

7 | Sixteenth-century women composers, beyond borders

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Women's voices from the Common Era sixteenth century embodying their musical creativity, especially those from the continent of Europe, emerge most clearly from the written records of the courts and convents of the time. Clarity is, of course, relative: not only are named female composers many fewer than male composers, but also the music they created has not survived in the same quantities as that of their male counterparts. Since notated, attributed music is at the foundation of the critical frame for the appreciation of European music, and the means whereby European musicology has been able to know of and understand the musicians of the past, the imbalance in documentation has led to a truism: that women's lack of access to education or the public sphere explains why there were comparatively few sixteenth-century female composers. However, as Brianne Dolce has pointed out in relation to the *trouvères*, musicologists and historians have habitually used masculine paradigms to measure the value and significance of musical activities, thereby failing to locate and valorise women's contributions to musical culture. In the face of new evidence gleaned from non-musical documents, she asks: 'where will scholars now look for evidence of women's participation in music making, and what other boundaries must be reconsidered or renegotiated in order to do so?'¹

As for the thirteenth, so for the sixteenth century, renegotiating the terms of engagement allows a richer picture of women's musical creativity to emerge. Looking beyond European and Eurocentric cultures not only broadens the geographical perspectives of Anglo-European musicology, but also provides a vital lens with which to refocus our narratives of musical women and the hierarchies of cultural value in which we place their activities. Such re-evaluation also has implications for performers and audiences of historical repertoires, opening up areas for dialogue, engagement, and learning across disciplines and creative sectors.

The status of 'composer' in Europe

Renegotiating our boundaries in the search for women composers of the past obliges us to go back to first principles, and to reconsider what it means to be a composer. The status of 'composer' emerges fully in European culture during the 'long' sixteenth century – from the end of the 1400s to the beginning of the 1600s – together with an increasing tendency to name composers of musical works.² There are two necessary components to this development: the first is the acknowledgement of the individual, rather than the collective, crafting of a musical phenomenon, usually a contrapuntal invention (including on a pre-determined *cantus firmus*, or by creating a canon) according to a set of rules; the second is the recording of that phenomenon on paper to create something we might now call a 'work'.³ While neither of these components was an entirely new development, late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century women were creating music at the point when putting a name to a musical work became normalized for European musical culture, and when authorship began to have meaning in the sense we would recognize now.

Sixteenth-century European musical culture was also coming to terms with the different ways in which written music accrues value: practically through the ability to perform and re-perform a repertoire; commercially through publication; culturally through association with patrons, musical institutions, or other musicians; and intellectually through study and analysis. These criteria are best demonstrated by music that is written down, so that it may be shared, sold, owned, studied, and evaluated. Authorship implies 'originality' and uniqueness – the timbre of a composer's voice that can be discerned, even when their music is performed by others; and attribution to a composer assists in the evaluation of music because it can be used to create a reputation, a hierarchy of composers, and a genealogy of compositional skill. All these practices became cultural commonplaces through the wide dissemination of music and (crucially) writing about music as the sixteenth century progressed. For women to enter this discourse, and ultimately the historiography, of musical composition, they needed to have access to the skills to produce written music, and the opportunity or incentive to see their music circulated and to attach their names to it.

Women's lives in sixteenth-century Europe were regulated by cultural codes, some derived from the beliefs and traditions of the Christian faith, others from the economic and stratified class systems on which their societies were structured, which restricted women's access to education, property, and legal independence. Some 'professions' – law, medicine,

university teaching – were accessible only through formal education that did not admit women; moreover, women could not take holy orders and serve in choral chapels. The modern concept of the ‘composer’ conveys the anachronistic ideal of professionalization whereby someone engaging in musical activity rises to the rank of professional musician when they are recompensed for that activity, and therefore acknowledged to be skilful enough at music to warrant payment. By analogy the musician rises to the rank of composer when they are paid for their compositions, with concomitant acknowledgement of the superior quality of their skill. But sixteenth-century measures of worth and expertise were not as inextricably bound up with monetary reward; moreover, the notion of a musical ‘profession’ in the sixteenth century is not necessarily helpful when considering how anyone might have supported themselves by musical activity, particularly in relation to composition. Composition was often an auxiliary product of a musician’s duties (such as those of a *maestro di cappella*) or a speculative activity by someone looking to gain more regular employment through the dedication of a book to a potential patron. Once at court, unless already working full-time in the chapel, male musicians might be given other household duties to make their continued employment practical. Music history surveys repeat the assertion that Maddalena Casulana claimed the title of professional in the dedication of her *Primo libro de madrigali a quattro voci*, but while she refers to ‘questa profession della musica’ she is probably indicating not employment or trade, but a vocation – claiming women could deploy musical knowledge with the same degree of expertise as men.

