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Chapter 7

Musical Portraits of Female Musicians at the Northern Italian Courts in the 1570s*

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The musical encomium, as a form of either flattery or celebration, was extraordinarily popular in Italy during the second half of the sixteenth century. Works of art, whether poetic, visual or musical, were common currency in the economy of patronage that supported most artisans; the musical encomium served dually to commemorate its subject in both verse and song. Encomia typically honored or advertised an individual's abilities; through setting a written encomium to music, the composer could introduce an extra layer of interpretation or illustration to the verbal portrait. Furthermore, in addition to its use as part of a presentational gift, usually a published volume of madrigals, the musical encomium had a certain recreational value, as it could be performed for, or by, its subject.

During this half-century, musical encomia for women increasingly found their way into print. Parallel fashions in literature and music saw the publication of sets of verse, such as *La primavera*, by Giulio Ariosto, the *Cento donne cantate*, by the Mantuan poet Muzio Manfredi, and sizeable collections of musical *villanelle* such as Gasparo Fiorino's *La nobiltà di Roma*, in which Roman gentlewomen are eulogized (Ariosto, 1555; Manfredi, 1580; Fiorino, 1571). Many of these women are praised for their beauty, some also for their accomplishments. Accuracy and veracity may not have been important concerns for the encomiast, so the evidence of these works may be questionable when used to reconstruct the lives and the attributes of their subjects. However, the encomia take on an enhanced significance when viewed together with other historical evidence that can confirm their claims.

Among the women most celebrated in these mid- to late-century musical encomia are those known to have been singers and musicians at the courts of the Farnese at Parma and the d'Este at Ferrara. The texts of these encomia are sometimes explicit in their references to the women's musical activities,

sometimes not. However, examining the women's biographies, the encomia themselves and the circumstances of their publication can help illuminate the social and musical *milieu* in which the women participated. It has long since been recognised that the musical establishment of the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este, played a seminal role in the acceptance of women as professional musicians, yet it appears that for at least a decade before the introduction of vocational female singers at Ferrara in the 1580s, a noblewoman's musical prowess played a major role in her ability to retain a central position at the court (Solerti, 1891; Newcomb, 1981; Durante and Martellotti, 1989). But the differences between the encomia for artisans and nobility seem to reflect a subtle uneasiness with female musical virtuosity for its own sake, a tension that is still apparent long after that virtuosity came to be publicly admired.

The Singers

The emergence of virtuoso female singers at the northern Italian courts roughly coincided with – or, more accurately, shortly followed – another musical 'fashion', most avidly pursued at the courts of Parma and Mantua. After the introduction of castrati into Italy in the mid-1550s, both Ottavio Farnese and Guglielmo Gonzaga became actively involved in the acquisition of accomplished castrati singers for their own ducal chapels – an obsession that for Guglielmo lasted the rest of his life. Guglielmo's searches encompassed most of western Europe; Ottavio recruited mainly from the Low Countries and Rome (Sherr, 1980; Stras, 2000). In Ferrara, Alfonso d'Este already had in his employ Hernando and Domenico Bustamente, Spanish castrati brothers who were considered to be the finest singers in Europe (Newcomb, 1981). This taste for high voices is reflected particularly in the madrigal books dedicated to Ottavio Farnese during this period, which contain pieces in which three or four sopranos are combined with only one or two lower voices. How and when high male voices began to be supplanted, or at least rivalled, by female voices is unclear, but certainly by the beginning of the 1570s, encomia began to appear celebrating singing women, seldom identifying them by name, more often by cryptic clues embedded in their texts.

At the beginning of the 1570s, three singers in particular were active in the region of the Po valley courts: Lucrezia Bendidio in Ferrara, Tarquinia Molza in Parma and Laura Peverara in Mantua. Bendidio was a noblewoman; Molza and Peverara came from artisan families. Molza might have been considered by some a gentlewoman, as her father was a Roman *cavaliere*, but Peverara

was the daughter of a merchant. In 1576, a fourth woman, Leonora Sanvitale, began to figure importantly in reports of performances by a group of female singers at Ferrara. Sanvitale was the daughter of a Placentine nobleman, so could also have been involved in music-making at the Farnese court. These ladies, although not involved in public performances per se, in that their singing took place within the confines of courtly life, were singled out for their vocal and musical talents, and eventually became the subjects of musical encomia. Striking similarities may be seen in the histories of the nobles and the artisans; there are, nevertheless, significant differences between the careers of each of these women that are reflected in the way their gifts were immortalized in verse and music, and in the way those artefacts were made available in the public domain.

One of the most immediate features common to the stories of most of these musical women is the way in which they were retained at the Ferrarese court. Their initial appointments as attendants to one of the royal ladies – the Princesses Leonora and Lucrezia, or the Duchess Margherita – were eventually followed by marriage to a d'Este vassal, usually much older than they. For the ladies of the 1580s – Peverara, Livia d'Arco and Anna Guarini – recognition of musical ability went hand-in-hand with social advancement through wedlock, but at the price of accepting a union that was usually childless, and may even have been expected to stay so. Peverara was thirty-three years old when she married, three years after joining the court in 1580. D'Arco and Guarini were in their mid-twenties; the banns for their marriages were published together in 1584, some three to four years after their initial employment. This suggests that their marriages had been arranged at the same time; furthermore, it seems that their marriages were delayed as long as possible, or at least until their long-term security became an unavoidable consideration (Durante and Martellotti, 1989). Thus unencumbered by dangerous pregnancies or by much need to attend to their husbands, the singers could concentrate on their musical duties. For Anna Guarini, the fact that her personal safety was directly connected to her musical function at Alfonso's court is all too tragically clear. She was married in 1585 at the age of twenty-two to Conte Hercole Trotti, a widower who already had two sons (Solerti, 1891).¹ Trotti, suspecting her infidelity, drove her alleged lover from Ferrara in 1596, but was forbidden by the Duke to harm Anna herself. The Duke's death in 1597 all but sealed Anna's fate; she was murdered at her husband's instigation on 3 May 1598 (Durante and Martellotti, 1989).

Although the status of the foremost singing women of the 1570s, Lucrezia Bendidio and Leonora Sanvitale, was secure in terms of the nobility of their

birth, their tenure at the d'Este court could also only be assured through marriage to a Ferrarese courtier. Born in 1546, Lucrezia Bendidio was the daughter of a Ferrarese noble. She began court life as a lady-in-waiting to Alfonso's first wife, Leonora de' Medici, and had entered the service of Alfonso's sister, the Princess Leonora d'Este, by 1561 (Bertoni, 1922; Ceserani, 1966, Vendittis, 1965). Bendidio had many admirers throughout her life, including the poets Torquato Tasso and Giovanni Battista Pigna. In 1562 she was married to Conte Paolo Macchiavelli, older than she and reputedly a dissipated and excessive libertine. The marriage was unhappy and without issue, although Bendidio adopted a two-year-old boy, Cesare Ligurio, in 1583 (Solerti, 1891).² Bendidio's importance at court initially was enhanced and protected by her long-standing affair with the Duke's own brother, Cardinal Luigi d'Este. However, as the affair began to wane so did her popularity, and by the time of the death of her mistress in 1581, she had lost her position as a central figure of the court – the reasons behind the shift will be examined later. She ended her days in obscurity; the last recorded mention of her comes in 1584, and the date of her death is unknown.

Leonora Sanvitale, daughter of the Placentine noble, Giberto, Conte di Sala, was born in 1561. She was brought to Ferrara through her marriage to Giulio Thiene, Conte di Scandiano, one of the most eminent of Alfonso d'Este's courtiers. The couple were married in January 1576, with the festivities timed to coincide with the Ferrarese *carnevale*. Almost immediately as she arrived in Ferrara, Sanvitale joined the court entertainments as a singer and dancer, and was regularly reported performing with the Bendidio sisters and other ladies of the court. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century local histories portray her marriage as a love match, coincidentally advantageous to both families and a cement to political amity between the states of Parma and Ferrara (Solerti, 1891; Belli, 1939).

