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Finding Their Voice: Women Musicians of Baroque Italy

FAITH POYNOR

FEMALE MUSICIANS began to achieve greater freedom and independence from men during the Baroque period, and their music and creative talent consequently began to flourish. Due to the rise in popularity of female vocal ensembles that resulted after the establishment of the *concerto delle donne* in 1580, women composers in early modern Italy gained greater access to musical training previously only available to men or nuns. As seen by the works of composers and singers such as Francesca Caccini and Barbara Strozzi, this led to an unprecedented increase in women's musical productivity, particularly in vocal music.

The rise of female vocal ensembles in the early Baroque period was a pivotal moment in women's music history, as women finally achieved widespread recognition for their talents as musicians. In 1580, Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, established the most famous virtuoso singing ensemble called the *concerto delle donne*, or ensemble of ladies. This ensemble consisted of a trio of trained female vocalists: Laura Peverara, Anna Guarini, and Livia d'Arco. The formation of such an ensemble reflected a growing trend of noble patrons who cultivated virtuoso singers to perform madrigals at court, beginning in Ferrara and Mantua in the 1570s. According to Diane Jezic, "it was precisely the development and cultivation of the female professional singer, beginning with the Ferrara singers in 1580, that paved the way for talented women singers to have viable and well-paid musical

careers.”¹ Positions as court singers were both lucrative and influential: the Ferrara singers and others like them were able to achieve not only fame, but fortune, setting the precedent for female musicians to be properly and regularly remunerated for their musical talents. The Ferrara singers mesmerized listeners, and the cultural desire for high, beautiful voices persisted in the following centuries. This Italian fascination with the beauty of women’s voices allowed talented women to flourish in musical careers. While there had previously been a negative social stigma attached to women singing publicly, now women were sought out and praised for their talented performances. As the Baroque period progressed, women had greater opportunity and influence to pursue musical careers, especially as singers, which resulted in a significant increase in the variety and number of female musical careers, not only for singers, but also instrumentalists and composers.

The growth of the printing industry also fostered the recognition and spread of women’s musical creativity. Women’s voices could now be heard, both literally and figuratively. The fascination with women’s voices expanded into a diversity of genres, particularly opera. The rise of opera after 1600 afforded women new professional outlets that showcased their talents to a larger audience. Baroque composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) created pieces that challenged and enhanced the voices of his performers, especially the female singers. The very physical performances of his madrigals and operas allowed women to express themselves in a new, freeing way. Operas empowered female singers during a time when public singing was unacceptable for women. While patriarchal societies are typically thought of as silencing women’s voices, the powerful female operatic voices of early modern Italy began to subvert this norm. Women performers had to contend with “the dissonances between a musical practice that displayed women’s voices and social mores that demanded silent women whose quieted voices reflected their chasteness and distanced them from

1 Diane Jezic and Elizabeth Wood, *Women Composers: The Lost Tradition Found* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1994), 20.

inappropriate eroticism.”² The physical aspects of voicing and performance were considered to be “inappropriately erotic” because women were using their voices and bodies provocatively to evoke emotion in the audience. With the rise of opera, women were able to express themselves physically in a space usually reserved entirely for men: theatre.

With the rise of professional female singers came the rise of vocal training for women. Italian courts sought out and trained young women musicians with promising skill, also giving them the theoretical knowledge and skills necessary for composing, though a few were already composers. Women finally had the opportunity to learn the musical theory required for composition, especially for the complex polyphony that was popular at the time.³ With this knowledge and training, female composers could compete with male composers of their time to create sophisticated works. The development of musical instruction for female singers allowed more and more women to receive musical education, resulting in a wider variety of musical careers for women as they took charge of their increased knowledge and independence.

Musical training allowed women to progress in music as composers and performers. There were three main categories of training for women at this time: convent training, court training, and training with musical families. Convent training provided women the opportunity to compose and perform music mostly free from patriarchal constraints. Nuns had no husbands or children to take care of, and they were given outstanding musical and general instruction. Isabella Leonarda (1620-1704) was an Ursuline nun from Novara, Italy who became a prominent convent composer as well as religious leader. At the age of sixteen, she entered into conventual life, where she was instructed in musical theory, performance, and composition. Isabella studied and developed skills in singing, organ, violin, composing, writing, and arithmetic. She began composing her own original works at age eighteen and eventually formed and led her own convent, for which she

2 Bonnie Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women: The Power of Song in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 43.

