

WOMEN AND MUSIC IN THE VENETIAN OSPEDALI

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## ABSTRACT

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The Venetian ospedali provided unique places in which women could train and perform as professional musicians. Much of our understanding of the ospedali, however, has been formed through the study of individual, male composers who wrote for the ospedali, of specific musical genres, such as motets or oratorios, or of individual archival collections. Studies of the female students and their lives are scarce. Additionally, ideas about gender shaped and continue to shape our understanding of these all-female institutions. To address these issues, this thesis focuses on the lives and public perceptions of the ospedali musicians. Chapter One contextualizes the ospedali's organization in Venetian history and culture, addressing why Venetian society considered it acceptable for the female students to perform publically in a European society that generally frowned upon professional female musicians. Chapter Two examines contemporary commentaries and reviews (both positive and negative) about the ospedali. These descriptions are compared to contemporary ideas of femininity to show how gendered thought has influenced historical representation of the female ospedali musicians. Chapter Three focuses on the music performed and written in the ospedali, and investigates how gender typecasts influenced visitors' perceptions of the ospedali's music.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1743, Jean-Jacques Rousseau visited the Ospedale dei Mendicanti, a hospice in Venice, to hear its all-girl choir perform a concert. He described the music as “far superior to that of the opera, and which has not its like, either in Italy or the rest of the world.”<sup>1</sup> What he heard was an anomaly, distinctive to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy. Except for the occasional opera star, European society ordinarily looked down upon women performing music publicly. Nevertheless, the Mendicanti and other Venetian hospices, henceforth ospedali, grew into grand conservatories and taught music to displaced and orphaned girls. Visitors from around the continent came to the ospedali to hear performances containing virtuosic solos, complex musical techniques, and rich expressive devices.

While much of our understanding of the ospedali has been formed through the study of individual, male composers who wrote for the ospedali, of specific musical genres, such as motets or oratorios, or of individual archival collections, my thesis brings the students and their lives into greater focus. The Venetian ospedali provided unique places in which women could train and perform as professional musicians. Ideas about gender shaped and continue to shape our understanding of these all-female institutions. To address these issues, I first examine contemporary commentaries and reviews (both positive and negative) about the ospedali. I then compare these descriptions to contemporary ideas of what constituted various forms of femininity. I look at behavior

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Vol. 1, Part 7, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1876) translated by W. Conynham Mallory from the French (New York: Modern Library, 1980), 162, as cited in Jane L. Berdes and Joan Whittemore’s *Guide to Ospedali Research* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2012), 64.

manuals, social customs, and Venetian sumptuary laws to show how these ideas of femininity have influenced the descriptions of these extraordinary women.

Up until this point, many scholars have emphasized the male teachers and composers at the ospedali, such as Antonio Vivaldi, who taught violin to orphaned girls at the Ospedale della Pietà between 1704-38. Rather than focusing on the ospedali musicians themselves, scholars show how composers exploited these instrumentalists to advance their own careers. Michael Talbot, for example, discusses the ways in which Venice and the ospedale shaped Vivaldi's musical output. Talbot explains that Vivaldi benefited from having a corps of orphan musicians available to play his compositions, as well as from the ospedale's staff of copyists and printers.<sup>2</sup> Marc Pincherle also describes Vivaldi's career at the ospedale, including his salary and influence as violin teacher and chorus master. Pincherle argues that Vivaldi was significant in the creation of larger instrumental forms such as the symphony and the concerto, because he had access to instruments and an organized orchestra at the ospedale.<sup>3</sup> Vivaldi's renown continues to inspire research; for example, Micky White is currently exploring the archives of the Ospedale della Pietà to complete a biography on Vivaldi and his students and hopes to discover more music composed for orphan girls.<sup>4</sup> These authors, however, fail to adequately examine the accomplishments of other composers and students at the ospedale.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Talbot, "Vivaldi's Venice," *The Musical Times* 119, no. 1622 (1978): 316-17.

<sup>3</sup> March Pincherle and Manton Monroe Marble, "Vivaldi and the 'Ospitali' of Venice," *The Musical Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1938): 300, 310-12.

<sup>4</sup> Michael White, "The Vivaldi Hunters," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2004. For another example of more current writings on Vivaldi see Amanda Holloway, "The Red Priest Unfrosted," *The Times*, October, 19, 2007.

In contrast, Denis Arnold primarily avoids investigating Vivaldi; instead, he lays a thorough foundation for studying the ospedali both in Naples and Venice, discussing these institutions' organization and the composers who regulated them.<sup>5</sup> He includes little about the daily lives and duties of the students, however.<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field has also turned to other important ospedali composers. She argues that many prominent composers, such as Giacomo Spada, Francesco Gasparini, Giovanni Bassano, Giovanni Rovetta, Missimiliano Neri, and Giovanni Legrenzi (to name a few), contributed to the institutions just as much if not more than Vivaldi; by tapping the girls' musical talents, these composers established exceptional music at the ospedale well before Vivaldi's time.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Faun Tanenbaum Tiedge has explored the life and works of Giovanni Porta, a Maestro di Coro of the Ospedale della Pietà. Through a study of the materials in the Fondo Esposti in Venice, Tiede analyzes how Porta's compositions exemplify the music of the ospedali. In her dissertation she provides a detailed description of what she terms the "Pietà style" of composition.<sup>8</sup>

Jane Berdes has been the only author who attempted to approach the ospedali comprehensively, including a discussion of the ospedali girls. In her book *Women*

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<sup>5</sup> Denis Arnold, "Music at the 'Ospedali,'" *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113, no. 2 (1988): 156-67; Denis Arnold, "Orphans and Ladies: the Venetian Conservatories (1680-1790)," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 89<sup>th</sup> Sess. (1962-63): 31-47; Denis Arnold, "Instruments and Instrumental Teaching in the Early Italian Conservatories," *The Galpin Society Journal* 18 (1965), 72-81; Denis Arnold, "Music at the Mendicanti in the Eighteenth Century," *Music & Letters* 65, no. 4 (1984): 345-56.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on a few of the most famous ospedali women see Arnold, "Music at the 'Ospedali,'" 165.