This romantic notion, however, may be at least partially dispelled by evidence contained in various contemporary documents. It appears that both Sanvitale and Thiene were extracted from previously arranged marriage contracts in order that they might be wed. Thiene was negotiating to marry one of the daughters of Francesco d'Este, cousins to Alfonso d'Este; Leonora had secretly promised herself to Don Cesare d'Avalos, Marchese di Padula, a member of the powerful Neapolitan military family, erstwhile Governors of Spanish-held Milan. Sanvitale and Thiene were joined together not by their own will, but through the auspices of Alfonso d'Este himself and at least three members of the Farnese family, who petitioned the Pope on at least two separate occasions to allow the couple to marry.³

The match appears to have been under consideration as early as September 1574, but although Giberto Sanvitale was aware of the early discussions, neither he nor Thiene's mother seem to have been fully apprised of each other's circumstances until the middle of May the following year. Giberto, it seems, was distanced from the negotiations, allowing a series of agents – first Alfonso Gonzaga, Conte di Novellara, then Ottavio Farnese, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese and finally Emilio Pozzi, the Savoyard ambassador to the court of Ferrara – to conduct matters with Thiene, Alfonso d'Este and the Papal court. Before petitioning the Pope himself, Thiene was given the reassurance of Prince Alessandro Farnese (d'Avalos' military commander) that nothing had occurred, or would occur, between the young lovers that might have jeopardised his matrimonial claim. Although permission was initially refused, the Pope finally reversed his decision in September 1575, issuing a *facoltà di concessa* allowing the marriage to go ahead.

One must ask why Alfonso d'Este deprived his cousin of a potential husband, and the Farnese family risked serious political strife with their Spanish allies (and Milanese neighbours) so that the marriage could take place. It seems remarkable that so many powerful men should have had to exercise so much in order to guarantee Leonora Sanvitale's future at Ferrara. Given her instant assimilation into Alfonso's private concerts, it is not difficult to imagine that Alfonso had wielded some influence of his own over Giberto Sanvitale, persuading him of the wisdom of giving Leonora to Thiene, so bringing her talent permanently to his court. Once her alliance with d'Avalos was discovered, negotiations became strained, but nonetheless great efforts were made to resolve the matter in Thiene and Ferrara's favour. Sanvitale appears to have been the only one of Alfonso's regular singers to take a husband of her own age, but perhaps allowing her to do so was the way in which she was persuaded to relinquish her promise to d'Avalos. If so, it was a high-risk strategy that ultimately failed. Her first pregnancy removed her from the 1577 *carnevale*, to the general dismay of the court; she died in March 1582, six weeks after giving birth to her second child.

Sanvitale must have had the opportunity to develop her singing ability before she arrived in Ferrara, and it is most likely that she did this in the artistic society that flourished at the Farnese court and in her father's household; the Sanvitale were noted patrons of artists and musicians, including Il Parmigianino.⁴ The comedies performed by the nobility at the Ferrarese court were also popular with the Placentine aristocracy. In 1571, several members of Sanvitale's family were welcomed at the *castello* of the Rossi at San Secondo, and one of the pastimes in which they indulged was a 'comediatte per far rider

le banche', perhaps performed in a bower on the banks of the Taro river.⁵ One can imagine the opening verses of Petronio Barbatì's *canzone* 'Porgetemi la lira' accompanying precisely such a performance:

Porgetemi la lira
vagli fanciulli, et su per queste sponde
ove soave spira
Zephìro, et move fior, herbe et fronde
et tremolar fa l'onde
del Tarro inargentate ...⁶

Hand me the lyre, beautiful youths, and here on these banks where Zephyr breathes sweetly, and moves flowers, grasses and leaves, and makes the waves of the silvery Taro tremble ...

This environment may also have nurtured the talents of Tarquinia Molza; an anonymous sonnet preserved in manuscript eulogizes two singers 'Tarquinia and Leonora' again performing together on the banks of the Taro:

Alza, rapido Tar, l'umida fronte,
e grazie al cielo e alla tua gran ventura
rendi immortale, e cristallina e pura
l'onda per l'alveo d'or versa dal fonte.
Mira di doppio sol doppio orizzonte
nell'una e l'altra angelica figura,
la cui luce serena ogni ora fura
all'alto carro onde cadeò Fetonte.
D'odoriferi fiori ambe le sponde
di mille bei color dipingi e mostra
quanto sparga d'april Favonio e Flora,
e dolcemente, dov'Eco risponde
ninfe e pastori per l'ombrosa chiostra,
s'odan cantar TARQUINIA e LEONORA.⁷

Raise, rapid Taro, your watery brow, and by the grace of Heaven and of your great fortune make immortal, and crystalline and pure the wave spilt by the fountain into the riverbed of gold. Look at the double sun, the double horizon of the one and the other angelic figure whose serene light every hour steals from the high carriage from which Pheobus fell. Along the banks, reveal and paint with sweet-smelling flowers of a thousand beautiful colors, and show how much springtime [April] is scattered by Favonio and Flora, and sweetly, where Echo answers the nymphs and shepherds by the shady bower, hear Tarquinia and Leonora sing.

Of all the female singers of the mid- to late century, Molza's career is certainly the best documented, both during her lifetime and through the agency of modern scholarship. The most detailed accounts exist for the years she spent in Ferrara, between 1583 and 1589, although her activities as a singer are recorded as early as 1568 (Stras, 1999). Much of what is known of Molza's early life is reported in a manuscript treatise, *L'amorosa filosofia*, written by her friend and teacher, the Ferrarese philosopher and scholar Francesco Patrizi.⁸ Whilst Molza's origins in Modena and connections with Ferrara are relatively clear, her associations with the Farnese establishments in Parma and Rome are more obscure.

Although Modena was within Ferrarese jurisdiction, Molza's father, Camillo Molza, was a sworn vassal of the Farnese court and a regular visitor to Parma. Molza's grandfather, the poet Francesco Maria Molza, had relied on Cardinal Alessandro Farnese as his most stalwart patron. In 1558, after the sudden death of her husband, Molza's mother found herself, if not destitute, in nonetheless severe circumstances with three of her nine children left to support – Tarquinia, who at sixteen had still not yet been required by her father to take a husband, and two young sons.⁹ She wrote to the Cardinal, pleading with him to take her three 'poveri fanciulli' into his protection, a request which he granted within a matter of weeks.¹⁰ For two years, Molza was the Cardinal's ward, until her marriage in 1560 to Paolo Porrino. Moreover, Molza's links with the Cardinal were not severed by her marriage; in 1577, Patrizi sent her verse to the Cardinal for his appreciation and patronage.¹¹ Perhaps the Cardinal functioned more as patron than a guardian and protector, introducing her to Farnese circles and establishing her reputation as a poet in Parma and in Rome.

The information Patrizi gives regarding Molza's musical development as an adult would fit neatly into a hypothesis that she became musically active in Parma in the mid-1560s. In the first dialogue of *L'amorosa filosofia*, Patrizi's interlocutor, Fabrizio Dentice, names her teachers as 'Cesarino, Modonino, Calderino, Alfonso della Vivuola, Giovannino Fiammingo'. Three of these correspond to names that appear regularly in the Farnese *ruoli* and *mastri* throughout the 1560s and early 1570s: Paolo Calderoni, Bartolomeo da Modeno, and Giovannino Fiammingo, who could be either the Giovannino Fiammingo who appears, *per se*, in the *mastri*, or Giovanni d'Arras.¹² Dentice himself appears in the *mastri* from the beginning of the 1570s.