Educating European women composers

In sixteenth-century Europe, the evaluation of compositional skill focused most firmly on polyphony, particularly setting serious poetry (for courts or elite social gatherings), or liturgical/Scriptural texts for worship or devotion. Polyphony was the main format for printed distribution of music; the vocabulary of music theory – and music criticism – developed in relation to polyphony, and so, inevitably, the highest intellectual value accrued to polyphonic composition, a skill that needed to be taught. In many European cities, women had less ready access to formal education, so were less likely than men to be able to read and write in the vernacular, let alone Latin, the language of most music theory treatises until the middle of the sixteenth century.⁴ Many sixteenth-century European girls would

not have had the same opportunities to develop their knowledge about music and composition, nor even to gain basic musical literacy. But with this truism come important exceptions: in northern Europe, municipal or faith-based public schooling could provide young women with basic musical training.⁵ Where such provision did not exist, families with money or skills (because they themselves were musicians) could ensure that their daughters were taught to sing and play domestic instruments. Relatively cheap and portable, the lute was ubiquitous by the middle of the century, used both on its own and for the accompaniment of singing. Keyboard instruments were also popular – less so for self-accompaniment (the Modenese gentlewoman Tarquinia Molza complained that the keys made too much noise) – but ideal for the demonstration of feminine virtues.⁶ The viol family, while technically more demanding, was better suited to collective music-making, suggesting greater affluence (with more instruments present in the home), or preparation for religion, since convent ensembles could be enhanced by bass instruments.

Musical skills were valued at court; a noblewoman's companions were there both to serve and to entertain – as we see most clearly in the story of the Ferrarese *concerto delle dame*, the ensemble of virtuosic female musicians who both sang and played at the court of the d'Este family in Ferrara.⁷ Preparation for this life started early. Thus the education of Lavinia Guasco, who by the age of eleven could sing and play at sight on both keyboard and viol, and had mastered rudimentary counterpoint, was organized by her father, determined to equip his daughter properly for life in courtly service.⁸ Advanced musical skills were also valued by convents, who would admit gifted girls in exchange for a lower dowry than that required for a woman with no special aptitude – an additional incentive for families to nurture their daughters' musical talent. European convents were economically vital in their communities, providing many practical services – such as tailoring and embroidery, baking, confectionery, preserving, and copying documents. Their highest purpose was as spiritual intercessors for their communities, and music was a commodity in this sense. Citizens would pay for votive and memorial masses to be said and sung for their souls: the more accomplished the music, the more effective and heartfelt the intercession, also the more expensive to the client (perhaps the only model of female music-making in sixteenth-century Europe that corresponds directly with modern notions of 'professionalism'). Fine musical establishments would attract a better class of novice to the convent, more dowries and more gifts, thereby improving its economic status.

While male musicians composed music for nuns to sing, there were nuns accomplished enough to compose as well as teach composition. Two sixteenth-century music treatises – Franchino Gaffurio's *Angelicum ac divinum opus musicae* (Milan, 1508), and Juan Bermudo's *El arte tripharia* (Osuna, 1550) – were adapted by their authors for the use of nuns.⁹ Both were published in the vernacular; while Bermudo's is more geared to rudimentary instruction for performance of chant, polyphony, and on the organ, Gaffurio's provides the rules of species counterpoint that underpin both extemporised polyphony (*canto fermo* or *contrappunto*) and fully notated polyphony (or *canto figurato*). We should not assume that young girls educated in convents, either as novices or as resident scholars, were excluded from learning *canto fermo*. While sixteenth-century prohibitions and exhortations against nuns' musical activity single out *canto figurato* as a particularly egregious activity, church authorities also insisted that when nuns sang chant, they did so 'simply and in unison' – meaning they should not extemporise on the chant. Presumably if the practice were not already happening, it would not have been forbidden.¹⁰ Evidence from the 1560 Biffoli-Sostegni manuscript (Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles MS 27766) shows that the nuns of San Matteo in Arcetri were at least familiar with the sound of extemporised polyphony: its setting of *Salve sponsa Dei*, the Magnificat antiphon for the Vespers II of St Clare, reproduces the sound of first-species counterpoint in four parts, all written in chant notation.¹¹

Anonymity and attribution: Suor Leonora d'Este

As noted, the business of claiming authorship in music, either for oneself or for another, emerges strongly in the European sixteenth century. The development of commercial printing is heavily implicated in this trend – the names of esteemed musicians added value to a publication – but it also reflects the rise of what Stephen Greenblatt called 'Renaissance self-fashioning', and the notion of both the virtuoso and the connoisseur. Thus, with the fame and reputation for genius of the early sixteenth-century composer Josquin des Prez, listeners accrued social capital through their appreciation of his music; printers accrued financial capital by adding his name to otherwise unattributed works.¹² At the other end of the century, Giulio Caccini made grandiose (unfounded) claims of authority in the invention of a new style of composition – what we now call monody – to his own commercial benefit. But we also see noblemen, such as Carlo Gesualdo, Alfonso Fontanelli, and Guglielmo Gonzaga, printing their

madrigals in almost ostentatious anonymity – in Fontanelli's case, using the epithet 'senza nome' – as it would be beneath their princely dignity to put their names on a commercial product.¹³ However, the choice of who was named, or not, was not always in the hands of the musicians themselves. Writers documenting events or publishers of a collection might have elected to name the most important figures and leave others unnamed, regardless of whether they knew who composed the work.

The shift towards acknowledging authorship of any creative work was problematic for women. The cultural codes determining sixteenth-century women's interactions with property and education also determined what they could be seen to do in public: a consistent upholding of modesty and obedience was required of all women, regardless of their social status. Therefore, having musical skills and being willing to demonstrate them unbidden was considered less than respectable: in the secular world, musical skills, notably those involving musical literacy, were routinely associated with courtesans; for nuns, the cultivation of musical knowledge was evidence of capitulation to the sin of vanity.¹⁴ This potentially left many literary and musically creative women under the veil of anonymity, particularly if they had taken religious vows. While we have secure attributions showing that European women composed polyphony in the sixteenth century, not many exist – either in manuscript or in print. We might further consider that if women were composing as part of their duties to a convent, who wrote the music may have been considerably less important to them than the content of the work – its words, its religious function – thus adding their name to the work would not have been a priority.