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field, "Music at the Pietà before Vivaldi," *Early Music* 14, no 3 (1968): 374; Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Faun Stacy Tanenbaum, "The Partbook Collection from the Ospedale della Pietà," PhD diss. New York University, 1993.



*Musicians of Venice*, Berdes examines the origins of the ospedali, the daily organization of the ospedali, the different roles men and women served, and the lives and works of the male composers. She only briefly mentions a few of the most prominent female musicians, however, including the names of Vicenta da Ponte, Agata, Teresa Orsini, Lelia Achipata, Elisabetta Mantovani, Anna Cremona, Bortola Anzoloti, and Maddalena Lombardi Sirmen.<sup>9</sup> In a separate publication, Berdes more fully acknowledges the accomplishments of Anna Maria della Pietà, who was the leading violinist at the Ospedale della Pietà during Vivaldi's time.<sup>10</sup> Elsie Arnold also contributed to a more extensive look at an ospedali student's life, co-authoring a book with Berdes that expands on Maddalena Lombardi Sirmen and her musical accomplishments.<sup>11</sup>

Berdes's work has come under harsh criticism. Laura Macy called *Women Musicians of Venice* a "mountain of documentary material that is both undigested and indigestible."<sup>12</sup> She notes that Berdes fails to define some of the terminology used or to discuss fully any single person or institution. Like Macy, Jonathan Glixon believes that

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<sup>9</sup> Jane L. Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice: Musical Foundations 1525-1855* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 237-9.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Maria della Pietà was a talented musician, skilled not only on the violin, but also on the cello, lute, theorbo, and mandolin. She composed and performed publicly for the ospedale until at least age sixty. For further information on Anna Maria, see Jane L. Berdes, "Anna Maria della Pietà: The Woman Musician of Venice Personified," in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, ed. *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 134-51.

<sup>11</sup> Elsie Arnold, *Maddalena Lombardini Sirmen: Eighteenth-Century Composer, Violinist, and Businesswoman* (Lanhan, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Laura Macy, "Review: The Venetian 'ospedali,'" *Early Music* 22, no. 4 (November, 1994): 682-3.

Berdes presented valuable information without interpreting any of it.<sup>13</sup> He acknowledges, however, that Berdes had good intention in her work, as the ospedali are in need of a thoroughly documented history. Unfortunately Berdes did not fulfill her promise of discussing the women musicians. Instead she focused on the male governors and maestri. Eleanor Selfridge-Field agrees that Berdes wrote “little of individual female musicians and less of music.”<sup>14</sup> Selfridge-Field explains that Berdes “rarely presents information that delineates what was unique to the female experience.”<sup>15</sup> She keeps in mind, however, that Berdes’s original interest was the social organization within the ospedali and the accommodations of economic difference within musical ranks. Berdes’s actual research interests caused *Women Musicians of Venice* to be not an analysis of the lives of female musicians, but an excellent summary of the ospedali’s institutional framework.

Despite these concerns, reviewers agree that Berdes’s work continues to be a valuable source of reference. Berdes’s research archives, located at Duke University in North Carolina, contain manuscripts, calendars, programs, expense reports, as well as other materials from the ospedali. Joan Whittemore recently published a guide to these archives, facilitating research of Berdes’s materials.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Jane Berdes, however, “The work of compiling a history of the *cori* is not finished. Indeed it is hardly begun.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan E. Glixon, “Review: Women Musicians of Venice,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter, 1995): 911-2.

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field, “Review: Women Musicians of Venice,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 4 (Winter, 1995): 1063-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Jane Berdes and Joan Whittemore, *Guide to Ospedali Research* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 252.

This thesis continues the work on the ospedali, and, instead of focusing on the male composers, I approach the topic from a feminist perspective in an effort to question the historical representations of the lives of the ospedali students. The four chapters move from general topics, such as the history of the ospedali and their social conditions, to specific discussions about public reception and musical analysis.

In the first chapter, I briefly outline the history of Italy in relation to the ospedali. Using the publications and research materials in the Jane Baldauf-Berdes archives as a main source, this chapter includes information about the organization of the ospedali and the daily lives and responsibilities of the ospedali musicians. Through this contextualization, I argue that Venetian culture, the ospedali's religious organization, and the ability to make money on the girls' talents allowed the ospedali to become some of the most distinguished musical institutions in Europe.

The second chapter describes gender relations in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy, drawing on feminist literature by Suzanne Cusick and Marcia J. Citron, as well as contemporary behavior manuals, such as Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* and Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*.<sup>18</sup> I argue that the ospedali girls' identity was constructed around two models:

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<sup>18</sup> Suzanne Cusick, "Gender, Musicology, and Feminism," in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, eds. *Rethinking Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Marcia J. Citron, "Feminist Approaches to Musicology," in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, ed. *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 15-28; Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell, Jr. and W. Davies, 1799); Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* 7th ed. (London: Luke Hansard for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806). Even though these sources were published at the end of the eighteenth century, they convey sentiments that were popular throughout the long eighteenth century. Other feminist literature includes Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500* Volume II (Grand Rapids, MI:

the courtesan and the nun.<sup>19</sup> Although obviously contradictory, the ospedali students exhibited traits of both these models. They lived modest, secluded, religious lives, like nuns, but they were also well-educated, talented, and earning money for their talents, like Italian courtesans. Their gender combined with their cultivated talents was titillating to contemporary male audiences; many visitors longed to see these musical women, hidden behind screens, whose voices created the “angelic” sounds of the ospedali.