The fourth name, 'Alfonso della Vivuola' presumably refers to Alfonso dalla Viola. He was a permanent employee at Ferrara during the years he might have taught Molza, and she does not appear to have frequented Ferrara

sufficiently for her to have been brought to a level of proficiency by someone with extensive duties at court (Newcomb, 1981). But it is possible that Patrizi named the wrong musician 'of the viol'; his account is not altogether accurate in some other details. If Molza was still circulating in Parma society after her marriage, she would have been in contact with the outstanding viol *virtuoso*, Orazio Bassano da Cento detto della Viola, whose connections with the Farnese date from 1570 (Fabris, 1992). Like Molza herself, he eventually was drawn to the Ferrara court in the late 1580s, but only on a temporary basis; his employer, Ranuccio Farnese, was only willing to 'loan' him to the d'Este for short periods (Newcomb, 1981). Molza's other contemporary biographer, Pietro Ribera, credits Bassano with having taught her, but it is unlikely that he would have done so in Ferrara; his first visit there was not until 1587, long after she had achieved renown as a virtuoso herself (Ribera, 1606).

Whatever her early circumstances, by the end of the 1570s Molza was an established member of Parma's artistic elite. By 1581, she had gained membership of the city's most prestigious *accademia*, the Innominati, an unusual honour for a woman.¹³ Alfonso d'Este brought Molza permanently to his court in 1583, although she had been a regular visitor to the court since the beginning of the 1570s. He had long since admired her musical talents, but only after the death of Porrino in 1579 and the conclusion of legal matters arising from her bereavement, would she consent to leaving Modena for Ferrara to take up an appointment as lady-in-waiting to the Duchess Margherita (Riley, 1980). She was the only one of Alfonso's female musicians not to be retained at the court by marriage, for she adamantly refused to take another husband.

Molza's fame as a singer, poet and musician was already well established by the mid-1570s; no less celebrated was the Mantuan singer and musician, Laura Peverara. Born in 1550, the daughter of a Mantuan merchant, the testament to Peverara's reputation is the fact that she was the focus of three anthologies of madrigals, assumed to have been compiled to celebrate three significant events in her life: her departure from Mantua in early 1580; her arrival and success at the Ferrarese court; and her subsequent marriage to Conte Annibale Turco in 1583 (Newcomb, 1975) (Durante and Martellotti, 2000). The first of these exists as a manuscript, although the two Ferrarese collections, *Il lauro secco* and *Il lauro verde*, are elaborately decorated prints. Peverara's marriage was almost certainly not for the purposes of procreation, for she was nearly in her thirties when she arrived in Ferrara. It does appear, however, that she was allowed some say in the choice of her husband. This may have been part of the negotiations between herself, Guglielmo Gonzaga and Alfonso d'Este that brought her to Ferrara.

Peverara's activities in the 1570s are not well documented, although she must have achieved no small measure of local fame in order that Alfonso be so anxious to procure her for his musical entourage. Beyond Mantua, she may have visited Verona, perhaps as a guest of the Accademia Filarmonica, perhaps as part of a larger Gonzagan entourage. Settings of texts whose central *conchetto* is either the laurel tree (*lauro*) or a soft breeze (*l'aura*) appear in madrigal books written and published in Verona throughout the 1570s. Peverara's official 'transfer' from Mantua to Ferrara may have taken the form of a ceremonial journey through the lower Veneto – or at the very least it appears that she was present in Verona just prior to taking up her position at the d'Este court, and that her Ferrarese appointment had been public knowledge for some time before she actually left Mantua.

Four sonnets in a manuscript volume of verse by the *padre* of the Filarmonica during the 1570s and 1580s, Alberto Laverozuola, are dedicated to Peverara: 'Se da longe scaldar tanto le menti'; 'Pass'l pensier, che non menti, ne campi'; 'Udisti pur del Re de' fiumi altero', and 'Fabricai, forse, il foco horrendo, e fiero'.¹⁴ The *argomenti* of three of these – 'Alla S.a Laura Peverari, gentildonna, et molte lettere ed molta musica mirabilissima mentre che da Mantova, se ne passò al servizio dell' Alt.mo de Ferrara'; 'Dissuade l'istessa a non partirsi dal Mincio dandole conto del costume del Po'; 'Per l'istessa, iscusandosi il Po di quanto gli vien offesa, persuade [sic] l'istessa à vedersi alle sue rive' – and that of the sonnet which immediately precedes them, dedicated to Vincenzo Gonzaga 'essendo col Ser. Sig. Duca suo Padre in Verona', suggest that Peverara was in Verona together with the Gonzaga princes on her way to Ferrara. The first two sonnets are also found as musical settings, respectively by Filippo di Monte and Orazio Vecchi, in the elaborate manuscript anthology apparently commissioned and prepared by the Accademia Filarmonica in Peverara's honour (Kenton, 1966; Newcomb, 1975).

The Poetry

The beauty of the female voice engaged in song was a familiar topos for the Renaissance poet, with models provided in the Classics and the more recent *rime volgari* of Dante and Petrarch. Women whose voices endow them with almost supernatural powers appear in countless printed verses and madrigal texts, but it is sometimes impossible to establish if these women were real or imaginary:

N'ardir egl'ha senza il bel vostro viso;
 com'all contrario ond'ogni cor si spetra,
 voi d'Aragne seconda vincitrice
 voi divina e d'apollo immitatrice
 col cembalo col plectro e con la cetra
 formate in terra un novo Paradiso.¹⁵

None may burn with desire without your beautiful face; on the contrary thus every heart will melt from stone, you the second [female] victor of Arachne, you who are divine and a [female] imitator of Apollo, with harpsichord, with plectrum and with cythara, you make a new paradise on Earth.

Self-accompanied song, and musical performances of Petrarchan sonnets or stanzas from epic poems, were among the few acceptable outlets for polite female vocality in the Renaissance. A gentle-born girl, destined for marriage within the nobility and prepared for life at court, might have been expected to attain a modicum of musical skill, including the ability to improvise a recitation within set melodic formulae to simple accompaniments on the lute or the harpsichord (Brown, 1986; Newcomb, 1986). Such performances would have occurred within a closely regulated circle of family and guests as a courtly pastime, not open to general display.

In the mid-cinquecento, the only women commonly engaged in the public demonstration of musical skill were courtesans and actresses, whose professional activities placed them beyond social acceptability (Newcomb, 1986). A noblewoman might well have possessed a beautiful voice and have developed a formidable technical command of her gift, yet directly or publicly to praise her for her abilities may have inadvertently associated her with social outcasts and immoral behaviour. This could at least partially account for the anonymous nature of many mid-century musical encomia, in which the performer is either unnamed, addressed as a mythical creature ('Sirena' or 'Angioletta') or disguised with a pastoral epithet, such as 'Filli' or 'Licori', an alias known to have been used for Lucrezia Bendidio by Tasso (Tasso, 1994). A madrigal by the Emilian poet Ridolfo Arlotti is a typical anonymous text – inscribed 'per cantatrice' and arguably directed to a specific woman, yet concealing her identity:

Allhor diss'io, che restai preso e vinto
 al canto tuo, c'hai di Sirena il canto;
 hor ch'in un mar di pianto
 vuoi pur vedermi estinto,

o nemica d'Amore,
dico c'hai di Sirena il canto, e 'l cuore.¹⁶

Now I would say, who was taken and vanquished by your singing, you that have the Siren's song; now in a sea of sorrow you would like to see me extinguished, o enemy of love, I say that you have the Siren's song, and her heart.