Although much anonymous music, both secular and sacred, was still published and copied in the sixteenth century modern attitudes to authorship – especially in relation to musics of the past – have ensured that considerable scholarly time and effort has been spent in testing, proving, or disproving attributions of works. Most of this scholarship relies on a groundwork that has already established a compositional style against which a doubtful work might be measured. In the quest for music written by women, we have little or no stylistic information on which to base our enquiry. Nonetheless, there are extraordinary circumstances that might lead us to identify the work of a woman. Such is the case for the *Musica quinque vocum motteta materna lingua vocata* (Venice: Scotto, 1543), an anonymous collection of five-voice motets for equal voices – that is, for a single-sex adult ensemble. The works in the book have recently been attributed to Suor Leonora d'Este (1515–1575), a nun and princess of the Ferrarese ruling family, thus with multiple reasons to remain anonymous.¹⁵

Suor Leonora was the only surviving daughter of Lucrezia Borgia and Duke Alfonso I d'Este. When Borgia died in childbirth in 1519, the young princess was cared for by the Clarissan nuns of Corpus Domini in Ferrara, where her mother, along with most of the family, was buried.¹⁶ By the time she was seven, she was learning to play keyboard instruments, and by the age of eight, Leonora had decided that she wished to remain at the convent as a nun. Her decision displeased her father greatly; as his only daughter, she was a valuable commodity for creating networks through marriage. She may well have understood, however, even at a young age, that she would rather devote her life to study and music than to share her mother's fate. Throughout her life she was praised and consulted by some of the most distinguished musicians of her day: Gioseffo Zarlino and Francesco Della Viola, her nephew's *maestro di cappella*, dedicated works to her. Nicola Vicentino, the inventor of the *archicembalo*, a microtonal keyboard with thirty-one notes to an octave, lauded her understanding of the esoteric *genera* of ancient music. Among other keyboards, she kept an *archicembalo* at the convent, and also possessed a large slate for drafting composition.

The motets of the *Musica ... materna lingua vocata* are tours de force of polyphonic composition, with a sophisticated understanding of dissonance, imitation, and the manipulation of large musical structures: no other composer published more than a handful of motets in five equal voices before this book. While there is no conclusive proof that they are by Suor Leonora, the collection appears to have been largely, if not completely, produced by the same compositional voice. The book contains both texts and melodies pertaining to Clarissan worship, and some works use contrapuntal techniques favoured by composers at the Este court, with musical references to both Josquin and Willaert. Finally, it is one of only a small handful of books to be published in Venice with no composer attributions at all – the others are demonstrably by noble composers. Suor Leonora is the only known musical figure of the period who fits the profile suggested by these works.

Named European women composers

The earliest surviving compositions by named European women are keyboard arrangements of existing music. The first of these is a three-voice instrumental counterpoint on the chant *Conditor alme siderum* by a Spanish nun, Sor Gracia Baptista, published in the *Libro de cifra nueva*, compiled by Luis Venegas de Henestrosa (Alcalá de Henares: Joan de Brocar, 1557). Clémence de Bourges (c.1530–c.1563) is better known as a

poet; a single work, an elaboration of Jacques Arcadelt's 'Da bei rami scendea', is attributed to her in Jacob Paix's *Ein schön nutz- unnd [sic] gebreüchlich Orgel Tabulaturbuch* (Laugingen: Reinmichel, 1583).

Maddalena Casulana is frequently cited as the first woman to publish under her own name. Four four-voice madrigals were published in the Venetian anthology *Il desiderio* (Venice: Scotto, 1566), followed by another in the *Terzo libro del desiderio* (Venice: Scotto 1567); a single three-voice madrigal appears in *Il Gaudio* (Venice: Scotto, 1567).¹⁷ The four-voice madrigals were soon reprinted in the earliest extant single-author collection of polyphony by a woman, her *Primo libro de madrigali a quattro voci* (Venice: Scotto, 1568), which she dedicated to Leonora de' Medici-Orsini. It had been presumed that Casulana was born around 1540 in Casole d'Elsa, near Siena, but new research suggests a date of 1532/33 in Vicenza.¹⁸ She worked as composer, teacher, and performer; in 1570 and 1583 she published two further collections of madrigals, the *Secondo libro de madrigali a quattro voci* (Venice: Scotto, 1570) dedicated to Antonio Londonio in Milan, and the *Primo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venice: Gardano, 1583), dedicated to Mario Bevilacqua in Verona – and her first four-voice book was also reprinted in 1583. Her reputation clearly extended beyond Italy, for in 1568, her five-voice motet (now lost) 'Nil mage iucundum', was sung at the wedding festivities of Duke William V of Bavaria and Renata of Lorraine.¹⁹ Her five-voice book is signed Maddalena de' Mezarii detta Casulana Vicentina suggesting one, possibly two marriages in her lifetime, although documentation survives of her activities as a performer contemporary with the publication.

