to have had the support of some other member of the clergy, possibly their confessor, who explains his position in writing but chooses to remain anonymous. His position on music was passed on by the nun to Ercole, who debated and contradicted it in detail in his letters.

In the years following this exchange of letters in the 1730s, internal disputes about music at the monastery must have calmed down, for in the late eighteenth century musical culture at the monastery continued to be relatively vibrant.

Similar internal disputes among the nuns at St Peter’s – although not necessarily about music – are also documented for later periods. Tensions about regulations and behaviour, for example, feature in the life of Blessed Adeodata Pisani OSB (1806–55) at the same monastery in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁸

piu di quello, che gli scrissi in altre mie. Che vi siano alcune buone Religiose alle quali piace l’opinione contraria, e non vogliono ne canto ne sono, in buon hora: ogn’uno regola la sua coscienza come le pure che sia à proposito; e può darsi il caso, che una cosa buona la sia buona per una e non per altra ... Ma che pretendono con questa loro opinione dar legge alle coscienze dell’altre, al questo e troppo: e che d’avantaggio pretendono obligare alla superiora, à cui loro devono obedire, questo poi non lo posso affatto ne intendere, ne approvare. ... La legitima conseguenza di ciò che io gia scrissi è, che V.S. si trova salva e salvissima nella sua coscienza perche la lezione del sono e con la buona intelligenza dell’ Ill.mo Prelato, e della sua superiora’: Ercole to ‘Reverenda Madre’, letter no. 11, 27 Mar. 1735, MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, fo. 16.

⁵⁶ Evangelisti, *Nuns*, 6.

⁵⁷ Monson, *Divas in the convent*, 4.

⁵⁸ See P. Serracino Inglott, *Adeodata Pisani: a mystic nun in Mdina*, ed. P. Caruana Dingli, Mdina, Malta 2018.

This essay has examined the performance of music in a Maltese female Benedictine monastery in the early modern period, in the light of prevailing attitudes to monastic music and polyphony. While the number of studies on eighteenth-century music in Malta is growing, little has been written so far about the involvement of nuns, and women overall, in the performance of music in early modern Malta.⁵⁹

As noted by Robert Kendrick, theoretical and practical differences between the traditions of different cities, and the varying reforming zeal of individual bishops in the early modern period, confirms the need for detailed study of individual cases rather than making assumptions about female monasteries as a whole.⁶⁰

Secondly, the unpublished letters presented in this article provide an example of a woman in early eighteenth-century Malta seeking to engage in epistolatory exchanges on philosophical and theological subjects. Early modern women did not have the same access to scholarly networks as their male counterparts. The style of the letters examined in this article, which were written by male clerics, suggests that they were also intended to be read by an anonymous male ‘advisor’ of the nuns, also a clergyman. None the less, the correspondence is addressed to a woman and assumes a high level of literacy on her part. The letters include extensive references to scholarly and theological texts, including quotations in Latin. They also indicate that the woman replied to these male scholars by referring to further theological texts, and requesting their reaction.

Literary scholarship has moved beyond traditional genre boundaries to a broader understanding of what constitutes a literary text, exploring a wide range of writing produced by women, such as diaries, testimonies, petitions and letters. Each of these forms of writing has its particular styles and conventions.⁶¹ The study of early modern letter-writing has expanded through an interdisciplinary approach, including literary criticism, history and gender studies. Letters form an important part of the body of written texts by women in early modern Europe. While relatively few works were published by women, they did participate more widely in other forms of writing.

The correspondence of nuns in early modern Italy, like Maria Arcangela Biondini (1641–1712), shows that it was occasionally possible for cloistered

⁵⁹ Besides Aquilina’s detailed study on Benigno Zerafa (2016), other studies include J. Azzopardi, ‘La cappella musicale della cattedrale di Malta e i suoi rapporti con la Sicilia’, in D. Ficola (ed.), *La musica sacra in Sicilia tra rinascimento e barocco: atti del convegno di Callagirone 10–12 dicembre 1985*, Palermo 1988, and, F. Bruni, *Musica e musicisti alla cattedrale di Malta nei secoli XVI–XVIII*, Msida, Malta 2001.

⁶⁰ R. L. Kendrick, *Celestial sirens: nuns and their music in early modern Milan*, Oxford 1996, 417–18.

⁶¹ See J. Daybell and A. Gordon (eds), *Women and epistolatory agency in early modern culture, 1450–1690*, London 2016.

women to communicate on literary and other subjects beyond the monastery walls.⁶² Nothing similar, however, has so far been identified or studied for nuns in Malta before this set of letters on music. This correspondence therefore provides a rare example of a Maltese woman in early modern Malta engaging in letter-writing activity which goes beyond domestic or personal communication. For all women at this period, and especially for nuns, corresponding through letters was one of the few available avenues of communication for intellectual exchange.

⁶² See G. Butterini, C. Nubola and A. Valerio (eds), *Maria Arcangela Biondini (1641–1712) e il monastero delle Serve di Maria d’Arco: una fondatrice e un archivio*, Bologna 2007.