

*Singing Games in Early Modern Italy: The Music Books of Orazio Vecchi.*  
Paul Schleuse.

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Using as case studies the printed music books of the Modenese poet and composer Orazio Vecchi (1550–1605), Schleuse demonstrates how a musician lacking sustained courtly patronage could boldly experiment with existing genres, crafting intertextual hybrids of new and old music and poetry, as well as transform the contents of a printed music book by varying its structure and order to cleverly represent metaphorical themes expressed in the book's poetry and music. Of equal interest to Schleuse are the intended singers who engaged with these books printed in Venice, since the printing of music disseminated musical repertoires to wider social circles beyond the hands of the noble elite and professional musician to academies, *ridotti*, and bourgeois homes.

By means of what Schleuse calls “recreational singing,” these secular songs by Vecchi enabled singers to assume the voices of poetic characters. Performing roles (e.g., lovers, peasants, drunkards, shepherds, et al.) that played with social conventions and allowed individuals to engage with identities different than their own was akin to game playing. From the conversations this music stimulated to the game playing it represented, Vecchi was keenly aware of the social function of music making, and thus composed the music and poetry and carefully arranged its presentation, so as to successfully engage with his reading performers. This relationship of early modern Italian print culture and the contexts of playful performing is at the heart of *Singing Games in Early Modern Italy*, and Schleuse argues convincingly for a new reading of Vecchi’s music and poetry that illuminates our understanding of how these musical works can represent broader social interactions and hierarchies.

Several of the book’s six chapters take as their focus the musical and poetic contents of one or more of Vecchi’s music books printed between the late 1570s and about 1600. Chapter 1 surveys two books of Vecchi’s four-part canzonettas published around 1580, demonstrating how selected songs, within their pastoral settings, exploited the recreational use of music, thereby serving as “a model for the elevated tone of courtly conversation and (re)inscrib[ing] for the singers the performative codes appropriate to a social milieu to which they may have had a peripheral or aspirational relationship” (20). Chapter 2 uses Vecchi’s works from the 1580s to distinguish his differing approaches to the genres of canzonetta and madrigal, highlighting Vecchi’s poetic and musical adaptations of other earlier works, and the networks of intertextual references (commonly achieved through poetic *proposte/risposte*), which “create a virtual dialogue between pieces that was realizable as actual conversational dialogue among recreational singers” (43). Chapter 3 turns to Vecchi’s *Selva di varia ricreatione* (1590) and *Convito musicale* (1597), which Schleuse employs to explore Vecchi’s metaphorical designs behind the choice of titles for these prints, and the powerfully effective variety achieved by the contrasting moods, registers, and genres in both collections of Vecchi’s music. Schleuse’s study of Vecchi’s *L’Amfiparnaso* in chapter 4 fulfills a larger aim of the book, that is, to “dislocate Vecchi from the margins of a teleological historiography of the later madrigal and early opera” (9), by reviewing this print’s reception history and the problematic genre label of “madrigal comedy.” This new reading of *L’Amfiparnaso* demonstrates the purpose of the woodcut illustrations found in the original print as conveying the works’ meanings, rather than intended stagings (as has been previously argued by scholars).

Schleuse introduces game playing in chapter 5 to draw comparisons with the sociability of music making that several works by Vecchi express. Distinguishing certain games from dissolute games of chance, Schleuse claims that Vecchi’s musical depictions of social groups playing games are more “elevated” when considered against contemporary game-like songs and against contemporary writings and paintings concerning the moral and social risks of gambling. Vecchi’s *Le veglie di Siena* (1604), which draws on Girolamo Bargagli’s 1572 description of the leisurely activities of the Accademia degli Intronati,

exhibits comic imitations of the pleasure derived from playing wholesome games often in mixed-gender settings. Schleuse likens the competitive nature of games to the challenges of singing among friends, claiming that “if sung correctly, a polyphonic song will always sound substantially the same, and the enjoyably game-like quality of recreational singing . . . lies in the challenge of getting it right” (213). Chapter 6 emphasizes how Vecchi used music to represent social hierarchies and modes of behavior as measured against the competitive nature of *sprezzatura* in courtly life, providing witty and caustic discourses about the anxieties of life as a courtier. From songs about drinking games to orgiastic gatherings, the equivocal poetry that Vecchi sets to music is at times intensely ribald, and yet performing this music invited singers to assume new identities through inversions of class and gender.

Together with abundant musical and textual examples (including a complete, thirty-three-page musical edition of Vecchi’s “L’hore di recreatione”), tables, illustrations of contemporary woodcuts, paintings, and games, as well as careful readings of the poetic verses, Schleuse’s insights into Vecchi’s music and its place within the contexts of print culture and the social world of late sixteenth-century music making make this book a valuable contribution to the scholarship of early modern Italian music.

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