Like Suor Leonora d'Este, Casulana was accepted by contemporary male musicians as an authority and peer: both Antonio Molino's *I dilettevoli madrigali a quattro voci* (Venice: Merulo, 1568) and Filippo da Monte's *Primo libro de madrigali a tre voci* (Venice: Gardano, 1582 – dedication signed by Angelo Gardano) are dedicated to her. The positioning of her work and reputation among the Veneto's creative elite is also reminiscent of Suor Leonora, and something she appears to have encouraged: her setting of Vincenzo Quirino's *ottava rima*, 'O Notte, o ciel, o mar, o piaggie, o monti', takes its opening directly from Cipriano de Rore's 'O sonno, o della queta humida ombrosa' (*Secondo libro de madrigali a quattro voci*, Venice: Gardano, 1557). She was keenly aware of her status as a woman making music in the secular world, declaring in the oft-quoted dedication of her *Primo libro* that her purpose in publishing was to show that men who believed women could not possess compositional talent were committing a 'vain error'.²⁰ The radical statement in her dedication is matched by her

Example 7.1 Maddalena Casulana, ‘Tant’alto s’erge la tua chiara luce’, from *Il primo libro de madrigali a quattro voci* (1568/reprinted 1583), canto and tenor, bars 14–17

14

C

(-di) On-de il gran no - me, on-de il gran no - me d'I - sa-bel - la a - dor - no

T

(-di) On-de il gran no - me, on-de il gran no - me d'I - sa-bel - la a - dor - no, L'a-ria per-

commitment to vocal audacity in the opening madrigal, ‘Tant’alto s’erge la tua chiara luce’, also dedicated to Isabella de’ Medici Orsini, which soars up to *b \flat* ” at the words, ‘ond’il gran nome d’Isabella’ (Example 7.1: only Canto and Tenore partbooks survive).

Many of Casulana’s four-voice madrigals are stylistically consistent with her male contemporaries in the 1570s, showing the hallmarks of courtly song ‘composed out’ into polyphony for publication: bass lines largely articulating root position chords rhythmically aligned with the upper voice, harmonic colouring that shows interpretative intent.²¹ She also experiments with vocal dispositions and characterization; for instance, Serafino Aquilano’s dialogue between the soul and Death, “Morte” “Che voi?” becomes a duet for two high voices. A number of the works in the *Secondo libro a quattro voci* are set for high or low equal voices, and a significant proportion of the works in the *Primo libro . . . a cinque voci* require at least three high voices, in the style of Ferrara’s *concerto delle dame*. The recent re-discovery of the missing Alto partbook of the five-voice collection permits us now to assess Casulana in this later style, and in the more challenging medium of five-voice polyphony.²² She shows herself the master of both the short, epigrammatic madrigal and the extended, theatrical *scena*, managing contrasts in texture and tessitura, as well as developing long-range structures based on cadential plans.

Given Ferrara’s centrality in the established history of sixteenth-century women musicians, courtesy of the Este family’s generous and very visible patronage of women performers at court and in convents, it might seem unusual that it took until the final decade of the century for a Ferrarese woman to publish music in her own name – or names. In 1593 the *Ghirlanda de madrigali a quatro voci* (Venice: Vincenti, 1593) was published under the name Vittoria Aleotti, simultaneously with the *Sacrae cantiones: quinque, septem, octo, et decem vocibus decantandae* (Venice: Vincenti, 1593) published under the name Raffaella Aleotti (1575–c.1640). While previous generations of scholars have wrestled with whether there

might have been two Aleotti sisters with superior compositional skills, the consensus is now that the books were written by the same woman, using both her secular name and her 'nome di religione' taken on entering the convent of San Vito, Ferrara in 1589.²³ According to her father's dedication of the madrigal book, addressed to Marchese Ippolito Bentivoglio, Aleotti's musical prowess was discovered very early when her parents engaged a music tutor for her older sister, who wished to enter religion. Prior to her own monachisation, Aleotti was given lessons by the Este court composer Alessandro Milleville. She also appears to have received composition tuition from Ercole Pasquini, to whom she expressed her gratitude by including two of his motets in her own publication. Aleotti became *maestra di musica* at San Vito, leading an ensemble that Giovanni Maria Artusi called the finest in Italy.²⁴ She remained in that position until her death around 1640. So skilful a composer and director was she that reportedly the Queen of Spain, Margaret of Austria, attempted to lure her into her own service.²⁵

Aleotti's madrigals seem anachronistic for their time: no four-voice madrigals had been published by Ferrarese musicians for decades, apart from her teacher Milleville's *Le Vergine, con dieci altre stanze spirituali a quattro voci* (Ferrara: Baldini, 1584), settings of Petrarch and other poems, probably written by Suor Brigida Grana, the book's dedicatee.²⁶ They are likely products of her study: they resemble Milleville's unostentatious settings, well-crafted polyphony for four vocal or instrumental participants that respond gracefully to the textual conceits. Her motets are on a grander scale, and while they are published for a full-voiced ensemble, from soprano to bass ranges, they are not difficult to arrange so that the lower parts are not always sung. A late sixteenth-century account of musical practice at the convent suggests that the nuns indeed arranged works in a way that best suited the forces they had: San Vito's choir possessed female tenors and basses, and also had an instrumental ensemble of winds, strings, and keyboards.²⁷ Aleotti uses discontinuous textures and sectional writing in a way that would allow *concertato*-like passages to emerge when the motets were performed with a mixed ensemble. Even though her approach to polyphony was often forward-looking, Aleotti was also careful to place herself into Ferrara's musical traditions and heritage. Her setting of Psalm 56: 2–3, 'Miserere mei, Deus', uses a *soggetto ostinato* device (drawn from Cipriano de Rore's four-voice motet, 'Miserere nostri Deus') that locates the motet in a musical genealogy stemming from Josquin des Prez's setting of Psalm 51, also called 'Miserere mei, Deus'.²⁸ Since a work attributed to Suor Leonora d'Este, too, fits into this tradition, it appears that over generations Ferrara's nuns considered themselves active participants in the city's musical culture.²⁹

