

Music in Venetian art: seduction and spirituality

*A new British Academy publication studies 'The Music Room in Early Modern France and Italy'. In this edited version of one of the essays, **Professor Patricia Fortini Brown** discusses how the ambiguous nature of music in Venice was reflected in its art.*

BY THE EARLY 16th century, as Venetian patricians turned away from active engagement in trade, they began to develop a more refined lifestyle, in which music played an increasingly important role that was reflected in a number of works of art. A connoisseur, in all likelihood a Venetian nobleman, could invite friends into his study to admire the *Fête Champêtre* (Musée du Louvre, 1508–9), his new painting by Titian of two young men about to play beautiful music with two nude nymphs in a rustic concert in the countryside. Alternatively, Carpaccio could sketch an informal concert taking place in what appears to be the study of a prelate – an intimate music room equipped with a virtual chamber ensemble, including a music book, a bow and viola da gamba, and a tambourine in the background; a recorder and a cornett

on the ledge in the foreground; and musicians playing a rebec and a pair of lutes (Figure 1). The drawing, now in the British Museum, is a singular, but faint, echo of the undepicted studios of music later described by Francesco Sansovino, well stocked with ancient and modern instruments, as well as music books. The humanist Fra Sabba da Castiglione wrote that some gentlemen delighted in adorning their homes 'with musical instruments, such as organs, harpsichords, monochords, psalteries, harps, dulcimers, *baldose*, and other similar things; and others with lutes, violas, violins, lyres, flutes, cornets, trumpets, bagpipes, *dianoni*, and other similar things'. He noted that 'such instruments are most delightful to the ear and greatly refresh the mind, for, as Plato said, they record the harmony that is born from the



Figure 1. Vittore Carpaccio, *Musicians*, drawing, c.1510. British Museum, London. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

movements of the celestial spheres, also they are very pleasing to the eye’.

And yet, uncertainty about the subject of Carpaccio’s drawing highlights the labile moral status of music. An early identification of the work as a rendering of St Jerome observing a concert of angels was rejected when scholars observed that two of the musicians were female. Michelangelo Muraro then suggested that the sketch depicted the Temptation of St Jerome, looking back nostalgically on his carefree, irreverent youth. The British Museum sidesteps the moral issue, labelling the work as ‘A monk and three musicians in a room, with vessels on a shelf behind’.

Venetian commoner, Irene was neither a lady of the court nor the sheltered female offspring of a noble Venetian family. Her father died when she was only 3 years old, and she was raised under the supervision of her maternal grandfather, Zuan Paolo da Ponte. He encouraged her to develop her talents, with instruction in painting from no less than Titian and music lessons from two professional musicians, the lutenist Bartolomeo Gazza and Ippolito Tromboncino, a composer of frottole, who instructed her in singing and in playing the lute and other stringed instruments. Irene was said to sightread perfectly and sang so delightfully that Queen Bona of Poland, on a visit to the family castle in Spilimbergo, rewarded her with a costly



Music in family life

With growing prosperity music became a part of everyday family life. Domestic account books frequently record payments for music lessons, usually for boys, along with dancing, writing, and arithmetic, beginning at the age of 7. Titian documents the musical literacy of young boys in his *Portrait of Two Young Brothers of the Pesaro Family* (Private Collection, Scotland). There were also talented girls like Irene di Spilimbergo (1538–59). Born to a Friulian nobleman and Giulia da Ponte, the daughter of a wealthy

Figure 2. Ludovico Pozzoserrato, *Concert in a Villa* (detail), c.1580s. Galleria Giorgio Franchetti (Ca’ d’Oro), Venice. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

golden chain. Irene’s biographer, Dionisio Atanagi, wrote that her ‘fixed ambition was to assure that in the activities she undertook, there would be no woman superior to her, thus she heard praise of other women with virtuous envy’. And yet, significantly, he stressed further that Irene always behaved with the ‘decorum [appropriate] to a gentlewoman and maiden’. Also significantly, perhaps, in her posthumous portrait by a follower of Titian, she is not

shown holding a paintbrush or a musical instrument, but a laurel wreath, while a unicorn – symbol of her virginity – reposes in the landscape behind.