The ambivalence which accompanied female virtuosity before the fullest flowering of the Ferrarese ensemble is reflected in the poetry inspired by Bendidio, and the way in which it is presented in publication. Torquato Tasso became enamoured of the young Bendidio during their first meeting in Padua in 1561. He wrote over a hundred poems for her in his lifetime, thirty-two of which were published in a 1567 collection by the Paduan Accademia degli Etereî, itself mostly composed of encomia to her (Tasso, 1965). Given her prodigious talent and Tasso's lifelong passion for music and musicians, it is curious that very few of his poems for her mention her singing at all, notwithstanding the potential impropriety such praise might imply. Of the half-dozen or so of these texts, none are specific about the qualities of her voice, nor do they name her directly. Nevertheless, one appears in the Etereî's volume; whilst more a love poem than an encomium, it draws specific attention to her musical ability, a significant contributor to the charms which ensnared the entire academy:

Avean gli atti leggiadri e 'l vago aspetto
già rotto il gelo, ond' armò sdegno il core,
e le vestigia de l'antico ardore
conoscea già dentro al cangiato petto;
e nutrir il mio mal prendea diletto
con l'esca dolce d'un soave errore
sí mi sforzava il lusinghiero Amore
che s'avea ne' begli occhi albergo eletto:
quand' ecco novo canto il core percosse,
e spirò nel suo foco; e 'n lui più ardenti
rendé le fiamme da' bei lumi accese.
Né crescer sí, né sfavillar commosse
vidi mai faci, a lo spirar de' venti,
come il mio incendio allor forza riprese.¹⁷

The graceful actions and the beautiful vision already melted the ice, with which disdain had armed the heart, and the remains of the old fire I already recognized before the altered breast; and I took delight in nourishing my malady with the sweet bait of delightful folly, thus the flatterer Love was forcing me who had chosen his dwelling in those beautiful eyes: when, lo, a new song struck

my heart, who breathed in its fire; and in whom more ardent were rendered the flames which were lit by those beautiful eyes. Nor did I ever see torches grow thus, nor throw sparks, moved by the blowing of the winds, like my fire regained strength at that time.

Within his few texts that refer to Bendidio's singing, Tasso attributes to her music two qualities appropriated from Classical sources: the Orphic ability to affect the physical processes of nature, 'l'aria addolcisce co' soavi accenti e queta i venti'; and the gift of healing melancholy, 'Udite il canto suo ch'altro pur suona che voce di sirena e 'l mortal sonno sgombra de l'alme pigre e i pensier bassi'.¹⁸ These attributions are common to many encomia (poetic or otherwise) for singers and musicians, telling us little or nothing about her actual voice. However, Bendidio was also muse to Giam'Battista Pigna, secretary to Duke Alfonso during the 1560s and 1570s. His verse for her is collected together in a manuscript volume, *Il ben divino* – unpublished during his lifetime, although the poems must have had at least a limited circulation; the commentary and *argomenti* in the volume were supplied by another Ferrarese poet-secretary, Giam'Battista Guarini (Pigna, 1965).

It is perhaps the private nature of the collection that permits Pigna's poetry to be more specific about Bendidio's talents. Much more direct than Tasso, Pigna portrays her in the act of singing, reporting actual events; one sonnet, 'Quella che al panno d'oro e al nero velo', describes her performance before the sons of Maximillian II at Brescello in 1571. Furthermore, in another poem, he begins to describe not just the quality of her voice but the song itself, by characterizing her as the nightingale's inspiration and tutor. The opening of the sonnet describes different 'modes' of singing ornamentation: long, short, doubled, single, high, low. It is perhaps too much to infer that, through association with the legendary improvisatory talents of the nightingale, Bendidio used extemporized ornamentation; nevertheless, the text suggests that she not only possessed a beautiful voice, but had the skill to deploy it in a variety of different ways:

In giri or lunghi, or scarsi, or doppi, or soli
or alti, or bassi, netta voce sgorga:
e con silenzio e strepito la ingorga
il vostro augel, perché a me morte involi.
Così la notte non con sciocchi voli,
ma con canti leggiadri, fa ch'io sorga
da la quiete orba di tempo e scorga
ne le tenebre mie vostri due soli.

Prendea da voi, mentre correva il giorno,
 modi dolci da usar: da voi maestra
 del contento che i cor ne disacerba.
 Tacendo voi, de le stelle al ritorno,
 seco provar solea se gli era destra
 l'arte imparata, e lo stil anco serba.¹⁹

In ornaments, now long, now short, now double, now single, now high, now low, the pure voice flows: and with silence and clamour it muffles your bird, because it sends me death. Thus the night, not with foolish flights, but with pleasant songs makes me rise from the quiet sphere of time and perceives in my darkness your two suns. I took from you, while the day passed, sweet modes to use: from you, the mistress of harmony that disembitters the heart. You being silent from the [appearance of the] stars to the return [of the sun], with them I used to try to show that I had learned the skilful art, and also cherished the style.

This text reveals more than perhaps was intended, for even though it is 'anonymous' in the sense that the words themselves contain no clues as to the identity of the singer, by virtue of its inclusion in Pigna's *canzoniere*, we know exactly to whom it refers. It is unique among texts of the 1570s for its precise reference to elaborate ornamentation styles, predating Guarini's celebrated 'Gorga di cantatrice' by at least six years.²⁰

The published verse known to be inspired by or directed to Leonora Sanvitale is similarly discreet with reference to her singing. Tasso's encomia to her are mostly in praise of her beauty, but one refers to her as a participant in a *mascherata* in the company of other women:

Bell'angioletta, or quale è bella imago
 di coprir degna il dolce avorio e terso
 del vostro volto, del color cosperso
 che rende il cielo in sul mattin più vago?
 Qual la potrà formar maestro o mago
 c'a voi convenga, o qual novo e diverso
 abito ammira l'Indo o 'l Franco o 'l Perso
 che d'onorarsi in voi non sembri vago?
 Nullo; ma come suole in selva o 'n scena
 Palla mostrarsi o Citerea succinta
 e segnar l'orme co' coturni d'oro,
 tal voi con fronte lucida e serena
 duce vi fate d'amoroso coro,
 e bella è più qual da voi meno è vinta.

Beautiful little angel, now such is the beautiful image that deigns to cover the sweet and polished ivory of your face, sprinkled with the color that makes the sky above the morning more lovely? What could a master or a sorcerer make which would suit you, oh what new and diverse clothing would India admire, or France, or Persia which, honoured by you, would not become beautiful? None; but like Pallas, or Venus customarily shows herself on stage or in a forest, treading her step with golden slippers, so you, with a luminous and serene brow, make yourself the leader of the amorous chorus, and most beautiful is she who is least vanquished by you.

Muzio Manfredi also reserves his praise for Sanvitale's dancing, heading his sonnet for her, 'Questa che si leggiadra il bel pié move' with the inscription, 'Nel suo ballare alla gagliarda, e balletti, comparve tre sere alla festa mascherata da donna, da ninfa e da dea' (Manfredi, 1580). Dancing was a far more acceptable pastime for a noblewoman, with implicitly understood rules that kept her within the bounds of respectability. Once settled in Ferrara, Sanvitale regularly took part in well rehearsed and choreographed entertainments – indeed her absence from the 1577 *carnevale*, due to advanced pregnancy, was notable enough to have been mentioned by the Tuscan ambassador in an official dispatch (Solerti, 1891).

Unlike those for Bendidio and Sanvitale, texts in praise of Tarquinia Molza and Laura Peverara are frequently fulsome in their descriptions of their respective vocal and musical talents. The dedications or inscriptions of the texts often name their inspiration outright, like those to Peverara in the Veronese manuscript. Moreover, the women's identities are sometimes revealed through the familiar rhetorical device of *paranomasia*, in which words or phrases that recall their names are interspersed in the text: 'l'aura' or 'molce', for instance. Taken together with other plentiful sources, one may see how the encomiastic verses amplify or reflect more prosaic descriptions relating to their performances.

Printed encomia for Molza exist in a variety of forms, and address a variety of her known skills and attributes. Poetic encomia are as likely to highlight her literary achievements as they are to praise her voice or her beauty. Her singularity is a common theme; indeed, towards the end of her life she was known as 'L'Unica'. Other sources in particular relate the opinion that the essence of Molza's musical superiority is not that she was able to sing elaborate ornaments, which other women might also be able to do, but that she understood the 'rules of music' (Patrizi, 1963) (Stras, 1999); furthermore, she could provide ornamentation of her own spontaneous invention, not sung from memory 'che vien dettato dai Maestri' (Ribera, 1606). Tasso's verse for

Molza embraces this *concetto* of vocal uniqueness, exemplified in the madrigal 'Forse è cagion l'aurora':

Forse è cagion l'aurora
di questo bel concento
che fan le fronde e i rami e l'acque e 'l vento?
O con sì dolce modo
il ciel Tarquinia onora,
e per lei de la terra s'innamora?
I' odo, o parmi, i' odo
la voce: ella è pur dessa;
ecco Tarquinia viene, Amor s'appressa!