3 Jezic and Wood, *Women Composers*, 3.

composed the entire convent liturgy. Isabella was one of the most prolific composers of her day: over the course of her life, she published twenty volumes of sacred works and a set of sonatas for string instruments.⁴ Isabella Leonarda's convent training and life as a nun and eventual Mother Superior gave her the freedom and knowledge to flourish as a composer and empowered her to publish her highly-respected music for over sixty years.

Many female composers were commissioned by nobility and served at courts where they received further musical instruction. The most renowned court composer of the time was Francesca Caccini (1587-1640). She was born into a famous musical family and received initial musical education from her father Giulio Caccini, who encouraged her to participate in the musical entertainments of court. She grew up at the Court of Tuscany in Florence where she eventually served as both a singer and composer under three Grand Dukes: Ferdinando I, Cosimo II, and Ferdinando II.⁵ At the Florentine court, she had the full benefit of Medici political support which granted her considerable opportunities for training and performance. Francesca's education was not limited to music: she spoke French, Spanish, and Latin fluently and, according to a contemporary musician of her time, Pietro della Valle, she was "greatly admired...both for her musical abilities in singing and in composing and for her poetry not only in Latin but also in Tuscan."⁶ Her intelligence, facility with language, and diverse creativity and ingenuity set the stage for her future international career. Her relationship with Grand Duchess Cristina di Lorena, who used Caccini's talents to build her political and cultural power, afforded her great popularity and success in her professional music career. Over a twenty year period, she composed and performed secular songs, madrigals, canzonettas, and operas for the Florentine court, where, by 1623, she was the highest paid of all court mu-

4 Barbara Garvey Jackson, "The Seventeenth Century," in *From Convent to Concert Hall: A Guide to Women Composers*, ed. Sylvia Glickman and Martha Furman Schleifer (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), 62-63.

5 James Briscoe, *Historical Anthology of Music by Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 22.

6 Doris Silbert, "Francesca Caccini, Called La Cecchina," *The Musical Quarterly* 32 (1946): 51.

sicians.⁷ Francesca Caccini's incredible accomplishments made her one of the most prosperous and popular musicians of her time. Thus, the increase in professional opportunities for women allowed them to compose and produce a wider variety of music than ever before.

A number of female musicians rose to prominence without the benefit of any religious or political position. These women came from musical families who taught and trained them. Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677) of Venice had the benefit of this kind of a home-taught literary and musical education. Both her mother and father were musicians, though she received most of her instruction from her father, Giulio Strozzi, who encouraged and aided her throughout her musical career. Venetian musical life was centered around academies, free-thinking, scholarly worlds into which Giulio Strozzi brought Barbara. The Accademia degli Unisoni was one such academy, created by Giulio for his daughter in 1637. His main goal was to institutionalize Barbara's performances and help her build her reputation in a nurturing environment full of intelligent and inspiring creative thinkers. According to Ellen Rosand, it was "designed, at least in part, to exhibit her talents to a wider audience."⁸ Giulio's academy focused mainly on music, and meetings were held in his house. Barbara's proximity to this scholarly, musical world complemented her training and influenced the music she wrote. Furthermore, she was the only woman to ever be a part of the Accademia degli Unisoni, and all her colleagues in the academy respected and treated her as an equal. In addition to home-schooling, she also received some private instruction from leading Venetian composer Francesco Cavalli.⁹ Her father arranged for her to study with Cavalli to ensure that she received proper instruction in composition. Barbara Strozzi's eventual success and lasting fame as a musician are incredible given her lack of formal position; she worked all for herself and achieved a place in the musical canon through

7 Jelic and Wood, *Women Composers*, 18.

8 Ellen Rosand, "Barbara Strozzi, Virtuosissima Cantatrice: The Composer's Voice," *Journal Of The American Musicological Society* 31 (1978): 244.

9 Rosand, "The Voice of Barbara Strozzi," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition (1150-1950)*, ed. Jane M. Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 174.

merit alone.