Because much of the music from the ospedali is either lost or left in pieces, we must rely mainly on visitor’s accounts to discern what their music sounded like. Accordingly, chapter two also explores the writings and reviews of ospedali visitors and patrons. Berdes’s research materials contain diaries, guidebooks, letters, memoirs, reviews, travel literature, and tributes written by ospedali visitors who came from all over Europe. Writers include poet and dramatist Joseph Addison (1672-1719); German Court Councilor Joachim Christoph Nemeitz (1679-1753); German flautist, composer, and theorist Johann Joachim Quantz (1697-1773); Italian librettist Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793); French writer Charles de Brosses (1709-1777); Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778); English music historian Charles Burney (1726-1814); and musician Johann Adam Hiller (1728-1804). Through these writings, I illuminate public perception of the ospedali students.

The final chapter focuses on the music performed and written in the ospedali. I discuss three notable characteristics of the ospedali music – instrumentation, virtuosity, and musical affects. To show the significance of these compositional traits, I analyze

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William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002); Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> These two models, their similarities, their differences, and their connection to the ospedali girls will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 2.

pieces composed by the ospedali maestri, including Giovanni Porta and Antonio Vivaldi. This chapter also extends the discussion on visitors' commentaries and perceptions. I use their comments to continue the investigation on how gender typecasts influenced visitors' perceptions of the ospedali's music.

## CHAPTER 1: The Ospedali Grandi: How Abandoned Girls Became Virtuosi

In the fourteenth century, a group of Venetian nuns, called the Consorelle di Santa Maria dell'Umiltà, also known as the Celestia, undertook the responsibility of caring for abandoned infants.<sup>1</sup> They became a solution to a persistent social problem. For centuries, unmarried Venetian women had been abandoning their illegitimate children as a way to uphold both family honor and the appearance of morality.<sup>2</sup> In response to the high rates of infanticide, the Celestia gave shelter to these abandoned infants and made sure that they were baptized and wet-nursed. At best these babies' chances of survival were slight, but if nothing else, at least they were baptized before death.

This original group of nuns probably had no idea what lasting effects they would have on Venice. In 1353, the Venetian State took over their organization, dedicated a building for its use on the Riva degli Schiavoni in the parish of San Giovanni, and named it the Ospedale della Pietà.<sup>3</sup> The Pietà was soon followed by three other hospices: the Ospedale degl'Incurabili (1522), the Ospedale di Santa Maria dei Derelitti (1528), and the Ospedale di San Lazzaro e dei Mendicanti (1595). Each catered to a different need: the

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice: Musical Foundations 1525-1855* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), 47.

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to give exact numbers of abandoned children. We do know, however that in fourteenth-century Florence the foundling hospitals Santa Maria da San Gallo and Santa Maria della Scala were accepting about two hundred abandoned children per year. It is likely the city of Venice saw similar numbers. Abandonment in Venice especially increased during the Black Plague epidemics of 1348 and 1566, as well as during the famine of 1570 and the ongoing war with the Turks. For more detailed information about abandonment in Italy, see John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 416; and David Kertzer, *Sacrificed for Honor* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 72-3.

<sup>3</sup> Berdes, 48.

Incurabili took in all who contracted incurable diseases such as syphilis or the bubonic plague; the Derelitti provided a place of refuge for the homeless; the Mendicanti cared for beggars and orphans; while the Pietà exclusively took in foundlings.<sup>4</sup>

These hospices – together called the Ospedali Grandi – eventually became grand conservatories in which the destitute were taught to read, write, and especially play music. Because boys could be employed in commerce and shipping, however, only girls were musically trained. In time, the managers of the ospedali realized they could host musical concerts and turn the girls’ talents into profit. Visitors from across Europe came to hear these all-female ensembles. In fact, the musical training at the ospedali became so renowned that visitors began referring to them as “some of the best performers and voices in Italy.”<sup>5</sup>

To understand the reception and influence of the Ospedali Grandi, an introductory study of their history and their organization is required. This chapter outlines the history of the Venetian ospedali, contextualizing their development with contemporary politics and ideas about music and female performers. I then discuss the daily organization of the ospedali and the duties of their wards. By the end of this chapter, I show why Venetian society considered it acceptable for these girls to perform music publicly in a European society that generally frowned upon professional female musicians.

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<sup>4</sup> Denis Stevens, “Orphans and Musicians in Venice,” *History Today* 50, no. 5 (2000): 22-3.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Folkes, “Journal” (Oxford, Bodleian Library: England, unpublished), Misc. d.444 f.7; cited in Jane Berdes and Joan Whittemore, *Guide to Ospedali Research* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2012), 56. Martin Folkes travelled to Venice in 1733 as part of a two-year tour of Europe.

## *Venetian Ospedali*

Before its economic decline and eventual fall to Napoleon in 1797, Venice was a proud city. Venetian citizens constructed their native city as the ideal center for Europe, boasting a free society, devout Christianity, and magnificent arts.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Venetians had reason to be proud: they enjoyed centuries of political as well as economic stability. The Republic organized its government around a number of checks and balances in which power was given equally to the one, the few, and the many. As a result, the city did not experience the dominance of a noble family, control from the Papal State, or other forms of tyranny. Indeed, Venice was free from upheaval, except for a few economic downturns when the Ottoman Empire took Constantinople in the fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Venetians believed they had created the ideal government – a mix of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy – independent from foreign authority.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, Venetian citizens lived in economic and political freedom, which allowed them to cultivate the creative arts like nowhere else. Venetian politicians and artists constructed themselves as a well-educated and cultured society. As François Raguenet noted, even children commonly received artistic training in accordance with the Venetian aesthetic: “The Italians learn Musick like we do to Read [...] and attain it to the

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<sup>6</sup> The government and arts in Venice will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> To read a more thorough history of Venice, see Katherine Vernon, *Italy from 1494 to 1790* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909).