Another Italian woman, Cesarina Ricci de' Tingoli, published a volume of works under her own name, her *Primo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venice: Gardano, 1597); two of its partbooks remain – although a single madrigal, 'Nel discostarsi il sole', exists in a keyboard intabulation in the library of the Benedictine Abbey in Munich (Mus. MS 4480). Ricci was the daughter of the illegitimate son of Cardinal Giovanni Ricci, and through her family was exposed to the rich musical environment in Rome, where she may have been taught by Ruggiero Giovanelli.³⁰ Ricci displays her skill in two distinct compositional styles: the fully contrapuntal madrigal, and a lighter texture informed by the fashionable late-century strophic villanella. Her dedication to cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini expresses, however modestly, that women may possess musical ability: 'non suole Apollo sprezzar le Muse'; 'Apollo does not disdain the Muses'.

There are some women for whom we have only reports, but no music: Caterina Willaert, who Massimo Troiano claimed was the daughter of Adriano Willaert, composed music alongside Casulana for the wedding of Duke Wilhelm, while the Jewish woman Madama Bellina is known only from a letter by the Venetian polymath Andrea Calmo, who said she was so skilled she could have taught Josquin.³¹ Like Sor Gracia Baptista and Clémence de Bourges, some women are known only for a single work included in a book compiled by a man. The Parmense Paula Massarenghi (b. 1565) contributed one madrigal to Arcangelo Gherardini's *Primo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Ferrara: Baldini, 1585). Casulana's patron, Princess Isabella de' Medici ('Lieta vivo e contenta') and her daughter Eleonora Orsini ('Per pianto la mia carne') are both named as composers of madrigals arranged for voice and lute in Cosimo Bottrigari's lute manuscript, compiled in the second half of the sixteenth century.³² Orsini's musical legacy is enhanced through the dedication to her of Girolamo Diruta's treatise on keyboard performance and composition, the *Seconda parte del Transilvano* (Venice: Vincenti, 1622). Although the attribution to Isabella is not entirely certain, Donna Cardamone argued that she very probably wrote the text to 'Lieta vivo e contenta' and may have devised the melody, before another musician took on the task of arranging it polyphonically.³³

These names are precious traces of women's wider involvement in musical creation, but it is here, in the collaborative possibilities for Isabella's madrigal, that the boundaries of our perception of who is a 'composer' are tested. Linda Koldau's handbook on women and music in early modern Germany provides a blueprint for understanding this

phenomenon throughout Europe.³⁴ Over a thousand pages long, it covers music in elite courts, non-elite spaces, and religious institutions. Koldau provides detail on women's involvement in music production as patrons, performers, and printers, as well as their activity as singers, instrumentalists, and poets whose words were sung to tunes written by others. Nevertheless, she does not see the composition of song texts as musical composition and labels few women as composers. In a later study, Cordelia Knaus considered whether women performers' involvement in the creative process of composition amounted to composition itself – specifically the input of the soprano and actor Isabella Andreini into music that was written for her, and her collaboration with a named composer at the early seventeenth-century Medici court.³⁵ Knaus decided that it did not, but the claim – or rejection – of authorship in terms of naming does not have any impact on the act itself: calling oneself or someone else the composer of a work, or refusing to do so, does not change who has been involved in bringing the music into existence.

These issues – writing words intended to be sung, the performer's role in music's creation, and the question of attribution – are crucial when we look beyond the borders of Europe to expand our understanding of women composers in the period. If we put aside Eurocentric concerns, particularly in terms of valuing original composition that can be reproduced from the page, then recognising non-European women as composers becomes not just possible, but also a path whereby we might include more European women also.

Women composers beyond Europe

In the late Míng dynasty, the Nánjīng courtesans, the most famous of whom is Má Shǒuzhēn (1548–1604), were celebrated for their skill at devising musical settings of their clients' poetry, and their own. These women, collectively known as 'the four beauties of the Qínhuái,' were active from the 1570s, thus exact contemporaries of the *concerto delle dame* at Ferrara.³⁶ Like their Ferrarese counterparts, they were taught performing skills – playing instruments, singing, and dancing – from a very early age, trained to fulfil a specific social function.³⁷ The Nánjīng courtesans flourished in a culture that regarded gendered behaviour less rigidly than European cultures, and even briefly cultivated a fluidity between feminine and masculine attributes. As Monica Merlin notes:

In this climate of evident porosity of social boundaries – of a new understanding of femininities and masculinities – the redefinition of gender contours saw men emphasising their *yin* side, while women appropriated spaces and modes of expression traditionally belonging to men. In this mutual acceptance of crossing the traditional notion of gender roles, a woman like Má Shǒuzhēn, who shared the same intellectual space as some of the most eminent literati, played an important role in negotiating her own space.³⁸

This freedom to engage in self-fashioning was not afforded to most respectable European women, except those in positions of authority such as women who held regencies, like Isabella d'Este in Mantua, or Christine of Lorraine and Maria Maddalena of Austria in Florence.

