

Harness, Kelley. 2006. *Echoes of Women's Voices: Music, Art, and Female Patronage in Early Modern Florence*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

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In Stephen Frears's recent film *The Queen* (2006), Elizabeth II, played by Helen Mirren, is deeply concerned about the boundary between private family life and public persona in the period immediately following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. In seeking to protect the privacy of her family and especially that of her grandsons, to allow them to grieve in private, she inadvertently projects an uncaring public persona. It falls to the newly elected prime minister, Tony Blair, in collaboration with the Queen's long-suffering secretary, to persuade Her Majesty to pursue a different course of action and thus placate the mass public. Whatever the fairness of this representation, the Queen, while clearly in command of her role as head of state, is portrayed as a leader no longer in command of her public image and even unable to comprehend its importance.

I'm tempted to recommend that Frears's Queen acquaint herself with the sophisticated communication tactics of other female rulers by reading Kelley Harness's *Echoes of Women's Voices*. Whether wives, widows, or nuns, early modern Italian noblewomen were adept at using patronage to shape their public image. Of course, sometimes they too had to practice damage control—a topic to which I shall return.

Echoes of Women's Voices is an absorbing study of female self-fashioning in early modern Florence that documents successes and mishaps in the patronage strategies of women regents and women religious. The main focus is on Archduchess Maria Magdalena of Austria, widow of Cosimo II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Florence, during her joint regency of Florence (1621–30) with Christine of Lorraine, but there are also two chapters on the institutional patronage of the convent of Santa Croce (known as La Crocetta), home to Princess Maria Maddalena, Christine of Lorraine's daughter and therefore Archduchess Maria Magdalena's sister-in-law. The concept of patronage as a means of fashioning a public identity is familiar, but aside from William Prizer's articles on Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia (e.g., 1982; 1985; 1999), and studies of convents by Robert Kendrick (1996), Craig Monson (1995), and Colleen Reardon (1996; 2002), there is little substantial work on women's musical patronage in Italy. Harness draws upon research into early modern women's patronage of the visual arts, particularly highlighting the idea from Roger Crum (2001) that, regardless of who commissioned a work,

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the potential patron, recipient, or user of a work exerts influence over its production (7). Harness argues that patronage took on special significance for women as a means of communication—one that perhaps did not sit easily with society's emphasis on the importance of silence as a female virtue (second only to chastity). In short, through patronage, women had a voice. The women "envoiced" through female patronage were not only the patrons but also the women characters that proliferated in their music theater.

Chapter 1 addresses "some of the ways in which [various aspects of] court spectacles reflected social hierarchies and also combined to convey specific, politically charged meanings in the decade before the advent of a female regency [in Florence]" (9). Chapters 2 through 6 look in depth at the secular and sacred objects of patronage during the regency, whether music theater, art, literature, or equestrian ballets. *La Giuditta*, a three-act opera with *intermedi* to a libretto by Andrea Salvadori and music (now lost) by Marco da Gagliano, is the subject of chapter 4: "Una forte, magnanima, e generosa vedova: *Judith*" (A strong, magnanimous and generous widow). The final chapters (7 and 8) examine the institutional patronage of La Crocetta. Although the convent was an active artistic patron during the sixteenth century, there seems to have been a change in patronage activity there following Princess Maria Maddalena's arrival in 1621: polyphony or concerted music became a feature of investiture and profession ceremonies, for example, and Medici court diaries more regularly note convent theater performance. Indeed, "between 1621 and 1633, the Crocetta assumed the status of a satellite court" (287). At the end of each chapter Harness includes valuable transcriptions and translations of selected archival documents, not to mention numerous music examples.

Harness's view of patronage as a means of communication leads to an investigation into the messages a work might have carried ("Whose message was transmitted . . . and to what audience?" 300) as well as into the exchange of ideas among those involved in the creation of a work. Jacopo Cicognini's *Santa Catterina* and *Le vittorie di Santa Tecla* (both five-act plays with choral *intermedi*), probably performed at La Crocetta, are intriguing examples of the complexity of the issues of audience and message. On the one hand, these theatrical entertainments exhibit "reciprocal communication" in that they "at once [stress] the holiness of the spiritual life and [congratulate] those young women wise enough to have sought it." On the other, the plays and their *intermedi* probably formed part of Cicognini's strategy to achieve a "more lucrative position" with the Medici; Harness notes that the plays' emphasis on the free choice of convent life in place of enforced monasticism contrasts with much convent theater written by nuns and ties in with the official Medici attitude toward Princess Maria Maddalena's calling (300). Thus, there are a number of "messages" in these works: first, a laudatory

message perhaps directed to the nuns of La Crocetta; second, a message that reflects Medici propaganda on the princess's supposedly freely chosen vocation; third, a message from Cicognini to the regents that he was worthy of further patronage.

Cicognini's works illustrate the importance of distinguishing between the contributions of all those involved in the collaborative production of an object of patronage, whether patron(s), adviser(s), potential recipient, craftspeople, or other authors. The nuns of La Crocetta influenced Cicognini's works in that they were the intended performers and audience, but there is no documentary evidence detailing their active input into the content. As a result, it is unclear to what extent these works reflect the nuns' views. The nuns had a vested interest in promoting the worthiness of the spiritual life, however, and were campaigning for the canonization of their founder around the time of Cicognini's plays.

Harness suggests the question of authorship is thorny where the patron is female: there is a particular concern for scholars to discern the extent of the woman's contribution to the resulting work and to distinguish her influence from that of her family (especially male relatives), her advisers, and others working on the project (5). (Harness notes also that the documentation already privileges the patron over the others involved in a project—musicians, carpenters, painters, and designers may have been making important and significant decisions independently of the patron or other overseers, but their precise contributions and creative processes are not usually recorded in detail.)