Perhaps the reason for the dawn is the beautiful sound the leaves and the branches and the waters and the wind make? O in this sweet way, the sky honours Tarquinia and because of her falls in love with the earth. I hear, or it seems to me, I hear a voice: it can only be hers: lo, Tarquinia comes, and Love approaches.

Tasso's verses for Peverara, like those for Bendidio, form an entire *canzoniere* of nearly one hundred poems. About a third of these were written after Peverara moved to Ferrara; however, many are *rime d'amore*, composed in the mid-1560s when Peverara was still a young girl, probably barely in her teens – yet already these texts praise both her physical and vocal beauty:

Non fonte o fiume od aura
odo in più dolce suon di quel di Laura;
né 'n lauro o 'n pino o 'n mirto
mormorar s'udí mai più dolce spirto.
O felice a cui spira,
e quel beato che per lei sospira!
Che se gl'inspira il core,
puote al cielo aspirar col suo valore.²¹

In neither fountains nor rivers nor the breeze do I hear a sweeter sound than that of Laura; nor in the laurel nor the pine nor the myrtle can such a sweet spirit be heard to murmur. O happy he for who she breathes, and how blessed is he who sighs for her! He whose heart is inspired by her may aspire to heaven with his valour.

Manfredi's sonnet for Peverara in the *Cento donne cantate* also predates her arrival at Ferrara, yet it shows that her activities in Mantua were the essence of her later duties – singing, playing and dancing:

L'Aura, che, mossa a voi d'intorno, e gira
 col Nome vostro in questa parte, e in quella,
 tal vi dipinge valorosa e bella
 ch'indarno ogni altra a cotal merto aspira.
 Dice: 'Beato è ben chi lieto mira
 le meraviglie nove accolte in ella.
 Nobil fanciulla sembra; e Dea novella
 è certo, e tal, ch'infino il Ciel l'ammira,
 move da gli occhi, e dal suo canto Amore
 foco divin, ch'altrui può far felice:
 se danza, o suona, ivi se stessa accende.
 Quand'ebbe il Mincio mai simile honore?
 E quando il Mondo? o vera, alma Fenice,
 te la tua propria gloria, eterna rende'.

The breeze, that, moves around you, and turns with your name this way and that, paints you so valiant and beautiful that in vain all other women aspire to such merit. And it says, 'Truly blessed is he who happily sees the new marvels gathered in her. She appears a noble maiden, and certainly a new Goddess, and such a one, that Heaven infinitely admires, Love moves by her eyes, and by her song a divine fire, that can make another happy: either dancing, or playing, therein she herself sets it alight. Whenever did the Mincio have such an honour? And when the world? O truly, blessed Phoenix, your own glory makes you eternal'.

There is little mistake from the printed texts for Peverara that her musical and performative abilities by far override any other attributes worthy of praise; a much higher proportion of the texts dedicated to her and about her mention her singing and her playing. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that she – of all the singing ladies – was lowest down the social scale. It is also clear that she was recognizably an employee, not just a lady-in-waiting but an employed musician. All four women examined here appear in Count Annibale Romei's *Discorsi*, a series of dialogues first published in 1585 and purporting to have taken place the year before at Alfonso's summer court (Romei, 1585). Significantly, although Sanvitale and Molza are elected 'queens' of the discourse on separate days, and Bendidio and Molza are active interlocutors in several dialogues, Peverara only appears at the end of each day to perform a 'sonetto' on the harp to amuse and relax the company (Durante and Martellotti, 2000).²²

The encomia for the noblewomen and the artisans differ in other respects. One of the most important is that the two artisan ladies are occasionally

depicted playing instruments as well as singing – this is, of course, never true of the noblewomen. The distinction could reflect the differing expectations of the two classes of women in their courtly performances. Bendidio and Sanvitale are never recorded accompanying themselves; at Ferrara, their accompaniment appears always to have been provided by Luzzasco Luzzaschi at the harpsichord. The artisans, on the other hand, were specifically celebrated for their skill at self-accompaniment: Molza on the viol and lute, Peverara on the harp. It has been suggested that Bendidio lost her place in Alfonso's entertainments at the end of the 1570s because she had to be taught the music (and/or the ornamentation), rather than create it for herself (Durante and Martellotti, 1989).²³ This assumption is strengthened by Ribera's comments about the individuality and spontaneity of Molza's musical performances. Presumably, once Alfonso had been captivated by the combination of the female voice and complex ornamentation, he must have begun to expect variety; he also needed quantity – there are reports of the nightly entertainments lasting over four hours (Newcomb, 1981; Durante and Martellotti, 2000). Bendidio, Sanvitale and the other noblewomen who sang with them may well have been able to perform simple self-accompaniments, as would have been expected as part of their courtly accomplishments – they may even have been able to improvise their ornamentation if there were someone else to accompany them with whom they had rehearsed. But the skills possessed by Molza and Peverara would have allowed them to learn new music at a rate appropriate for the demand, and to vary their performances from night to night, even hour to hour – Alfonso is known to have requested the same piece from Molza up to six times consecutively (Stras, 1999).

Musical Settings

The encomia for Molza and Peverara are further distanced from those for Bendidio and Sanvitale by the fact that curiously, though perhaps not coincidentally, there are no published musical settings of the encomia indeniably for the noblewomen that relate to their performing activities. Although musical encomia for all four women appear in the 1570s, only those for Peverara and Molza include settings of those texts which refer to their singing. Luzzasco Luzzaschi, who was the 'capo de' concerti' and principal court composer at Ferrara from the 1570s until the end of the century, published two madrigals on texts for Molza in his *Primo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* of 1571 – 'Mentre l'ardenti stelle' and 'Mentre fa con gli accenti' (Luzzaschi,

1571).²⁴ The second of these texts adopts the *conchetto* of the woman's song affecting the course of nature:

Mentre fa con gli accenti
 Tarquinia risonar l'aria d'intorno
 e così pone 'l freno a' fiumi, e a' venti,
 il portator del giorno
 crede che sia Caliope e 'l carro gira,
 ma poi che la rimira,
 gli par del terzo ciel la bella Dea.
 'Ond'abbagliat' il senso, e l'intelletto,
 ch'io ti fossi soggetto',
 disse, 'Non ti bastava ò Citherea,
 mercè del foco tuo leggiadro e santo,
 se non mi soggiogavi ancor col canto'.

While Tarquinia makes the air all around resound with music [ornaments], and thus reins in the rivers and the winds, the carrier of the day [Phoebus], believing that it is Calliope, turns his carriage, but when he sees her, she seems to him the beautiful Goddess of the third heaven. 'And so dazzling the sense and intellect, so that I am made your subject', he said, 'was not enough, o Venus, thanks to your happy and sainted fire; you also subjugated me with your song'.

Although only two partbooks remain of the original five, it is clear that this setting was more elaborate than others in the book, with ornamentation used specifically to represent words in the text. The illustration, however, applies not to Molza's singing, but to the 'rivers and winds'. More revealing is Marc'Antonio Ingegneri's 'Hor che 'l ciel et la terra e 'l vento tace', published in 1572 in his *Secondo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Stras, 1999). The work depicts Molza singing and playing for an enthralled audience; the reported performance can be matched with an actual event, a civic feast held in Modena in October 1568 for Alfonso d'Este, his sister Lucrezia and his wife Barbara. The anonymous text, a parody of Petrarch's famous sonnet with the same *capoverso*, portrays Molza singing a setting of that sonnet, gracing her performance with vocal ornaments:

'Hor che 'l ciel et la terra e 'l vento tace',
 incominciò colei che l'aria molce
 con angelici accenti, e in lingua dolce
 rischiara Secchia con la toska face.
 Sentian gli spirti altrui beata pace;

tutto l'amar si trammutava in dolce.
 E giva al ciel (che più l'alma soffolge)
 mio cor, che via da lei morendo giace.
 Che poi se i moti de suoi tersi avori,
 de' vaghi lumi e del leggiadro viso,
 l'occhio vedea ch'or vana vista intrica;
 che poi s'un dì mi spiega bei tesori,
 o del nome Tiran degn'et nemica,
 o qua giù cieli aperti, o paradiso.²⁵

'Hor che 'l ciel e la terra e 'l vento tace', began she who soothes the air with angelic accents, and in a sweet tongue illuminates the Secchia with the Tuscan torch [i.e. the words of Petrarch]. The others' souls felt a blessed peace; all bitterness transformed into sweetness. And my heart, which [now] parted from her lies dying, rose to Heaven (that comforts the soul still more). What then, if the movements of her polished ivory [fingers], of her beautiful eyes and charming face, the eye could see, which is now snared by empty visions; what then, if one day she reveals her beautiful treasures to me, oh she who is worthy of the tyrant's name and foe, oh the heavens opened to us below on earth, oh paradise.