Over the course of the 16th century, from the concerts held in noble houses to more intimate family music-making such as the scene captured, exceptionally, by Leandro Bassano (*Concert*, Uffizi, 1592), the air of the Venetian palace was filled with the harmonious sounds of the human voice and – the inventories tell us – a wealth of instruments: harpsichord, clavier, spinet, organ, viola da gamba, lute, harp, cittern, cornett, theorbo, and flute, to name only a partial list. Bassano portrays four generations of his own family, featuring two young women, one playing the spinet and the other the lute, accompanying the others, as well as the family dog, in an evening chorale. As has often been noted, the painting is a quintessential statement of family harmony, solidarity, and continuity.

Danger to decorum

And yet, at the same time that music was cherished for its spiritual enlightenment and its central role in family congeniality, it was also suspect because of its seductive sensuality. A villa scene by the Flemish artist Lodowijk Toeput, also known as Lodovico Pozzoserrato, makes the point. While the setting is signorial, the activities in the foreground of both humans and the family pets border on the licentious, with decorum slipping away into abandon to the accompaniment of a chamber ensemble (Figure 2).

Indeed, music could be dangerous, as well as delightful. Pietro Bembo, in his discourses on platonic love, wrote that when two lutes are in tune with one another, when one is played the other responds in sympathetic vibration, that is, the same pitch without being touched. He makes the analogy with two lovers who though distant are joined in the sweetest and most perfect harmony. But there is an edge here. The operative word is lovers. When Bembo's 13-year-old natural daughter Elena begged for lessons on the monochord, he refused, saying that she was too young and that musical performance was the business of vain and flighty women. Bembo cautioned: 'It would give you little pleasure and fame if you were to play badly. But in order to play well you would have to spend ten to twelve years without thinking about anything else. If your friends want you to play for their pleasure, tell them that you do not want to become ridiculous, and had better remain satisfied with letters and needlework.' Aretino went further, declaring that sounds, songs, and letters were the keys that open the gates of a woman's chastity.

Stefano Guazzo in his *Civil Conversation*, a treatise on manners published in Brescia in 1574, propounded a class-based curriculum for girls. Singing and dancing were appropriate in the education of young girls who would be noble ladies at court, but were not to be encouraged in a private home: 'If fathers wish to marry their daughters to those who are not consumed by the smoke of music or the odour of poetry, they would be advised to keep them occupied with the woolwinder and household goods, rather than musical instruments.' And yet, what was so dangerous about the strumming of a lute?

Music and the courtesan

One problem was that music-making had also become associated with a sphere that existed alongside the wholesome domesticity that we see in Bassano's paintings: that is, with the extra-curricular world of the courtesan, as attested by a number of prints by Giacomo Franco (Figure 3) (and perhaps also by Pozzoserrato's painting). The courtesan was, strictly speaking, a whore, but one who enjoyed a special status because of exceptional beauty, charm, intellect, or talent. Indeed, courtesans were often indistinguishable in public places from noble matrons, and many were excellent musicians. This perhaps created a slippage that moralists found problematic.

Writing nearly a century later, the Englishman Thomas Coryat would praise the beauty of the courtesans of Venice and their 'infinite allurements', adding that 'such is the variety of the delicious objects they minister to their lovers, that they want for nothing tending to delight. For when you come into wone of their Palaces ... you seeme to enter into the Paradise of Venus. For their fairest roomes



Figure 3. Giacomo Franco, engraving from *Habiti delle donne venetiane* (*Costumes of Venetian Women*), c.1592. Photo: author.

are most glorious and glittering to behold.’ He continues: ‘I have here inserted a picture of one of their nobler Cortezans, according to her Venetian habites, with my owne neare unto her, made in that forme as we saluted each other.’

After describing her artfully painted face and elaborate hairdo, Coryat cautioned: ‘Though these things will at the first sight seeme unto thee most delectable allurements ... she will endeavour to enchant thee partly with her melodious notes that she warbles out upon her lute which shee fingers with as laudable a stroke as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of Musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice’ and advised that she was also ‘a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discourser, so that if she cannot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay thy constancy with her Rhetoricall tongue’.