Má Shǒuzhēn excelled in a variety of media: she was known for her paintings and poetry, including *cí* lyrics, which are all prefaced with the name of the tune to which they were intended to be sung. However, selecting the tune was only the beginning of the creative process leading to performance. As Judith Zeitlin notes, the Nánjīng courtesans practised both *dùqǔ*, 'to perform a song', and *dūqǔ*, 'to fashion a song by fitting new words to a pre-existing tune':

Both ways of 'realizing the tune' required serious skill and understanding of music to execute, and both activities had one or the other in it. To perform a new song from written lyrics inevitably meant making prosodic and musical adjustments. Fashioning a song by fitting new words to an existing tune pattern demanded even more effort. Particularly challenging was the method of *jīqǔ* (developing a 'composite tune'), which involved piecing together individual lines from separate tune patterns in the same mode to create a patchwork melody with a new title.³⁹

The compositional process that pertained in Ming China was to invent new lyrics based on the metre, rhyme scheme, and word tone implied by the original words of the chosen tune. Even so, the tunes were not fixed, but existed as living repertoire, or collective knowledge. As Zeitlin says, 'the melodies were mainly transmitted orally and understood to be highly mutable over time'. The need to write down melodies only arose centuries later, when the print economy demanded it; notated arias appeared near the end of the European eighteenth century to serve the amateur singer who had not undergone years of training.⁴⁰

This compositional concept inverts the Eurocentric view, switching the emphasis from innovation in the music to innovation in the text and performance. Similar priorities governing the creation and preservation of song pertained in the same era on the Indian subcontinent: musical notation was irrelevant to both composition and performance in the

system of *ragas* and *talas* (melodic and rhythmic cycles, or modes) that were taught through oral transmission. Hindu culture shares with Christian culture the central role of singing and chanting in worship; however, it is more forthcoming in recognizing a woman as one of its greatest songwriters, the Bhakti saint, Mirabai.⁴¹

Mirabai's songs are performed in many styles – from folk to classical – but their primary origins are as *bhajans*, songs with refrains sung collectively as part of Bhakti worship. Mirabai's biography is difficult to pin down with the kind of accuracy that European scholarship demands: there are no contemporary documents corroborating clearly the facts of her life, and those that do exist do not agree with each other. Nonetheless, most scholars accept that Mirabai was a real woman, a North Indian princess, who lived in the mid-sixteenth century Vikram Samvat (Hindu calendar) – equating to the beginning of the European sixteenth century.

Only six poems attributed to Mirabai exist in manuscripts dating from before the middle of the European seventeenth century.⁴² Nonetheless, the body of work now attributed to her extends to hundreds, if not thousands, of poems, identified – as is traditional for the genre – by the naming of the saint in the closing verses of the song. They are part of what the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu called a culture's 'orature', India's vast non-written cultural heritage, and their transmission through generations has been through song. There can be no way of knowing which or how many of them were composed by Mirabai herself. As Nancy Martin puts it:

To refer to songs bearing Mirabai's name either as strictly 'hers' or as 'poems' is misleading, for they belong to this world of song, composed orally and sung, first by the saint and then brought to life by subsequent singers who co-create their meanings together with audiences in the improvisational milieu of performance.⁴³

While a few of the manuscript sources for Mirabai's songs indicate a specific *raga*, most do not – and although some have become associated with one over time, there is no need to adhere to it. To perform a song by Mirabai, the singer may choose the *raga* and the *tala*; the mode of accompaniment is also individual to the performance, thus the song can migrate in terms of place, time, and genre. One of her most widely known *bhajans*, 'Mhārā re giridhar gopāl', has been recorded in a range of styles. These include a traditional classical performance by the esteemed singer Lata Mangeshkar; a similarly classical performance, but with a fully electrified band accompaniment by the playback artist Sharanya Srinivas; and a quasi-westernised common-time version by Aks and Lakshmi, which uses a different *raga* to the more conventional versions.⁴⁴

Each performer devising a song by Mirabai, either through performance of an existing text or the creation of a new one, subsumes their own identity while acknowledging their primary purpose of communicating Mirabai's voice, sentiment, and devotion to Lord Krishna.⁴⁵ In the case of a new fashioning, the words may originate with the performer, but the inspiration comes from the saint. Mirabai's songs, then, are better considered to have her 'authority' than to be authored by her. They are anonymous in Eurocentric terms, but those terms are not relevant here. To my knowledge, this votive attitude to authorship has no parallels in Eurocentric cultures.