<sup>8</sup> A greater discussion of the idealistic “Myth of Venice” is presented in David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 1-5.



greatest Perfection.”<sup>9</sup> Charles Burney revealed, “The first music which I heard here was in the street, immediately on my arrival [...] but I shall not mention all the performances of this kind which I met with here; as they were so numerous, that the repetition would be tiresome.”<sup>10</sup> Over the years, the arts would become essential to the city’s economic survival. Venetians advertised their privilege, wealth, and power through extravagant art, festivals, dress, dialect, and other forms of pomp. They strove for perfection in order to craft the greatest European achievements in architecture, music, paintings, and sculptures to attract tourists.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, by the eighteenth century, Venice became better known for its arts than its legacy as a powerful naval trader.<sup>12</sup>

Alongside the extravagance, Venetians also emphasized their virtue and piety; citizens were free to practice whatever religion they chose, and a church could be found on almost every street. Venice was even home to the first Jewish ghetto neighborhood in Europe. State events were often combined with religious festivals, as the sacred and secular were one and the same to Venetians.

To protect this political, cultural, and religious freedom, Venetians long believed that overly prominent individuals posed a threat of tyranny, so no one stood above the

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<sup>9</sup> François Ragueneau, *Comparison between the French and Italian Musick and Opera*, trans. J.E. Galliard (London: for William Lewis, 1709), 41; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Burney, *An Eighteenth Century Musical Tour in France and Italy*, Percy Scholes, ed. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 110-1.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, to preserve the greatness of Venetian arts, artistic merchants were not allowed to leave the city without permission, while foreign artisans had to receive a permit to trade within the city. See Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> See Vernon, 419-22.

rest. Instead, they worked together for the good of the Republic to uphold an ideal image of their city. Additionally, the Christian tenet to “take care of the poor among you” persuaded people to hold themselves responsible for each other’s welfare.<sup>13</sup> Venetians held strong beliefs in charity and communal care.<sup>14</sup>

Controlling Venetian social environment was important to protecting its utopian quality. Plague, famine, and most especially idleness were seen as menaces to tranquility.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Venice established regulation known as the Poor Laws. Adopted in the early 1500s, Poor Laws stated that any person who could not help him/herself must be confined within an institution.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, institutions like the Ospedali Grandi were established to take in the destitute. The Venetian State had two reasons for these laws: first, to protect the individual citizen from perceived corruption; and second, to keep the public atmosphere appealing.<sup>17</sup> These Poor Laws exemplify Venetian society’s view that beggars, homeless, the sick, or otherwise impaired were abhorrent and needed to be separated from the rest of society.

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<sup>13</sup> Kertzer, *Sacrificed*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 428.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault also discusses the need for confinement. See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 38-64; and Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Baldauf-Berdes, “Anna Maria,” in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, ed., *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 145.

<sup>17</sup> Venetian society accomplished both of these goals; its citizens were usually content and well taken care of, and tourists were often drawn to the beautiful architecture and beggar-free environment. For a detailed history of tourism in Venice, see Christopher Hibbert, *Venice: The Biography of a City* (London: Grafton Books, 1988), 95-142.

Even though the Poor Laws required the destitute to be separated from society, they were not dismissed as either disgraceful or unimportant. Instead, Venice, being a charitable and cultured community, became responsible for their welfare. For example, at the Ospedali Grandi, the governors (volunteer patricians fulfilling their duties to the Republic) provided their wards with food, shelter, and most notably an education, in hopes that all would reenter Venice as productive citizens.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, to preserve Venetian virtue, religious practice was the most important part of every ospedali ward's education. The male children were also often taught commerce, shipping, or some other public service, while female children learned sewing, laundering, and other abilities to prepare them for marriage or entrance into a convent. Since music was an essential part of Venetian culture and religious practices, the ospedali governors also allowed the institution to train the female wards in music.<sup>19</sup>

### *Religion and Music*

The Catholic Church, partially responsible for the development and regulation of the ospedali system, placed many restrictions on music throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1665, for example, Pope Alexander VII ordered that music in the

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<sup>18</sup> A propensity to give to charity stemmed from a few different sources. The first influence was Roman tradition, such as the myth of Romulus and Remus, two abandoned twins who founded Rome. Consequently, since the origins and potential of an abandoned infant was never known, society was expected to care for every child in case he or she grew up to be a prominent individual. Christianity also encouraged charity. The Christian tenet to "take care of the poor among you" persuaded people to hold themselves responsible for each other's welfare. For a more in depth explanation of Roman legends, see Boswell, 70-80. To read more about the desire to rehabilitate idleness, see Foucault, 38-64.

<sup>19</sup> For a more complete history on Venice, see Vernon, *Italy from 1494 to 1790*.