There is abundant documentation concerning Archduchess Maria Magdalena's involvement in the realization of the art and theater works that she commissioned; she was very much a hands-on patron. For example, Maria Magdalena selected the subject matter, attended rehearsals, and auditioned singers for the 1624 and 1625 productions of the five-act, fully sung opera *La regina Sant'Orsola* (libretto by Salvadori, music by Marco da Gagliano; the 1625 production included a new aria by Francesca Caccini). There is an illuminating correspondence between Maria Magdalena, her secretaries, and Ferdinando Saracinelli (the producer), in which the archduchess resolved a dispute over who should sing the title role vacated by soprano Maria Botti because she failed to learn her part. After the archduchess heard the singers, she settled on a castrato (Botti seems to have been the only woman considered for the role of Saint Ursula). She also made suggestions about which music might be sung, recommending that Francesca Caccini compose a new aria (87–88).

Viewed in light of Maria Magdalena's evident involvement in the preparation of theatrical entertainments, the Salvadori-Gagliano opera and *intermedi*, *La Giuditta* (*Judith*), performed during the politically difficult visit

of Pope Urban VIII's nephew, proves fascinating because of the ambiguous message it sent regarding the relationship of the joint regents of Florence to the pope. Unlike the unintentional miscommunication between Frears's Queen Elizabeth II and her subjects, here the ambiguity was deliberate. Maria Magdalena, with her keen eye for propaganda, is unlikely to have overlooked the symbolic potency of performing an opera "whose subject matter narrates the decapitation of a powerful political and military figure by a pious widow with traditional associations to Florentine civic liberty" (1) during Cardinal Francesco Barberini's visit.

The figure of Judith must have appealed on many levels to Maria Magdalena of Austria. Throughout early modern Europe, women rulers used artistic patronage to confirm the legitimacy of female rule; this was no less true of regents than it was of queens. Indeed, in the case of regents, legitimacy was an especially important issue because such women had married into the ruling family from outside, and therefore their loyalty and allegiances might be called into question. By the seventeenth century, Judith had a long history in Florentine cultural life: she had come to represent the city as well as the Medici family. As Harness explains, Andrea Salvadori's plot for *La Giuditta* exploits the richness of Judith as a multivalent symbol: "This Judith is at once the militant church decapitating heresy, the spirit of Florence protecting its interests, and a strong and clever [and chaste] young widow capable of defeating a seemingly more powerful man" (128). Judith is a symbolic conflation of widow-regent Archduchess Maria Magdalena with the embodiment of Florence. Using an image traditionally associated with Medicean Florence, Archduchess Maria Magdalena presented herself as a leader loyal to the Medici and willing to fight for Florentine interests.

Following the performance, rumors abounded that the intended message of the opera and its attendant prologue and *intermedi* had been that Florence, with its female regents, would brook no nonsense from Rome and its allies. On October 3, 1626, the archduchess's secretary, Dimurgo Lambardi, drafted a letter to Andrea Cioli, the Florentine secretary of state in Rome, the purpose of which was damage control. In the letter, Lambardi takes responsibility for asking Cioli to raise the issue with the pope, thus distancing the regents from the request (the crossings-out in the draft are illuminating here). The secretary of state is asked to represent the work as something that was prepared in haste and therefore not carefully selected or rehearsed, but, importantly, Lambardi does not deny the validity of the politically rebellious interpretation of the performance:

Their Highnesses heard with particular pleasure the praises that the pope gave to Sig. Salvadori for his *Judith*, and he truly merited the honor that it pleased His Holiness to bestow on him. [~~Their Highnesses also say~~] I

desire very much [Sig. Salvadori] that, if Your Illustrious Lordship should have occasion to be with the pope and should find him unoccupied with serious business, you [~~would not refrain from~~] would take some favorable moment to disabuse His Holiness of the idea that the work was deliberately thought out, prepared, and performed in order to apply to the Barberini, because actually it was unexpected and improvised, and put together, one can say, in just a few hours. (1)

In fact, *La Giuditta* was planned, though with some haste compared to other courtly spectacles. (Salvadori probably started writing the libretto in August 1626, and the opera was performed on September 22, 1626, within a fortnight of the approval of the expenditure). Just as Maria Magdalena was almost certainly aware of *La Giuditta*'s ambiguous political implications, so she was almost certainly behind the writing of her secretary's letter. Certainly in the numerous letters Harness has collected and translated, Archduchess Maria Magdalena appears to have been a formidable woman who would have embraced ambiguity when it suited her political needs. And indeed, perhaps the various messages were intended for different constituencies: the image of the "militant church decapitating heresy" would have been appropriate for Cardinal Barberini as a representative of the pope, while the themes of the "spirit of Florence defending her interests" and "the young widow capable of defeating" a powerful man were directed to the cardinal, but also to the archduchess's local Florentine audience. Unlike Frears's Queen Elizabeth II, this ruler seems to have known how far she could go, and how to handle the inevitable diplomatic controversy.

Harness has written a fascinating, insightful, and well-documented study of the communicative and political strategies of early modern noblewomen's artistic and musical patronage. I recommend this work for the light it sheds on patronage as a form of communication, and for the details of the roles of the various contributors to court spectacle. Far from experiencing artistic decline, as some accounts have it, the Florentine regents were responsible for sophisticated and elaborate theatrical entertainments and visual arts that conveyed complex political messages to diverse audiences. Thanks to Harness's attention to the echoes of women's voices, regency Florence can once again be seen to have had all the signs of a thriving cultural life.

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