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Music, gender and the erotic in Italian visual culture of the 16th century: introduction

In 16th-century Italy, music occupied an ambivalent position in relation to ideals of feminine conduct. On the one hand, it was associated with rational judgement through its long-term theorization within the mathematical quadrivium, founded in Pythagoras and his discovery of harmonic ratios. Both *Musica*, the personification of the liberal art of music, and the decorous Muses, ancient goddesses of the arts, stood as feminine guarantors of the virtuous nature of this studious pursuit. On the other hand, music was also widely associated with sensation and seduction, bypassing reason thanks to its much-vaunted power to move the passions. This feature in itself had a dual aspect, because music's moving quality might be harnessed to a pious sensibility within devotional practice—something considered particularly suited to women—or it might equally motivate licentious thoughts among those enjoying love-songs and other characteristically youthful and amorous forms of musical socialization. As a result, numerous conduct books of the period are guarded in their acceptance of women's musicianship and are sometimes outright hostile to it. Contemporary reactions to different modes of women's musical participation—singing, playing, dancing, listening—are modulated according to the different bodily operations required for their execution and their potential sexualization.

Numerous studies have addressed these contradictory aspects of gendered musical culture, describing several distinct strands. Some have explored the social affordances and restrictions through which normative culture sought to shape women's musicianship, with considerable help from the growing conduct literature of the 16th century.[1] Some have documented examples of women who came to public note as musicians in spite of the ambivalence of their contemporaries, with a particular focus on rich patrons, professional musicians and nuns.[2] Some have critiqued the representations of gender found in 'the music itself' and the poetic texts chosen for musical setting.[3]

It is striking that visual sources have played only a minor role in this literature.[4] From the 16th century in Italy, we have an enormous portfolio of paintings and other visual material

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[1] For example, C. Deutsch, 'Musique, *institutio* féminine et normes de genre dans l'Italie de le première modernité', in *Pratiques musicales féminines: discours, normes, représentations*, ed. C. Deutsch and C. Giron-Panel (Lyon, 2016), pp.13–34; digital version available in Archive ouvert en Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société, https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01121953/document; S. Lorenzetti, 'Public behaviour, music and the construction of feminine identity in the Italian Renaissance', *Recercare*, xxiii/1–2 (2011), pp.7–34.

[2] For example, W. Prizer, 'Una "virtù molto conveniente a madonne": Isabella d'Este as a musician', *Journal of Musicology*, xvii/1 (1999), pp.10–49; M. Feldman, 'The courtesan's voice: Petrarchan lovers, pop philosophy and oral traditions', in *The courtesan's arts: cross-cultural perspectives*, ed. M. Feldman and B. Gordon (New York, 2006), pp.105–23; L. Stras, *Women and music in 16th-century Ferrara* (Cambridge, 2018).

[3] This is the focus of Bonnie Blackburn and Laurie Stras's edited volume *Eroticism in early modern music* (Farnham, 2015), among many other examples.

[4] For instance, visual materials are not considered at all in *Eroticism in early modern music*, ed. Blackburn and Stras. Important exceptions include D. E. Davies, 'On music fit for a courtesan: representations of the courtesan and her music in sixteenth-century Italy', in *The courtesan's arts*, ed. Feldman and Gordon, pp.144–58; F. Dennis, 'Unlocking the gates of chastity: music and the erotic in the domestic sphere in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century

placing musical instruments and activities alongside women, sometimes in ways that seem frankly erotic. These images span a huge range of subject-matter—from true portraits and portrait-like *belle*, to domestic scenes, to myths and allegories, to saints' ecstasies—and a great diversity of media—from book illustration and printed images, to the decorative arts, and to easel paintings and altarpieces.

Where scholars have considered this phenomenon, they have generally adopted a broad interpretation of sexual allure for visual representations of women's musicianship, often referring to the trope of the musical courtesan to root such a reading in a specific social context.[5] Arguably, the prevalence of what has become a routine interpretative strategy has obscured as much as it has illuminated. The seven essays presented in this themed cluster set out to broaden and refine what was in fact a complex visual discourse addressing music, gender and the erotic, following two specific strands. First, problematizing the stock tropes of the musical courtesan and the concert scene, and exploring the possibility of a role for music as a playful refrain shifting between *matrona* and *meretrix*, virtuous and illicit, and harmony and dissonance. Second, demonstrating that musical eroticism was amenable to multiple shades of meaning, ranging from the secular to the sacred.