Church “must express only serious sentiments of piety,” that “No solo voice, high or low, is permitted, either for the whole or part of a psalm, hymn, or motet,” and that churches were obligated to put up “straight grills that are sufficiently high to hide the view of the cantors.”<sup>20</sup> Popes Innocent XI (1679-89) and Innocent XII (1692-1700) both forbade the use of horns, trumpets, oboes, recorders, flageolets, and mandolins.<sup>21</sup> In 1692, Pope Innocent XII also declared, “His Holiness does not in any way permit or allow any motet or song to be sung during Mass unless it pertains to the Mass itself [...] and during Vespers His Holiness permits only those antiphons which come before and after the psalms, and these should be sung without any alteration.”<sup>22</sup>

Although music was an inseparable and powerful part of religious practices, restrictions registered contemporary beliefs that music was also threatening. While music could encourage devotion and intimate connection to God, it could also lead congregations astray. From the time of classical Greece, different compositional devices were believed to have various ill affects on the audience; innovation seemed especially threatening. As Plato wrote, “Any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited.”<sup>23</sup> This sentiment continued through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, echoed by Giacomo Vincenti in a work he dedicated to the ospedali:

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<sup>20</sup> Robert F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislations on Sacred Music, 95 A.D. to 1977 A.D.* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1979), 78.

<sup>21</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Pallade Veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society 1650-1750* (Venice: Fondazione Levi, 1985), 62.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Selfridge-Field, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *The Complete Works of Plato* Book IV, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Oxford University Trinity College, 2011).

Those motets and similar types of musical compositions whose purpose is to move listeners through the use of such devices as mood-setting, technical display, and various other ‘barockisms,’ are displeasing in direct proportion to the degree to which they disturb their audiences. The reverse to this theory, it seems to me, is equally valid. By this I mean that compositions which produce the greatest sense of pleasure for their listeners through the use of lively tempos, and overall tastefulness, are the best ones.<sup>24</sup>

To further protect their congregations, church leaders also commonly restricted women from participating in musical activities. Beginning in 1588, Pope Sixtus V banned women from the stage in all Papal States. Reiterated by Pope Innocent XI in 1676, the ban continued into the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Musicologist Suzanne Cusick explains, “It is easy to interpret the exclusion of a music-creating woman as a response to the centuries-old trope in European thinking about music that describes music’s irresistible power as akin to the erotic power that women’s bodies are supposed to have over men’s. From Plato to Artusi to Hanslick, anxieties about music’s power have been elaborated through metaphors of gender, sexual difference, and sexual allure.”<sup>26</sup> When women and music combined in a performance, the effect could be detrimental to the morality of the

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<sup>24</sup> Giacomo Vincenti, “Dedicazione,” in Ruggiero Giovanelli, ed. *Sacrum modulationum* (Venetiis: Apud Jacobum Vincentium, 1598); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 21-22.

<sup>25</sup> These decrees stemmed from St. Paul’s admonition, written in 1 Corinthians 14:34: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted for them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.” S. M. Ugoni, *Discorso... della dignitàe eccellenza della città di Venetia* (Venice: F. Spinola, 1562), 166.

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Cusick, “Gender, Musicology, and Feminism,” in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, eds. *Rethinking Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 478.

congregation, provoking men from divine thoughts to earthly pleasures.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, according to the Church, any music performed by women needed to be controlled or separated so that it would not present moral danger. The only acceptable places for women to perform music were in seclusion, such as in convents or in the home, where only other women or family members would be in attendance.

### *Female Musicians*

The seductive nature of music pervaded eighteenth-century European beliefs. For instance, Hannah More (1745-1833), a member of the Blue Stocking Society who became well known and influential during her lifetime, recalled an ancient association of artistic women and immoral behavior:

[A]n entire devotedness to the fine arts has been one grand source of the corruption of the women; and so justly were these pernicious consequences appreciated by the Greeks, among whom these arts were carried to the highest possible perfection, that they seldom allowed them to be cultivated to a very exquisite degree by women of great purity of character.<sup>28</sup>

More warned that if a lady should aspire to art, music, writing, or philosophy she should remember that those who did in ancient Greece were not the “chaste wives” and “virtuous

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<sup>27</sup> Linda Austern, “Music and the English Renaissance,” in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, ed. *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 57.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell, Jr. and W. Davies, 1799), 35.

daughters” of philosophers, poets, and politicians, but were “among the Phrynes, the Laises, the Aspasia, and the Glyceras.”<sup>29</sup>

While More advocated for women’s education to support their future roles as wives and mothers, she also believed that devoting the majority of an education to music or the arts did not suit a virtuous woman. In More’s words, a woman “should be carefully instructed that her talents are only means to a still higher attainment, and that she is not to rest in them as an end; that merely to exercise them as instruments for the acquisition of fame and the promoting of pleasure, is subversive of her delicacy as a woman, and contrary to the spirit of a Christian.”<sup>30</sup> According to More and her many readers, the arts cultivated in excess “become agents of voluptuousness. They excite the imagination; and the imagination thus excited, and no longer under the government of strict principle, becomes the most dangerous stimulant of the passions, promotes a too keen relish for pleasure, teaching how to multiply its sources, and inventing new and pernicious modes of artificial gratification.”<sup>31</sup>

Other authors echoed More’s warnings. Concerned about female morality, Thomas Gisborne, an Anglican priest and poet, wrote *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) for women of all classes. He believed that women excelled most in

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<sup>29</sup> Phryne, Lais, Aspasia, and Glycera were well-known Grecian hetaeras. A hetaera was akin to the Renaissance Italian courtesan – a highly educated, refined, sexual companion. Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 37.

the domestic sphere, so his writings applied to all women equally.<sup>32</sup> Beside his belief that a woman's only concerns should be comforting others, being examples in conduct for men, and raising children, Gisborne expressed his concern that playing music publically for large audiences (similar to the way the ospedali performed) was vain, detracting from the purpose of listening.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, performances were believed to influence the character of the audience; so only those performances that were "unequivocally virtuous" should be supported. Otherwise public performances should be "exploited as a nuisance and most dangerous to the community."<sup>34</sup>

Even in Italy, where expanded roles for women were commonly supported, female musicians were still suspect. In 1541, the Italian humanist Pietro Bembo instructed his daughter that playing a musical instrument was "a thing for vain and frivolous women."<sup>35</sup> Two centuries later, this opinion still persisted. An Italian-born English literary critic Giuseppe Baretti (1719-89) expressed a concern over musical training for young women in Italy:

The Italian parents would have a greater inconvenience to contend with should they venture to make their girls greatly proficient in music. They are therefore right when they avoid this danger, or when they suffer them only to learn a little from musical women; which they condescend to do in several parts of our towns, and especially in Venice, whose musical

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* 4th ed. (London: T. Cadell, Jr. and W. Davies, 1799), 1-2. The first edition was published in 1797.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-8.