Ingegneri's music attempts to convey the effect of that ornamentation, with elaborate and rapid figuration appearing in all five voices setting the lines that describe the performance. The literary portrait is thus enhanced and invigorated by its musical setting.

Texts for all four women are among the first poems by Tasso to be set and published by musicians: 'Tarquinia, se rimiri' (as 'Mentre mia stella miri') was published in a five-voice setting by Pietro Vinci in 1573 (Vinci, 1573); 'D'aria un tempo nodrimmi, e cibo e vita', for Peverara, was published in a five-voice setting by Giovann'Agostino Veggio in Parma in 1574 (Veggio, 1574).²⁶ 'Geloso amante, apro mille occhi e giro', written for Bendidio, appears in Luzzasco Luzzaschi's *Secondo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* of 1576 (Luzzaschi, 1576); and a setting of 'Quel labbro che le rose han colorito', written for Sanvitale during the lengthy wedding/*carnevale* celebrations of 1576, is published by Paolo Isnardi in 1577 (Isnardi, 1577). All of these settings predate the texts' publication in collections of verse, so the composers must have had access to manuscript sources, possibly even from Tasso himself. Tasso may have considered the texts appropriate for a musical context, even though none of the texts refer to musical performance.

While texts praising female singers appear, mostly isolated or semi-isolated, in a great number of musical publications in the 1570s and 1580s,

not surprisingly they are collected most densely in volumes that emanate from Ferrara. Some of the earlier settings, like those of Vinci, Ingegneri and Veggio, are more readily connected with the court at Parma, but given the frequent traffic of poets, musicians and minor patrons between the Farnese and d'Este establishments, one might expect the shared creative experience to manifest itself in at least some publications. It has been suggested that between Lucrezia d'Este's departure for Pesaro in 1571 and her return to Ferrara in July 1576 there was little overt musical activity at Ferrara, at least in terms of female performers. It has also been assumed that her sister, Leonora, despite having been musically educated in her youth and herself lauded by Tasso as a singer, had little interest in the court entertainments, being generally frail and prone to illness (Durante and Martellotti, 1989).²⁷ Nevertheless, in 1576 Luzzaschi dedicated his *Secondo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* to Leonora, thanking her for the 'benignità' that allowed his works to be created.

The contents of the book reveal the growing influence of the ladies' entertainments at the Ferrarese court, and the growing fascination with female voices as vehicles for virtuosity. Leonora was the prime instigator of the *balletto di donne* which formed at the court during 1574, probably as a result of the visit of Henri III in August of that year, and four of the madrigals in Luzzaschi's book could be *ballate*, which could be sung as accompaniments to dances (Stras, 2000).²⁸ Two encomia for anonymous singers are also included, 'Dhe non cantar, Donna gentile' and 'Al dolce vostro canto'. The order in which these works appear seems to have been carefully arranged into three groups. The first group comes immediately after the dedicatory madrigals that open the book. The first *ballata*, 'Come potra questo mio afflitto core' is followed by 'Dhe non cantar, Donna gentile', a short madrigal graced with ornamentation, chromatic inflection and metrical variation. The group is completed by a more weighty, but still relatively ornate, two-part setting of Tasso's sonnet for Bendidio, 'Geloso amante, apro mille occhi e giro'. In the second group, another of Tasso's sonnets, 'Aminta poi ch'a Filli non dispiacque', is sandwiched between two further *ballate*; some commentators have speculated that this text was written, specifically for setting to music, during the wedding celebrations of Thiene and Sanvitale in January of 1576 (Durante and Martellotti, 1988). Finally, the last *ballata* is paired with the other 'anonymous' encomium, 'Al dolce vostro canto', the opening conceit of which is familiar:

Al dolce vostro canto
ch'i fiumi affrena e queta l'aere e 'l vento

vidi pur io fermarsi il cielo intento;
 e 'l tempo che fuggia sì lieve e presto
 alhor ritenne il sole
 ch'immobil festi al suon delle parole.
 Però se quel cantar soave honesto
 udir potess'io ogn'hora
 il fior de l'età nostra eterno fora.

At your sweet song, which stops the rivers and quiets the air and the wind, indeed I saw the busy heavens halt; and time which flew so lightly and quick, now held back the sun, which you made immobile at the sound of [your] words. Thus if I could hear that sweet and honest singing always, the flower of our age would blossom eternally.

Musically, the two encomia do not differ significantly in style from the rest of the book, making it difficult to assert that they are intended in some way to 'represent' their subjects in the same way as Ingegneri's madrigal so obviously does. Nevertheless, throughout the book the upper parts carry intricate decorations, and Luzzaschi exploits the timbral differences between high voices and low through contrasting blocks of reduced textures, often resulting in duets and trios in the upper voices. It would appear, then, that the entire book could be seen as the first substantial musical document to chart the emergence of female musical virtuosity at the d'Este court, and the beginning of the legitimisation of female musical performance in a recognized arena. The two printed anthologies for Laura Peverara are further manifestations of how far forward Alfonso's activities had brought this acceptance in the intervening years. Once Peverara was joined by Anna Guarini and Livia d'Arco, throughout the 1580s texts and madrigals emerge that name them directly and extol their musical talents; furthermore, imitation *concerti* were established at many of the major Italian courts (Newcomb, 1981). But these imitations had only published documents and the privileged accounts of only very few witnesses on which to base their activities. The Ferrarese *concerto*'s performances were not still public; much of their music and its practice were jealously guarded secrets, even if their existence was not.

Inevitably, after Alfonso's death in 1597, his most treasured music and poetry began to emerge in print. Giam'Battista Guarini issued the first complete edition of his *Rime* in 1598; some of Luzzaschi's accompanied and decorated madrigals were published in 1601 (Guarini, 1598; Luzzaschi, 1601). One manuscript anthology, however, was never printed, and the fact that its unique musical and poetic contents remained virtually untransmitted during

Alfonso's lifetime is an indication of its importance as a document of the inner circle of the court (Durante and Martellotti, 2000). Biblioteca Estense Ms. Mus. F1358 contains musical encomia recognizably for Leonora Sanvitale (two, but possibly five), her stepmother Barbara Sanseverina (two) and the Neapolitan bass Giulio Cesare Brancaccio; many other texts disguise or do not name their subjects. The manuscript must date from the early years of the 1580s, when Sanvitale was still alive and Brancaccio was still present at court; Durante and Martelotti reason that it is likely to date from the autumn of 1581 (Durante and Martellotti, 2000). It is an extensive collection of madrigals that, unlike the two Laura anthologies, is exclusively by Ferrarese composers. Considerably larger than the overwhelming majority of printed madrigal books, with thirty-six works instead of twenty-six or twenty-seven, it is likely it was never intended for publication. As the prime motivator for the two Peverara publications appears to have been Tasso, the artistic spirit that infuses the Ferrarese manuscript is that of Giam'Battista Guarini. Only four of the thirty-six texts are incontrovertably not from his pen; six others, whilst not attributed to Guarini anywhere else, bear strong stylistic and verbal concordances with other texts known to be by the poet.