The personal background and training composers received, whether at home, court, or convent, influenced their music. Francesca Caccini received some home-taught musical training before and during her rise to fame that laid the foundation for her court training. She was involved in the creation of at least three spectacles produced for the Florentine court, one of which was *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina*, which was performed during the Carnival of 1625. According to Donald Grout, this spectacle incorporated “a compositional scheme devised by Caccini to equate gender with tonality: flat keys are associated with the female protagonist, Alcina, and her attendants; sharp keys with the male protagonist, Ruggiero, and the other supporting male roles; and the key of C, with the androgynous sorceress Melissa.”¹⁰ This compositional device reveals Caccini’s compositional ingenuity and attention to issues of gender in her society. Her position and service to the powerful Grand Duchess Cristina di Lorena allowed her to have some influence in making social commentary and using her music to support women, like her patron, in positions of power. Her portrayal of womanhood was empowering and intellectual. In addition to her compositional skill she was a virtuoso singer and instrumentalist. Skilled in languages both verbal and musical, she spoke many dialects and played many instruments, including the lute, harpsichord, and guitar.¹¹ Francesca was also a renowned lyricist, as seen primarily in the operas she wrote and composed. She was the first woman to compose an opera, as well as the first composer of an Italian opera performed outside Italy. Francesca Caccini’s skill and expressivity in her compositions and performances were the result of extensive training in many fields and disciplines, both with her family and at court. Her natural gifts blossomed with the training and knowledge she received through her court position.

Barbara Strozzi had a prolific career outside the court or convent,

10 Donald Grout, “Other Early Seventeenth-Century Italian Court Operas, including the First Comic Operas in Florence and Rome,” in *A Short History of Opera*, ed. Hermine Weigel Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 61.

11 Silbert, “Francesca Caccini, Called La Cecchina,” 52.

one of the first home-schooled women to achieve such fame. Although Barbara was the illegitimate daughter of Giulio Strozzi and his servant Isabella Griega, Giulio referred to her as his “chosen daughter,” and offered her all of his support and encouragement.¹² Her unique background as the illegitimate daughter of a middle class man did not deter her career, but, in fact, strengthened her and gave her a unique perspective as a musician. Free from religious or political ties, Barbara composed music for herself to sing, mostly soprano and continuo pieces. Her freedom allowed her to have full control over her creations and career, allowing her to achieve much more than any other composer of her time. Her father’s academy was a microcosm of the larger Incogniti academy, of which she was one of the few women to take part. Her time studying with the Incogniti academy, though in an unofficial capacity, and the way her peers regarded the “feminist issue” as a fascinating new moral topic, allowed her to grow as a musician. She also participated in the secret Unisoni meetings, which produced a good deal of high quality music, according to the Veglie. Although the composers remained anonymous, Strozzi must have composed at least part of the music.¹³ The inclusion of women in intellectual discussion and training caused them to flourish as composers and performers.

Women’s wider involvement in Italian music and culture during the Baroque period is reflected in their large and diverse creative outputs and long careers. Francesca Caccini achieved world renown as one of the first performers to undertake a concert tour; she was in popular demand due to her reputation as the greatest singer of her time. Her life as a concert tourist allowed her fame as a singer and composer of theatre and opera to spread throughout France and Italy. After she visited France, King Henry IV requested that she stay at the French court indefinitely, saying “she is the best singer ever heard in France.”¹⁴ Caccini’s status allowed her to have greater control in publications than most composers of her time, and she collabo-

12 Beth Glixon, “New Light On the Life and Career of Barbara Strozzi,” *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 311.

13 Rosand, “Barbara Strozzi, Virtuosissima Cantatrice,” 253.

14 Briscoe, *Historical Anthology*, 22.

rated with publishers and made the major decisions about how her works would be published. Consequently, Francesca published more cantatas than any other seventeenth-century composer, though, unfortunately, little of her music survived. Her first volume of songs, *Il primo libro delle musiche*, is the greatest surviving collection of her music. Figure 1 shows the opening passage of *S'io men vo*, one of the pieces from this volume. A canzonetta for two voices that contrasts soprano and bass, *S'io men vo* exemplifies Francesca's clever setting of words to music as well as her predilection for shifting modalities. Throughout *Il primo libro*, she varies the melody, bass, harmony, and rhythm to create constant contrasts that intrigue the listener. Her use of diminished seventh chords and a strong, active baseline distinguishes her music from her contemporary monodic composers. Her vocal lines are long, lyrical, and wide in range, making them "extremely expressive in regard to the emotional content of the poems."¹⁵ From this volume alone, though it contains just a fraction of her compositions, it is evident that Francesca Caccini made a significant, unique contribution to the body of sacred monody and song.