<sup>35</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Opere in Volgare*, ed. Mario Marti (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), 877-78; cited in Martha Feldman, "The Courtesan's Voice: Petrarchan Lovers, Pop Philosophy, and Oral Traditions," in Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105.



hospitals furnish them with female teachers, who know so much of playing and singing as to be able to give a girl some little taste of both, but cannot easily lead her to that excellence in music which might prove pernicious to innocence and virtue.<sup>36</sup>

Taking this sentiment to the extreme, Girolamo Fenaruolo wrote in a letter to a choirmaster of the Basilica di San Marco, “Never is there found a woman so rare nor so chaste that if she were to sing she would not soon become a whore.”<sup>37</sup> Most women musicians who were not linked to a man as a husband, constant companion, protector, or sponsor would have been considered a prostitute or a courtesan – to be looked at and applauded, but not to be included in “polite society.”<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, the suspicion of female musicians was partly due to a common belief that singing was a means of projecting sexuality from a woman directly into the ears of her listeners. Throughout the seventeenth century, the oral cavity was thought to be intimately tied to female reproductive organs. Not only were they similarly shaped openings, both connecting to cavernous internal organs (the stomach and uterus, respectively), but they were also both tied to sexual activity (kissing and intercourse).

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<sup>36</sup> Giuseppe Marc’ Antonio Baretta, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy; With Observation of the Mistakes of Some Travellers with Regard to that Country* 2 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: T. Daniels and L. Davis, 1769), 99-100; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Edmond Vander Straeten, *La misque aux Pays-Bas avant le XIX siècle: Documents inédits et annotés*, 8 vols. repr. In 4 (1882; New York: Dover, 1969), 6:221, vv. 122-24; cited in Feldman, 105.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Newcomb, "Courtesans, Music, or Musicians?: Professional Women Musicians in Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (1986), 103.

Bonnie Gordon explains, “Singing required the rapid opening and closing of the glottis, which paralleled the motion of the uterus imagined to accompany orgasm.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Ospedali Organization*

Despite the social stigma against and legal regulation of female musicians, the *cori* (all-female choirs) of the *ospedali* still became not only well known for their excellence in music, but also successful with the public. Training the orphaned girls in music also defied papal authority (a common Venetian exploit). Thus, to control the threat of female singers, the *ospedali* became modeled on convents. The clergy controlled the *ospedale* girls’ daily routines, during which they constantly practiced religious devotion, even during work. Structure and regulation was based on medieval Christian monasticism, with four main rules applied to *ospedali* life: prayer, reading, work, and following the Liturgy of the Hours.<sup>40</sup> Every morning the students would wake to prayer, which continued throughout the day. They ate their meals in complete silence, performed manual labor and chores, and attended lessons in reading, grammar, arithmetic, catechism, and vocational training, with little leisure time. The students attended multiple

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<sup>39</sup> Gordon gives three contemporary examples of this association: (1) The “Hippocratic method of testing fertility: having a woman sit over a head of garlic and checking her mouth for the pungent odor.” (2) In 1624, doctor/philosopher Jacques Ferrand claimed, “chapped and dry lips indicated a ‘dry womb.’” (3) Intercourse “was imagined to deepen a women’s voice by enlarging her neck, “which responds in sympathy with the stretching of her lower neck.” John Chadwick and W. N. Mann, eds., *The Medical Works of Hippocrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 262; Jacques Ferrand, *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, trans. David A. Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 294; Ann Hanson and David Armstrong, “The Virgin’s Voice and Neck: Aeschylus, Agamemnon 245, and Other Texts,” *British Institute of Classical Studies* 33 (1986): 99; cited in Bonnie Gordon, “The Courtesan’s Singing Body as a Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy,” in Feldman, 186-7.

<sup>40</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 55.

masses throughout the day and even performed frequent, mandatory confessions.<sup>41</sup> The ospedali students were instructed to practice modesty, silence (all casual talk was forbidden), obedience, as well as to avoid idleness. Those who broke the routine way of life, with offences such as tardiness, absences, or refusal to take on extra work, were subject to monastic punishment. For instance, students could be punished through isolation, haircutting, withholding a share of income, loss of right to wear uniforms, fines, or even a prison diet of only bread and water.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, students were not allowed to leave the ospedali premises without written consent from the governors, nor could visitors enter.<sup>43</sup> According to Venetian custom, the ospedali women were only given one holiday from their daily routines each year, during which they usually were allowed a supervised visit to the countryside.<sup>44</sup> The Priora – the lead supervisor of the female sector of the ospedali – and governors also regulated correspondence to and from the students. If they deemed a letter unsuitable, a student would not receive it or even know of its existence.<sup>45</sup>

When the ospedali cori were first formed, priests taught all music, which served only religious functions. The girls primarily performed as vocalists accompanied solely

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>43</sup> Regulation on leave and admittance was actually quite common throughout Venice. To protect the quality and singularity of Venetian work, for instance, artisans were not allowed to leave the city, while outsiders were only given a three-year permit to work in Venice. Even a doge (the leaders of Venetian government) could not leave his palace without consent from a committee. Ibid., 14, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 78.