Several courtesans would exhibit considerable musical and literary talents. Paola Provesin, one of the last of the great Renaissance courtesans, lived in an apartment on Piazza San Marco rented from the Procurators by the nobleman Tommaso Contarini. He paid not only for her rent and living expenses, but also for her instruction by masters of music, painting, and poetry. The inventory

made at the time of her death in 1638 contained thirty paintings, one listed as ‘portraits in a concert of music’ – one thinks of the many paintings of musical muses by Tintoretto. Indeed, Paola’s rooms were filled with books of music and a veritable orchestra of musical instruments: a spinet and a harpsichord, both painted with fillets of gold, six theorbos described as old, and another of ivory, as well as an ivory lute, and another theorbo and another lute, each with its case, and a large harp. In her will, Paola had ordered all of her worldly possessions to be sold, with the proceeds given to charity. Her music may have been profane, but her life is a testament to the capacity of music not only to enchant and to seduce, but also to enlighten and to elevate the soul.

Interpretation

The multivalent status of music – a symbol of harmony both divine and sexual – has made the interpretation of such paintings as Titian’s several versions of *Venus and a musician* a cottage industry for art historians. Are these works, as Erwin Panofsky saw it, allegories about the superiority of vision over hearing and the Neoplatonic notion of ascent, wherein the contemplation of earthly beauty leads to the contemplation of the divine? Or are they simply celebrations of sensual love, as others would have it, with the courtier’s musical performance a prelude to the act of love by wooing the woman through the power of music? Present interpretations tend to reject the either-or approach and celebrate the complexity of Titian’s vision, which embraces values both high and low, both spiritual and profane.

What then are we to make of Bartolomeo Veneto’s *Woman Playing a Lute*, of a century earlier (Figure 4)? Wildly successful, the panel survives in no fewer than 21 versions. The lutenist’s coy demeanour and direct gaze are suggestive. Her music has been variously identified as a secular *canzonetta* and as a spiritual *laude*. But who is the lady? Her features and corkscrew ringlets are strikingly similar to those in a painting by the same artist of a young woman whose exposed breast and myrtle crown earned her labels ranging from a courtesan, to an allegory of Flora, the goddess of spring, to a portrait of Lucrezia Borgia, to a bride, to an idealised woman with a sensual attitude (*Flora*, Frankfurt, Städelsches Institut). The actual identity of the lute player is equally opaque. Despite her resemblance to the lady known as ‘Flora’, she has been identified



Figure 4. Bartolomeo Veneto, *Woman Playing a Lute*, 1520. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 5. Paolo Veronese, *Allegory of Music*, 1556. Biblioteca Marciana, Venice. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

by some as Cecilia Gallerani, mistress of Lodovico il Moro, by others as a woman in the guise of St Cecilia, and yet by others as simply a 'bella donna'. And yet, we cannot be certain in either case. These are ladies of ambiguous status, akin to the ambiguous status of music.

The issue may be summed up by Veronese's *Allegory of Music*, one of 21 roundels painted for the ceiling of the new Biblioteca Marciana (Figure 5). Vasari described it as

a representation of three young women, the most beautiful playing a large viol da gamba and regarding the keyboard, listening with her ear down. One of the others is playing the lute, while the third is singing from a book. Near them is a

wingless cupid playing a harpsichord, to show that music gives birth to love, or rather that love is always associated with music, and that is why cupid is wingless. He there introduces Pan, the god of shepherds ... with his pipes, an instrument, as it were, dedicated to him by the famous pastoral poets.

Adjudged the best roundel of the ceiling in a competition judged by Titian and the architect Jacopo Sansovino, the painting brought Veronese his own prestigious gold chain as a reward. A subtle balance of the sensual and the spiritual, it may be seen as a consummate symbol of harmony and concord. And as in the paintings by Titian and many others,



Professor Patricia Fortini Brown was awarded the Serena Medal for Italian Studies in 2011. She is pictured here at the awards ceremony in October 2011, with Professor Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy.

musical performance is not confined to a closed interior space, but extends into a garden beyond. In Venetian art as in Venetian life, music bridged the unbridgeable: between humankind and nature, between heaven and earth, between the sacred and the profane.

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