Two of the encomia name their subjects directly – 'Ama ben dice Amore' is directed towards a Barbara (Sanseverina) and 'Quando i più gravi accenti' describes a performance by Brancaccio. Although the setting of this second text, by Lodovico Agostini, does not concern us from the point of view of the sex of the singer, like Ingegneri's madrigal, it is another example of a musical setting whose techniques are intended to illustrate and enhance the text by creating a sonic world which 'describes' the performance rather than recreating the performance itself. Other texts suggest their subject through the use of *paranomasia*, including those which appear to have been written for Leonora Sanvitale. Two are particularly clear: 'Donna mentre vi miro' which contains the lines 'O bellezza vitale, o bellezza mortale' (the prominent use of the word 'vitale' is a frequent gesture in Tasso's verse for Sanvitale); and 'Udite, udite amanti', which describes the adored lady as 'l'unica beatrice de la mia vita'. 'Donna mentre vi miro' holds an important position as the opening madrigal in the book, and the madrigal which follows, "'Amiam" Fillide, amiamo' portrays the nymph singing. It could be that this 'Filli' text, like Tasso's sonnet 'Aminta poi ch'a Filli non dispiacque', had a particular significance for Sanvitale. One further text, 'Questa ch'il cielo honora', echoes more explicit texts that elide the words 'ciel' and 'onora' to create the illusion of the name 'Leonora'; the text also contains a reference to the 'five years' in which the poet has languished for his lady – in 1581, Sanvitale had been in

Ferrara for five years.²⁹ Lastly, the only text by Tasso in the volume, ‘Amorosa fenice’, refers to the ‘bel nome santo’ of the poet’s mistress – again, the same gesture appears in other verse dedicated by Tasso to Sanvitale.

Musically, many of the works in this book adopt the style of Luzzaschi’s 1576 book – lightly chromatic, sectional with more or less pervasive ornamentation in the upper parts. Some madrigals, such as ‘Aura dolce odorata’ by Francesco Manara, make a feature of the two equal high voices, offsetting virtuosic diminution in the upper duet with fuller textures for all voices. Others, such as ‘Su le mie labra un’ bacio’ by Vicentino Fronti, appear to allow for spontaneous ornamentation. However, the manuscript is too pristine and too carefully prepared to be anything other than a presentation volume, so if these works were part of the regular repertoire of the *concerto*, the manuscript must have been compiled separately from everyday partbooks. Whilst it would be too speculative to say that this volume may have been conceived, at least initially, as a tribute to Sanvitale and Sanseverina, clearly they were intended to be prominently represented in its works.

Further Reflections

The growth in popularity and versatility of the musical encomium is succinctly illustrated in a 1585 book of madrigals by the priest, and sometime confessor to Tasso, Giacomo Moro. Dedicated to Barbara Sanseverina, its title *Gli encomii musicali* reveals its nature – a publication consisting entirely of musical encomia. Its contents and subjects are varied: women, men, soldiers, singers and beauties alike. The subjects are all members or frequenters of the Gonzaga court, including Agnese Argotta, Marchese di Grana, one of Vincenzo Gonzaga’s many mistresses. Unusually, she is praised directly as a singer – the poem opens ‘Questa pura sirena’ – and she is named in the print as the subject of the text. Two more texts extol a singer named Angelica, although the identity of this woman is still a mystery.³⁰ Graphic and virtuosic ornaments are now commonplace and grace even the named setting for Argotta.

The acceptability of female virtuosity was, of course, not universal, and does not appear to have been consistent even in the environments that fostered it. By 1598 in Ferrara, female musicians were participating in public displays; during the nuptial festivities that greeted Margherita d’Austria in honour of her wedding to Phillip III of Spain, ten women, deployed on boats equipped with harpsichords, sang and played *laude* for the new Queen.³¹ This represents a distinct shift in attitude from that which precipitated Molza’s sudden and

untimely dismissal from the court in 1589. Her unmarried status and unique talents left her vulnerable to criticism, given the association of musical and literary ability with the less desirable female elements of society. Once her affair with the composer Giaches de Wert was exposed, she had crossed the line of Renaissance respectability, and was expelled from court. More forward-looking patrician societies – i.e. those that transcended the demise of city-state feudalism, such as Parma and Rome – continued to accept and honour her until her death in 1617. Similarly, once Lucrezia Bendidio's relationship with a d'Este prince weakened and her abilities as a singer were no longer sufficient to warrant the protection of the Duke, her reputation quickly dissolved leaving her a social outcast, tolerated only by virtue of her noble birth.

But an indication of how female virtuosity, or at least musical competence, was becoming acceptable even for the nobility may be found in *La Ghirlanda della Contessa Angela Bianca Beccaria*, an anthology of textual encomia by various Po valley authors (including Molza herself) collected by Stefano Guazzo and published in 1595 (Guazzo, 1595). The book is laid out as a series of dialogues which first present the texts then consider them line by line, after which the literary criticism gives way to a general discussion on the issues raised. One madrigal praises Beccaria's singing with the same effusiveness characteristic of texts for Molza and Peverara some two decades before:

Al dolcissimo suono
 Donna de' vostri Angelici concenti,
 che placan l'ire à più feroci venti,
 ogn'animo turbato
 da se sgombra ogni noia,
 e di pace, e di gioia
 gode felice stato;
 ond'hoggi per mia man v'offre sua fronde
 Palla, ch'à noi pace, e quiete infonde.

At the sweetest sound, Lady, of your angelic music, which placate the ire of the most ferocious winds, every disturbed soul clears itself of every care, and with peace and joy rejoicing will be happy; therefore today by my hand Pallas offers you her frond [the olive], that suffuses us with peace and quiet.

The subsequent discussion makes it clear that Beccaria is also a harpsichordist of no mean accomplishment. After much debate over the acceptability of music as a pastime for respectable women, Beccaria closes the discussion with the pronouncement, 'I'm sorry for the honour of Sig. Cesare Todesco

(the poem's author), and for my own benefit, for not having made so much progress in music that I could verify his words, with which making me into something which I am not, diminish his authority, and increase my vanity'. Whether or not Beccaria actually possessed the skills she is praised for, she refused to own them, for it would still have been unseemly for her so to do.

Notes

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- 1 Solerti quotes F. Sansovino, *Ritratti delle più nobili e famose città d'Italia* (Venezia, 1575), stating that Ercole is the father of two sons, 'monsignor Paolo Antonio' and Alfonso.
- 2 Tasso dedicated a sonnet to Ligurio, 'Vago fanciul, che da l'ardor sovente' (Tasso, 1994).
- 3 Documents relating to the marriage negotiations are contained in the Archivio di Stato, Parma (ASP): Fondo Sanvitale, *busta* 847; Carteggio Farnese Estero, *buste* 130–31; Carteggio Farnese Interno, *buste* 69 and 76 – also in the Archivio di Stato, Modena (ASM): Cancelleria Ducale, Particolari, *buste* 1381 and 1383; Carteggi principi esteri, 1362 A/95.
- 4 ASP, Fondo Sanvitale, *busta* 883, a 17th century manuscript history of the Sanvitale family. Of Giberto, it says 'Et come era nutrito longe spatie di tempo in Corte, dilettauali della conversatione di huomini di diverse professioni, con quali, ò gravemente discorrendo, ò allegramente cessando, passava honestamenti il tempo. Per il che in Casa sua ricevendosi letterati, musici et soldati, cosa che non era che da ragionamenti loro imparare et intendere non li potesse'.
- 5 ASP, Epistolario Scelto, *busta* 14, letter from Tomasso Machiavelli to Giam' Battista Pico (secretary to Ottavio Farnese), 31 October, 1571: 'Domani qui s'aspetta la S.a Lavinia, et la S.a Anna da Colorna, et con esse la S.a Contessa di Sala. Et anco Il S.r Gio: Galeazzo, et si farà una Comedietta a far rider le banche'.
- 6 The *canzone* was set to music three times in the space of five years: first by Bartolomeo Spontoni, *Il secondo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venezia, 1567); Hippolito Chamaterò, *Il quattro libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Venezia, 1569); Lodovico Agostini, *Il secondo libro de madrigali a quattro voci* (Venezia, 1572).
- 7 Modena, Biblioteca Estense, Fondo Molza-Viti. The text is undated and unsigned, but the paper bears a sixteenth-century watermark. The provenance of this text, and others preserved with it, is unknown.