by an organ or occasional string instruments. By 1630, however, the ospedali governors began realizing the economic potential of the ospedali choirs. Higher-quality music yielded larger donations from patrons and visitors.<sup>46</sup> Between 1630-75, the governors hired professional musicians instead of priests to teach performance practice, sight singing, ear training, music theory, and instrumental techniques. During this time, however, the governors were still concerned about the integrity of the music presented, so they set decrees for compositions. Following the governors' directions, the male composers and teachers – or maestri – simplified liturgical celebrations by limiting innovation or unorthodox techniques in their music and emphasizing the religious texts. Even though the ospedali started using more instruments in their sacred music after 1630, the governors still forbade the use of trumpets and drums.<sup>47</sup>

Between 1675-1720, the ospedali performances began attracting the interest of traveling royalty and music journalists, who spread the word about the musicality of the cori. To appeal to these larger audiences, the governors enlarged the musical staff, hiring more distinguished composers and instrumental teachers.<sup>48</sup> In 1677, Giacomo Spada, a Maestro di Coro (Choirmaster) at the Pietà, became the first serious promoter of musical training for the orphans, regulating daily practice routines and requiring that the most talented attend music lessons. Spada also recognized that an instrumental supplement to the choirs could draw in more listeners, so he appointed his brother Bonaventura as

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<sup>46</sup> Denis Arnold, "Music at the *Ospedali*," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 113, no. 2 (1988): 159.

<sup>47</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 185.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-4.

*maestro di instrumenti* to give lessons on string and wind instruments.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, the ensembles became larger, more instruments were purchased, and the composers were given permission to use more innovative techniques. For example, in 1704, Francesco Gasparini, Spada's successor at the Pietà, positioned four choirs in four separate corners of the ospedale church to create a polychoral, echo affect for the audience (a practice that began at the Basilica di San Marco in the late sixteenth century).

The ospedale reached their pinnacle between 1720-80; the musical ensembles grew in number, and the governors hired even more instrumental teachers and composers. Many of these composers (primarily trained in the conservatories of Naples) already held successful reputations before they began their careers at the ospedale. Hiring the most famous composers became essential to attracting larger and wealthier audiences. Consequently, word of the ospedale's high-quality music traveled around Europe in literature and upon the tongues of traveling musicians, writers, and royalty. Compositional style shifted from orientation towards the church to focus on the individual performer, featuring soloists and an operatic and virtuosic style. Additionally, instead of only training orphaned children, the governors started auditioning and bringing in adult students, called *figlie di spese*, to supplement the cori.<sup>50</sup> Some of these *figlie di spese* were children of nobility, whose families paid tuition so they could become virtuosi like the orphan girls. For example, Bortola Andriana Biondi, a daughter of a wealthy family in Venice, was accepted into an ospedale choir at age sixteen. Her brother and

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<sup>49</sup> Eleanor Siegfried-Field, "Music at the Pietà before Vivaldi," *Early Music* 14, no. 3 (1968): 374.

<sup>50</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 215.

brother-in-law paid tuition for the five years she was a member.<sup>51</sup> Some tuition prices were high enough to pay for over one-third of a maestro's yearly salary.<sup>52</sup>

Due to the financial instability in Venice, however, the ospedali fell into bankruptcy.<sup>53</sup> By 1777, salaries for external maestri were eliminated; teachers and composers, such as Ferdinando Bertoni of the Mendicanti, only stayed on voluntarily as part of their "Christian duty."<sup>54</sup> All the ospedali surrendered to government control, and in 1791, the Venetian Republic decided to reorganize the ospedali. Afterwards, the musicians only performed on a reduced scale.<sup>55</sup> The Derelitti closed in 1791, followed by the Medicanti in 1795. After Napoleon's invasion of Venice in 1797, all musical activities at the ospedali were reduced to only the *falsobordone* style practiced in churches.<sup>56</sup> The Incurabili then closed in 1805. Only the Pietà's musical activity survived Napoleon's government takeover. Nineteenth-century tourists, however, considered their compositions and performances mediocre at best. The Pietà's last known composition

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>52</sup> Denis Arnold, "Orphans and Ladies: The Venetian Conservatories," *The Royal Musical Association* 89<sup>th</sup> Sess. (1962-3): 37.

<sup>53</sup> Venice's financial decline began at the end of the sixteenth century and continued to its fall in 1797. The city lost large numbers of its population to the Black Plague in 1575 and 1630. Portugal also found a sea route to the East, causing Venice to lose its prominence as a trade center. See Vernon, 419-22.

<sup>54</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 182, 232.

<sup>55</sup> Berdes and Whittemore, 154.

<sup>56</sup> *Falsobordone* is a chordal recitation over root position triads. It is an *a capella* style based on Gregorian psalm tones, made up of two sections, each over one chord followed by a cadence. Murray C. Bradshaw, "Falsobordone," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed April 9, 2013), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09273>.

was performed in 1840. Today, the institution still stands in Venice, but survives solely as an orphanage.

### *Acceptance*

I propose three explanations why the ospedali girls' public performances flourished in a society that usually abhorred female musicians:

First, Venetian culture supported the potential in every individual. Even though the Poor Laws required the girls to be separated from society, Venetian citizens still upheld the importance of education and practiced charity and communal care. Thus, the abandoned girls were not rejected, but instead, received stability, food, shelter, and most notably an education. In fact, the education was considered one of the most important parts of their rehabilitation, so that each ward could return to Venice as a productive citizen.