Barbara Strozzi's works reflect the seventeenth-century Venetian cultural preoccupation with emotional and intellectual persuasion through music and text. Her skill in lyric writing centered on her sensitivity to textual expression via word painting as well as her affective and structured narrative style. Her songs were full of laments that harnessed the power of tears to move her audience. She was "the most prolific composer—man or woman—of printed secular vocal music in Venice around the middle of the century."¹⁶ Her large musical output included many genres, especially vocal music, such as arias, recitatives, solo cantatas, madrigals, and duets. She produced seven different publications and one volume of sacred music between 1644 and 1664. Strozzi's status and popularity as a renowned composer and singer rivaled that of her contemporary male counterparts. One aforementioned male contemporary, Loredano, wrote, "Had she been born

15 Carolyn Raney, "Francesca Caccini, Musician to the Medici, and her *Primo Libro* (1618)," Ph.D. diss., New York University (1971), 356–357.

16 Glixon, "New Light On the Life," 311.

Figure 1

Soprano
S'io men vo mo - ri - rò, mo - ri - rò, ahi, cru -

Basso
S'io men vo mo - ri - rò, mo - ri - rò, ahi, cru -

B.C.
S'io men vo mo - ri - rò, mo - ri - rò, ahi, cru -

6
S.
del. ahi, cru - del di - par - ti - ta. ahi,

B.
del, ahi, cru - del di - par - ti - ta.

B.C.
del, ahi, cru - del di - par - ti - ta.

11
S.
cru - del di - par - ti - ta.

B.
ahi, cru - del di - par - ti - ta.

B.C.
ahi, cru - del di - par - ti - ta.

in another era she would certainly have usurped or enlarged the place of the muses.”¹⁷ Barbara Strozzi’s works and their relation to seventeenth-century Venetian musical culture exemplify the large and diverse creative outputs of women during the Baroque period. Women’s wider involvement in Italian music and culture resulted from the greater inclusion of women in musical society since the formation of virtuoso female vocal ensembles.

The lives and careers of Isabella Leonarda, Francesca Caccini, and Barbara Strozzi, three of the most significant female musicians of the Baroque period, are especially impressive considering that, in this period, “only a few women continued to write music after their years of youth.”¹⁸ Most of the other female musicians of their time composed and performed for only a relatively short period of time, with most of their works now lost. In contrast, the careers of these three women lasted throughout their entire lives

17 Rosand, “The Voice of Barbara Strozzi,” 173.

18 Jane M. Bowers, “The Emergence of Women Composers in Italy, 1566–1700,” in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition (1150-1950)*, ed. Jane M. Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 145–146.

and resulted in extensive bodies of work. Francesca Caccini's musical career was vaunted by the political support of the Medici, showing how greater support for women composers and performers in seventeenth-century Italy contributed to the flourishing of female musicians. Barbara Strozzi's life and art were intricately connected, insofar as her father supported her musical career by bringing her into the intellectual and musical world in which he also thrived, showing how women's greater inclusion and participation in Italian culture influenced their music and allowed them to build their own musical careers. These singers were renowned for their skill and expressivity, a result of their greater freedom and independence from a patriarchal society which set restrictions on women, both as people and as musicians, for "reasons that hinge not so much on the quality of [their] work as on cultural biases that have excluded women from consideration."¹⁹ The successful professional careers of these women during the Baroque period attests to the increasing access to improved musical training for women after 1580.

Italian fascination with the female voice, starting with the formation of the *concerto delle donne* in 1580, led to the increased inclusion of women in musical society. After the rise of female vocal ensembles, women began to receive improved instruction that allowed them to succeed in professional music careers. Women's training, independence, and wider involvement in politics and culture influenced their music. As evidenced by the successful and productive careers of composers and singers like Francesca Caccini and Barbara Strozzi, the Baroque period saw a dramatic improvement in training, independence, and respect for female musicians as a result of their greater inclusion and recognition in society.

Faith Poynor is a sophomore majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing and Music. She prepared this essay as part of Professor Kimberlyn Montford's survey of Western Music History (Music 3341, Fall 2015).

19 Susan McClary, "Of Patriarchs... And Matriarchs, Too," *The Musical Times* 135 (1994): 366.