An element of mistrust of oral tradition and enthusiastic local historians may be at play in the historiography of another woman musician, Teodora Ginès, reputed to have lived during the European sixteenth century, whose name appears in a song attributed to her, just as Mirabai's does in hers. Some strands of scholarship suggest she was a freed slave from the Dominican Republic, probably born around 1540, and that she and her sister Micaela were bandora players, who performed public music for dancing and as entertainment in Santiago.⁴⁶ However, the story of the Ginès sisters relies on books published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which transcribe documentary evidence from the Spanish colonizers that is no longer extant. It is therefore now impossible to verify the information. Even if Teodora existed, there is nothing to suggest she wrote 'El son de la Ma Teodora', a three-line sequence of call and response – but legend is strong, contributing to senses of ownership and nationalism in both the Dominican Republic and Cuba. And like Mirabai's songs, 'El son de la Ma Teodora' is a part of the orature of the Caribbean, and is still a mainstay of the *son* repertoire, with recordings ranging from a historically-informed arrangement by Ensemble Villancico to the classic *son* of Celia Cruz.⁴⁷

We cannot claim Má Shǒuzhēn, Mirabai, or perhaps even Teodora Ginès as composers in Eurocentric terms – they do not fulfil the 'music first' criteria established for the evaluation of composition as musical skill. But if we reframe the definition to include ways of creating music not centred around a hierarchy of originality valuing notation over text, then not only do we acknowledge these women, we also admit many more European women to the status of composer. In particular, we can acknowledge the musical creativity of women who composed poetry for singing to pre-existing melodies.

Europe reconsidered: new criteria

Women's involvement in crafting song during the European sixteenth century spans all social classes, across religious divides. Returning to literacy, rather than oracy, it makes sense that more women involved in creating music were language-literate than music-literate, and since the process of writing down words is less resource-hungry than that of writing down music, it would have been more available to women of lesser means.

Perhaps the largest body of works by women songwriters exists in the genres of hymns and devotional songs, since vernacular musical worship was common to heterodox and then Protestant practices, as well as serving the private devotions of Catholics. This was by no means a new development: in Italy, songs by fifteenth-century women, such as the nun Saint Catherine of Bologna and the noblewoman Lucrezia Tuornaboni Medici, were still sung well into the sixteenth century. The Dutch anchorite Zuster Bertken, who died in the second decade of the sixteenth century, also left behind songs and hymns that were assimilated into the printed literature.⁴⁸

These women were in the vanguard of a considerable growth of female songwriters during the century who wrote new texts for familiar melodies, a process that in Eurocentric terms is called 'contrafacting'. Sometimes their words were published with musical notation, as in the case of Elisabeth Cruciger, Lutheran poet and composer of the words of a well-known hymn, 'Herr Christ der einig Gotts Sohn' published in 1524.⁴⁹ The tune for the hymn was already well known as the secular song 'Mein Freud möcht sich wohl mehren' found in fifteenth-century sources, but it may be that Cruciger herself had chosen and adapted it to her new words. More often, we see a text alone published with an indication of the tune to which it could be sung. The melodies of the *Chansons spirituelles* of Marguerite of Navarre, Princess of France, first published in 1548, were derived from secular songs, some of which were less than pious.⁵⁰ The publications of songs by the Anabaptist martyrs Anna Jansz and Martha Baerts are from the other end of the social scale, but the melodies selected by these women were published in the *Souterliederkens*, a collection of spiritual songs, specifically crafted to be cross-confessional, appealing to both Protestant and Catholic worshippers.⁵¹

Circulating song without musical notation made it more portable and flexible, but while contrafacting meant some adaptation was always necessary by the performer, that adaptation had already been thought through, in practice, by the writer of the words. Not all these works were devotional,

however. The Florentine nun Suor Annalena Aldobrandini's manuscript of theatrical entertainments is also annotated with musical references so that they could be performed by others. In some cases, she names specific songs, as in the Dispute between Arrogance and Virtue, which she wants sung to the tune of Lorenzo de' Medici's famous 'Quant'è bella giovinezza'. In others she simply indicates a style of performance, for instance 'in the style of the *Ninfale*', referring to the Italian tradition of formulaic *arie per cantar*, used to recite poetry.⁵² Singing to an *aria* (not entirely dissimilar to singing the blues – the harmonic framework determined by the bass line was the consistent element) went further, leaving the crafting of melody entirely to the performer – and that is even before thinking about embellishment or accompaniment.

The implications for historians and musicologists of removing the Eurocentric criteria for the status of composer are clear, but they can be almost as profound for musicians trained only in twenty-first century musical literacy. Performing the music of most of these women would require a command not only of performance practices and music theory, but also of the melodic and literary repertoires that pertain. This forms a barrier to ensembles wanting to 'resurrect' these composers within the scope of traditional historically-informed performance practice; but musicologists can help musicians understand unfamiliar practices or repertoires, thereby opening up texts to ways of performing that might be more familiar. The approach largely depends on the priority for the performance – whether representation of the past, or re-invigoration of the song's meaning and its cultural intertextuality. For further lessons to be learned, we can turn to twenty and twenty-first-century performances of Mirabai's songs: they transcend genre and performance practice, but they retain their meaning because the 'authority' is in the accrued and continuing history of the words, not the music.