- 8 Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, cod. Pal. 418. The manuscript, dated 1577, is available in a modern transcription (Patrizi, 1963). Although a short contemporary account exists (Ribera, 1606), the first extensive biography of Molza was published in the eighteenth century (Vandelli, 1750). Three substantial studies have examined both biographical and musicological evidence from Vandelli and Patrizi (Durante and Martellotti, 1989, Riley, 1980 and Riley, 1986).
- 9 I am very grateful to Joanne Riley for sharing her knowledge of Molza's family circumstances to help identify for which of the children Isabella was pleading.
- 10 ASP, Epistolario Scelto, *busta* 11, Isabella Columba Molza to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Modena 16 June 1558. A further letter of 16 July confirms that he had accepted the children under his protection.
- 11 Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Carteggio Alessandro Farnese, letter from Fulvio Orsini to Cardinal Farnese, 3 August 1577: 'Francesco Patritio, di che è la rinchiusa, è uno delli dotti huomini che sia nell'età nostra; ha mandato in luce molte belle fatighe, e tuttavia manda delle altre, essendo ben disciplinato et nelle opere d'Aristotele versatissimo con le cognitione esatta della lingua greca. Desidera, come V.S. Ill.ma vedrà, che sia compiacuta questa parente del Molza delle compositione tanto volgari quanto che latine, nella quale niuno ha più commodità che V.S. Ill.ma d'auitarla ...'.
- 12 ASP, Mastri, *busta* 6. Paolo Calderoni's profession is not stated either in the *ruoli* or the *mastri*, but payments to him in the *mastri* are consistently preceded and/or followed by those to known musicians. Payments in the *mastri*, whilst not specifically ordered, tend to be grouped by profession.
- 13 An elegy 'trascritta dal Libro intitolate Delle disavventure d'Ovidio Libri cinque ridotti nella volgar lingua da Giulio Morigi nell'illustrissima Accademia de' Signori Innominati di Parma l'Inabile, in Ravenna presso Francesco Tebaldi da Osime, MDLXXXI' is dedicated to 'Signora Tarquinia Molza, Accadem. Innominata' (Serassi, 1750). Founded in 1574 by Eugenio Visdomini, the Innominati were responsible for much of the literary and musical activity in Parma; other members included Orazio Bassano, Francesco Patrizi, and the poets Torquato Tasso, Giam'Battista Guarini, Muzio Manfredi and Angelo Ingegneri.
- 14 Archivio di Stato, Verona (ASV), Fondo Dionisio, *busta* 367. The small manuscript volume, approx. 10cm x 15cm and bound in parchment, is dated 1590. The front page bears the title 'Rime di Alberto Laverozuola, Padre nell'Accademia Filarmonica'. It contains sonnets, sestinas and longer dedicatory poems; several pages are left blank apart from inscriptions 'here belongs the poem x, printed in my book, page n', referring to a published collection of Laverozuola's *Rime*, Stringario, Verona, 1583. Also in the ASV, Fondo Lando, Appendice, is a small volume of Latin verse which contains four sonnets to Peverara. I am grateful to Enrico Paganuzzi, director of the Biblioteca Accademia Filarmonica, Verona, for directing me towards these volumes.
- 15 David Sacerdote, *Il primo libro de madrigali a sei voci* (Venezia, 1575). Presumably the object of the poem is a second Athena, who turned the maiden Arachne into a spider after a spinning contest.
- 16 Ridolfo Arlotti, in *Rime di diversi*, Biblioteca Estense, Ms. ital. 759, 151v (Durante and Martellotti, 1989). It is possible that the singer is Lucrezia Bendidio: Arlotti contributed a poem to the anthology for her published by the Paduan Accademia degli Etere, *Le Rime de gli Academici Etere* (Padua, 1567).
- 17 The *argomento* attached to a later version of this sonnet reads 'Dimostra come l'amore acceso in lui da l'aspetto de la sua donna fosse accresciuto dal suo canto' (Tasso, 1994).
- 18 'Qual più rara e gentile' and 'Aprite gli occhi, o gente egra mortale'.

- 19 The *argomento* (added later by Guarini) reads: 'Rende la cagione perché quel lusignolo cantasse, mostrando che per quanto durava il giorno notasse i modi con che la donna cantava, e poi s'essercitasse la notte, quando era fuori del cospetto di lei, per veder se sapesse bene imitarla'.
- 20 Pigna died in 1575, providing a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the sonnet. Guarini's poem 'Mentre vaga angioletta' ('Gorga di cantatrice'), whilst more specific about musical content (and claiming stylistic antecedents in Pliny and Ariosto), cannot be identified as a portrait of any particular singer (Ossi, 1997) (Durante and Martellotti, 2000).
- 21 The *argomento* reads: 'Paragona il canto di Laura a' dolcissimi suoni fatti naturalmente e dimostra gli effetti de la sua meravigliosa armonia'.
- 22 Although there can be little doubt that the *Discorsi* provide an accurate picture of Ferrarese courtly life, they cannot be relied upon as a factual account: Sanvitale (who appears only in the 1586 Ferrarese reprint) could not have participated in the discussions if they indeed took place in 1584, as she had already been dead for two years, and by 1584, Bendidio was effectly an outcast from the court.
- 23 The correspondent *cavaliere* Grana reports to Cardinal Luigi d'Este on Bendidio's disappointment at no longer being included in Alfonso's musical entertainments: 'la musica di quelle signore quale accrescono ogni giorno di vantaggio et la signora Malchiavella ne porta grande invidia per non haver chi l'impari di vantaggio.'
- 24 The volume was dedicated to Princess Lucrezia d'Este on the occasion of her marriage to the Prince of Urbino; Lucrezia became an important patron of the female musicians at Ferrara in the 1580s. Also in 1571, Pietro Vinci published an encomia to, and a madrigal on a text by Molza in his *Terzo libro di madrigali a cinque voci* (Venezia, 1571). In the same year, Vinci dedicated his *Primo libro de madrigali a sei voci* to Ottavio Farnese, linking him with the Parma court at the time of his compositions for Molza.
- 25 The text could be by Pigna; Patrizi records that Alfonso ordered Pigna to write four sonnets about Molza's performance – could he have also ordered the sonnet for Bendidio which recorded her performance at Brescello in 1571 (see above)?
- 26 Marc'Antonio Ingegneri's setting of this latter text did not appear in print until 1580 (in his *Terzo libro de madrigali a cinque voci*), although there is evidence to suggest it was composed around the same time as that of Veggio (Paget [Stras], 1995).
- 27 Both Lucrezia and Leonora were tutored in music by Alessandro Milleville, at the behest of their mother, Renata di Francia (Campori and Solerti, 1888). My grateful thanks to Richard Wistreich for providing me with this reference.
- 28 These pieces are identified by double lines through the staves after the first three lines of verse, demarcating a possible *ripresa*.
- 29 These texts, and those for Sanseverina, were altered substantially before their publication in Guarini's collected edition of 1598, ostensibly to remove or obscure the references.
- 30 A singing 'Angelica' was the intended recipient of five sonnets and three madrigals composed by Tasso 'Al signor Guido Coccapani per una donna di nome Angelica amata dal duca di Ferrara' (Tasso, 1994).
- 31 *La Sontuosissima entrata della Serenissima Margherita d'Austria Regina di Spagna, et del Serenissimo Arciduca Alberto d'Austria in Ferrara* (Verona, 1598), 4v: 'et dopo desinato si affacciarono alle fenestre quali scoprono le fosse del Castello, nelle quali vi erano cinque barche tutte giale [sic], per cada una delle quali erano 10 donne, che vogavano, et sonavano con tanto artificio certi cimbani [sic], che sembravano Ninfe maritime, et cantando laude alla sereniss. scherzavano con giuochi bellissimi delle Barche'.