The recurring female musician—be it the female lutenists examined in Laura Ventura Nieto's essay, the young women in Bernardino Licinio's concert paintings from Chriscinda Henry's article, or the musical women characters in Sigismondo Fanti's *Triompho di Fortuna* explored in Annabelle Page's study—playfully presents and obscures her sensualities and identities in layers of meaning and tension. While Fanti's fortune-telling game book reveals some of the advisory and polemical commentary surrounding women, the various musical scenes highlight the blurred lines between virtue and vice. Ventura Nieto addresses some of the implicit and explicit elements of sensuality and explores the various functions and receptions of pictures of female lutenists from the early to the mid-16th century. In doing so, Ventura Nieto considers how the sight of music-making could bring contemporaneous viewers closer to the perfect union of body and soul. Reverberations and vibrations between the musical figure and the musical instrument are also explored in Sigrid Harris's essay on Guido Reni's *St Cecilia playing the violin*, while Henry identifies the sonic dissonance between the *frottola* or *strambotto* played by the young women, and the repetitive clanging of coins shaken by the men, in Licinio's concert paintings.

Italy', in *Erotic cultures of Renaissance Italy*, ed. S. F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham, 2010), pp.223–45; and *Sexualities, textualities, art and music in early modern Italy. Playing with boundaries*, ed. M. L. Marshall, L. L. Carroll and K. A. McIver (Farnham, 2014).

[5] Examples, all focused on Venice, include K. McIver, 'Pastoral pleasures, sensual sounds: paintings of love, music and morality in sixteenth-century Italy', in *Music, sensation and sensuality*, ed. L. P. Austern (New York, 2002), pp.285–98; Davies, 'On music fit for a courtesan'; J. Anderson, '*Vedere la musica*: painting and music in Renaissance Venice', in *Architettura e musica nella Venezia del Rinascimento*, ed. D. Howard and L. Moretti (Milan, 2006), pp.21–40; P. Fortini Brown, 'Seduction and spirituality: the ambiguous roles of music in Venetian art', in *The music room in early modern France and Italy: sound, space and object*, ed. D. Howard and L. Moretti (Oxford, 2012), pp.19–36.

In this mutable domain, the available interpretative cues and tools often allow the meaning of an image to resolve in several possible directions with strongly contrasting ethical, philosophical and theological implications. In response, several of the essays foreground the gaze as a performative agent in the making of the picture. In Barbara Swanson's analysis of Tintoretto's *Women making music*, Malachai Bandy's analysis of Titian's various versions of *Venus with a musician*, and Harris's exploration of Reni's *St Cecilia*, gazing at the picture is a rich and textured process, eyes ranging widely across the canvas, zooming in to examine details, engaging the senses of hearing and touch as well as sight. Gazing is itself a sensuous experience, a kind of musical performance, whether tending towards luxury or towards spirituality. As Page's analysis clearly demonstrates, in Fanti's *Triompho* the musical images are entirely embedded in an elaborate game, forming a part of its meaning-making apparatus, harnessing the encounter with the musical image to a systematic process that is at the same time purposeful and playful, reflective and performative.

Ventura Nieto follows a growing vein of scholarship in suggesting that the playful mutability of her female lutenists was purposefully designed to prompt discussion and debate among viewers, thereby aligning these depictions with what Henry has recently termed 'playful pictures'.[6] The connections that Ventura Nieto explores with the growing culture of parlour games in 16th-century Italy roots many of the pictures discussed here in the home and domestic sociability, a setting that is brought to life in Bláithín Hurley's vivid analysis of domestic inventories documenting women's ownership of musical instruments in 16th-century Venice. As we are reminded by Page's discussion of the printed *Triompho*, and the books and instruments represented in the paintings studied by Bandy, Harris, Swanson and Ventura Nieto, the visual culture of the home was not limited to paintings hanging on the walls, but extended to printed images and books, musical instruments, and many other items of furniture and homeware. In this richly multi-sensory setting, women's musical identities were shaped and encountered in ways that do not obey modern disciplinary boundaries, as people and their possessions collaborated to claim and contest spaces of musical agency amid conflicting views on music's probity. As Page observes, Fanti's *Triompho* can be seen as a conduct book in disguise, combining visual, textual and musical prompts to encourage readers to reflect on their gendered actions and attitudes.

Taken together, the essays in this themed cluster set out to demonstrate that there is more to say about eroticism in 16th-century representations of women making music. By herself the 'musical courtesan' cannot account for all of the surviving images. Images of the musically erotic are not generic, but carefully crafted, responding to different, though overlapping, contexts and discourses. They extend across media, and are found embedded in different social settings. Their eroticism, their gendering and also their musicality lie not only in their subject-matter—what they are pictures of—but also in the ways in which they were owned, displayed, viewed and discussed.

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[6] C. Henry, *Playful pictures: art, leisure and entertainment in the Venetian Renaissance home* (University Park, PA, 2021).

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