Looking beyond the borders of Europe in the sixteenth century not only shifts the emphasis of women's music history away from the narrow definitions of the Eurocentric canon, but also allows us to form a much richer picture of contemporaneous women's musical activities in all regions. I would like to think that this reflective extension moves this chapter away from what the Canadian scholar Dylan Robinson calls "additive" inclusion.⁵³ Robinson calls for musicologists to 'affirm that there are many epistemologies of music, and that they are not mutually exclusive', and to 'understand that many cultures consider song to have life, and have more-than-aesthetic functions', so that we may avoid 'enacting epistemic violence' by imposing Eurocentric structures of knowledge on

non-Eurocentric cultural expressions.⁵⁴ Reframing a survey of Renaissance composers to encompass activities beyond the confines of European courts and convents allows Eurocentric musicology to rethink what we mean by ‘composition’ at the crucial point where the concept gains its cultural currency, and even to question what it is that we value about musical activity and why we do so.

Suggested Further Reading and Listening

- Chiara Bertoglio, ‘Music and Women’, Chapter 11 in *Reforming Music: Music and the Religious Reformations of the Sixteenth Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 625–84.
- Cappella Artemisia, *Raphaella Aleotti and the Nuns of San Vito* (Tactus, 2005).
- Ensemble Laus Concentus, *I canti di Euterpe: Composizioni femminili (XVI – XVII secolo)* (La bottega discantica, 1998).
- Lata Mangeshkar, *Meera Soor Kabira* (Saregama, 2001).
- Musica Secreta, *Lucrezia Borgia’s Daughter* (Obsidian, 2017).
- Musica Secreta, *Mother, Sister, Daughter* (Lucky Music, 2022).

Notes

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- 2 Rob C. Wegman, ‘From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450-1500’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49/3 (1996), 409–79.
- 3 Laurenz Lütteken, ‘The Work Concept’, in *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music*, ed. Anna Maria Busse Berger and Jesse Rodin, trans. James Steichen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 55–68.
- 4 Chiara Bertoglio, *Reforming Music: Music and the Religious Reformations of the Sixteenth Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 631–32.
- 5 Gordon Munro, “Sang Schwylls” and “Music Schools”: Music Education in Scotland, 1560–1650’, in *Music Education in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Susan Forscher Weiss, Russell E. Murray Jr., and Cynthia J. Cyrus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 65–83; Kristine K. Forney, ‘A Proper Musical Education for Antwerp’s Women’, in *Music Education in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 84–125.
- 6 Laurie Stras, ‘Recording Tarquinia: Imitation, Parody and Reportage in Ingegneri’s “Hor che ’l ciel e la terra e ’l vento tace”’, *Early Music* 27/ 3 (1999), 358–78; Forney, ‘A Proper Musical Education’.

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- 9 Colleen Baade, 'Nun Musicians as Teachers and Students in Early Modern Spain', in *Music Education in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 262–83; Laurie Stras, 'The Performance of Polyphony in Early Sixteenth-Century Italian Convents', *Early Music* 45/2 (2017), 195–214.
- 10 Laurie Stras, 'Voci pari motets and convent polyphony in the 1540s: the *materna lingua* complex', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70/3 (2017), 617–696, 620; Stras, *Women and Music*, 180.
- 11 Lucia Boscolo, 'Una composizione a 4 voci in notazione quadrata nel codice fiorentino di Bruxelles 27766', in *Un millennio di polifonia liturgica tra oralità e scrittura*, ed. Giulio Cattin and F. Alberto Gallo (Venice: Società Editrice Il Mulino, 2002), 11–18.
- 12 Rob C. Wegman, 'Who Was Josquin?', in *The Josquin Companion*, ed. Richard Sherr and Peter Urquhart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21–50.
- 13 Martha Feldman, 'Authors and Anonyms: Recovering the Anonymous Subject in Cinquecento Vernacular Objects', in *Music and the Cultures of Print*, ed. Kate Van Orden (New York: Garland, 2000), 166–99.
- 14 Stras, *Women and Music*, 54–62; Stras, 'Voci pari motets', 620.
- 15 Stras, 'Voci pari motets'.
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- 17 Jane A. Bernstein, *Music Printing in Renaissance Venice: The Scotto Press (1539–1572)* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 694, 726, 729.
- 18 Beatrice Pescerelli, *I madrigali di Maddalena Casulana* (Florence: Olschki, 1979), 5. See also Catherine Deutsch's forthcoming article, 'Maddalena Casulana: Making a Name as a Published Woman Composer in Renaissance Italy' and monograph, *Maddalena Casulana, ou la preuve par l'exemple: musique et philogynie dans l'Italie de la première modernité*.
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- 21 Peter Schubert, 'Maddalena Casulana, "Per lei pos' in oblio" from *Cinta di fior* (1570)', in *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Secular & Sacred Music to 1900*, ed. Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190237028.003.0003>.
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- 35 Kordula Knaus, ‘Italian Courts and their Musicians in the Early Modern Period: Authority, Authorship and Gender’, in *Autorschaft – Genie – Geschlecht, Musik – Kultur – Gender. Studien zur europäischen Kultur*, vol. 11 (Köln: Böhlau, 2013), 67–84.
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- 37 *ibid.*, 37.
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- 41 Nancy M. Martin, ‘Rajasthan: Mirabai and Her Poetry’, in *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 241–54.
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- 47 Ensemble Villancico, dir. Pete Pontvik, *¡Tambalagumba!: Early World Music in Latin America* (CPO, 2014); Celia Cruz & La Orquesta Sonora (Serfaty Records, 1955).
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- 49 Mary Jane Haemig, 'Elisabeth Cruciger (1500? –1535): The Case of the Disappearing Hymn Writer', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31/1 (2001), 21–44.
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