




REVIEW: EDITION

Le sacre stimmate di San Francesco d'Assisi

Maria Anna von Raschenau (c1650–1714), ed. Janet K. Page
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Studies of musical life in cloistered women's communities are often hindered by the lack of documentary and musical sources or by difficulties in accessing archives. Still elusive, to some extent, is the richness of the life conducted within the walls of institutions that were formally closed to the outside world but were, as a matter of fact, promoters of significant artistic and musical activities. Convents were not only places designated by the nobility to accommodate young women, but also symbols of political prestige and cultural centres for artistic patronage and musical practice. Recently, musicology has been shedding light on the musical activities of the nunneries of the modern age, thanks above all to the contribution of scholars like Robert Kendrick, Craig Monson and Colleen Reardon, who have demonstrated the musical vitality of some of these institutions. In fact, in various European contexts, music was often a point of contact between the cloistered community and city life: religious houses flaunted their power and prestige by organizing solemn celebrations with professional singers and instrumentalists, thus becoming producers and patrons of sacred music.

The studies of Janet K. Page add a significant element to the investigation of convent music in Austria. Page has rediscovered the close relationship between the Habsburg court and Viennese religious institutions, revealing the political and cultural value of this type of environment. The Augustinian convent of St Jakob auf der Hülben in Vienna was certainly one of the most interesting examples: visitor reports from the mid-seventeenth century describe female musicians as the protagonists of musical performances that took place there. The musical practices of these nuns did not consist simply in accompanying the liturgy, but also included theatrical performances, oratorios and sacred genres. The oratorio *Le sacre stimmate di San Francesco d'Assisi* was composed in 1695 by the canoness Maria Anna von Raschenau, and it represents today the most complete example of this sort of production. As Page explains in the detailed Introduction, Maria Anna von Raschenau arrived in the convent of St Jakob around 1672 as a novice, but her musical activity began earlier in the Viennese imperial court, where her father, Johann Rasch von Raschenau, was employed. It is worth noting that the imperial court itself provided Maria Anna with a 'scholar's stipend', allowing her to receive adequate musical training in singing, composing and playing instruments such as keyboards, violin, viola da gamba and transverse flute.

Between 1694 and 1709, at St Jakob, Raschenau composed seven major musical works dedicated to the Emperor Leopold I. *Le sacre stimmate* was performed in 1695 on 25 July, during the feast of St James, the patron saint of the convent. However, the only surviving manuscript of this oratorio is a version that was probably written by a court copyist, since, as Page explains, Leopold I loved to follow the music during the performances. Therefore, since it is not a copy intended for musical realization, it is not surprising that it contains some errors and omissions. Furthermore, the score, now

preserved in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, is anonymous and lacks an introductory symphony. The attribution to Raschenau is possible thanks to the libretto by Marco Antonio Signorini, who was the librettist for all Raschenau's other works. As for the missing introductory symphony, Page suggests that one of the symphonies composed by Carlo Agostino Badia and Giuseppe Pacieri, performed in the same year at the convent of St Ursula in Vienna, could well have introduced the oratorio. In this regard, I would have appreciated more details – further information about the circulation of music and musicians between monastic institutions in Vienna.

The libretto, preserved in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, belonged to the library of Apostolo Zeno, court poet in Vienna between 1718 and 1729. As stated in the original dedication and the librettist's commentary, the narration deals with the ecstasy of St Francis and his reception of the stigmata. The edition contains a transcription of the entire libretto, accompanied by an English translation. The libretto includes many biblical citations as marginal notes. I very much appreciated Page's dutiful and diligent effort in retracing all the biblical references reported in the printed booklet. She claims the biblical verses very often help us to understand the meaning of the proposed text, yet to my mind this relationship between poetic text and biblical verses is not sufficiently clarified by the author. I would also have wished for a summary of the oratorio's plot.

The musical language of the work lies halfway between reminiscences of the early seventeenth century and the innovations characteristic of the end of the century. Page rightly explains that the rise of the oratorio in Vienna coincided with the interest in the Italian operatic style based on da capo arias, ariosos and secco recitatives, a style from which the oratorio production also drew. Raschenau's oratorio comprises roles for male voice ranges (three roles for tenor and one for bass), even though it was composed for a female institution. In the interesting – albeit concise – paragraph 'Notes on Performance', the author rightly explains that often women sang in the male vocal range: this practice is also confirmed by the presence of nuns called *Bassistinnen*, women capable of singing low parts. Similarly, it is also plausible that some male parts could have simply been sung by priests who joined the female choir through a window.

The edition is followed by a Critical Report which contains detailed information on the sources used and the editorial methods chosen. Page uses part names and instrumentation as given in the source, while unlabelled parts in the source are chosen based on common instrumentation practice in Viennese religious institutions and are marked in square brackets. The orchestral ensemble features two violins, three violas and basso continuo. However, the three violas never play all together, but only in pairs (see Nos 3 and 6), meaning that the three parts could be covered by two performers. Based on their original clefs (soprano, alto and tenor), Page chooses to label the three violas as Viol 1, Viol 2 and Viol 3, but modernizes the clefs, resulting in one viola part appearing in the G clef and two others in the alto clef. This could be somewhat confusing in practice, as Viol 2, in the alto clef, plays in two movements, while Viol 1 and Viol 3 play in only one movement each, for a few bars. In any case, that three viola parts are noted in the manuscripts might indicate an alternation between nuns for didactic purposes, to allow more players to take part in the performance. It would have been interesting had the editor proposed further hypotheses on this topic.

Finally, I thoroughly agree with Page's reflections on the effects of the seclusion to which the inhabitants of convents were subjected. Though this seclusion certainly put an end to some forms of public activity, in various European contexts the convents also maintained an effective presence in civic life through continuous links with the influential families from which some of the nuns came. Indeed, the seclusion was often only a formality, because contacts with the outside world were frequent and the *modus vivendi* in many nunneries was not really based on a strict observance of orders and prohibitions. Participation in cultural and artistic life was a favourite activity for nuns: public or secret 'entertainments' became the way to socialize with relatives and to interact with the city. Page properly affirms that seclusion had a positive effect on nuns' music-making because they took responsibility for the music and provided music on their own initiative. This

situation probably helped in the formation of a repertory conceived, composed and performed by women. In this sense, Page's careful work on *Le sacre stimmate* allows today's audiences better to appreciate the value of convent musical practice, bringing to light a precious source that has hitherto been ignored.

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