Furthermore, Venice gained a reputation as a musical center for tourists, and music became an essential part of every Venetian's life. When visitors came to the city, they expected to hear some of the finest music in all of Europe. Therefore, it is not surprising that Venetians allowed the musical training of the ospedali girls to complement the artistic nature of their city. In fact, during Lent, the Ospedali Grandi filled the important role of attracting tourists when opera could not. Their high-quality music and sacred nature allowed the ospedali to be substitute attractions for tourists during religious seasons.

Second, the girls had access to music because it formed a part of their religious education. The ospedali governors, who had a duty to uphold the reverent nature of Venice by taking in the derelict, maintained the conviction that religious activity was a

necessary part of daily duties and education. The religious devotion of the ospedali wards was essential to their ability to someday contribute to Venice as acceptable citizens (i.e. nuns or wives). Therefore, music became a part of their education because it was intimately tied to religion. The students initially performed only as a part of religious worship. Because it was sacred, performing music did not create any controversy. Instead, society believed that the music showed the girls' devotion, and any additional musical activities complemented the girls' religious fervor.

Eventually, society saw the orphan girls as angelic messengers of God. Since the public could see that the girls were pious as a result of the ospedali's routine religious practices, citizens were more likely to perceive that the girls were virtuous rather than provocative. The girls' chaste images were further supported because they were young and secluded within the ospedali walls. Since the girls practiced inflexible daily routines supposedly set by the clergy, they seemed to submit to strict masculine control. Thus, their musical performances were monitored and regulated; the public did not perceive their music as morally dangerous. Instead, their music might move its listeners to a more divine state.

Third, the girls were allowed to perform publicly, because the ospedali administrators realized they could use the girls' talents to bring in revenue. An all-female musical ensemble was unusual, and like anything out of the ordinary, it caught the public's attention. As a result, it attracted potential patrons.<sup>57</sup> Their public donations supported a growing number of ospedali patients, but it also bolstered the administrators'

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<sup>57</sup> Berdes, *Woman Musicians*, 34.



pay. If the administrators only cared about the interests of the orphan girls, they would have turned away any non-orphan students, such as children of nobility, from participating in the ensembles.<sup>58</sup> However, it was more than just charity that motivated the ospedali directors. The ospedali maestri were considered rich when they retired from the Pietà, some of them, the richest composers in all of Italy. They not only earned a yearly salary on which one could live comfortably, but they also supplemented their income from lessons or compositions for ospedali patrons. Renting the orphan girls to nobility for private performances provided additional revenue.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, the Ospedali Grandi proved to be influential to the field of music. Because the girls were talented on a wide variety of instruments, composers such as Vivaldi were able to write music that helped develop the modern day orchestra. The ospedali were some of the first institutions to have complete, trained, in-house orchestras readily available to perform. The Ospedali Grandi also became examples for future musical institutions, as many Italian music schools are direct decedents of the ospedali. Additionally, when music historian Charles Burney returned to London after his Grand Tour, he was determined to establish a musical conservatory fashioned after the ones he saw in Venice. In his plan for a music school, he declared the following: “Dr. Burney having long seen & lamented the want of a public music-school in this Country, has bestowed much Time & Reflection in forming a Plan for the Institution of one, somewhat

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<sup>58</sup> Berdes, “Anna Maria,” 146.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 36.

similar to the famous *Conservatorios* of Italy.”<sup>60</sup> He failed to accomplish his goal, but the Royal Academy of Music, established in 1822, followed a model similar to the one Burney hoped for. It was the first English music school that solely trained both girls and boys in professional musicianship.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Carl Zelter founded an “Ordentliche Singschule nach Art der italienischen Konservatorien” in 1804. As a highly regarded teacher, Zelter was a large influence on his student Felix Mendelssohn, who founded the famous Leipzig Conservatory in 1843. As Denis Arnold wrote, “It is not too much to ascribe to the influence of the Italian institutions the creation of a whole climate of music teaching until our own day.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Burney continued: “It seems as if an English Music School, should be divided into two distinct Classes, which would comprehend all the advantages of the celebrated Musical Seminaries of both Venice & Naples, one of which should be wholly appropriated to the Education of Girls, chiefly in Singing; & the other to the Instruction of Boys who have talents for Composition & for performing on different Instruments.” Jamie Croy Kassler, “Burney’s ‘Sketch of a Plan for a Public Music School,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (April 1972): 227-31.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>62</sup> Arnold, “Music at the Ospedali,” 167.

## CHAPTER 2: Angels or Sirens: Visitors' Commentaries on the Female Musicians of the Ospedali Grandi

“In these conservatories, of which some aged senators take on themselves the management, female orphans or foundlings are maintained, brought up under the best masters, and portioned, each of these foundations being very plentifully endowed. The tendency of the education, however, seems rather to make Laises and Aspasia, than nuns or mothers of families.”

– Pierre Jean Grosley de Troyes, 1758.<sup>1</sup>

In the long eighteenth century, Venice, Italy was a must-see destination for any cultured traveler. In 1776, for example, influential English author Samuel Johnson declared, “A man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see.”<sup>2</sup> Among Italian cities, Venice boasted “the most compelling achievements in modern politics, painting, architecture, and music.”<sup>3</sup> Grand Tourists who stopped in Venice had the opportunity to learn about one of the most successful and peaceful governments in Europe, as well as experience an extravagant lifestyle that included large festivals, showy fashion, open sexuality, and uninhibited manners. In 1789, Hester Lynch Piozzi waxed poetic about her visit to Venice: “The general effect produced by such architecture, such painting, such pillars; illuminated as I saw them last night by the moon at full, rising out of the sea, produced an

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Jean Grosley de Troyes, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'Italie et les Italiens*, trans. T. Nugent (London: L.Davis and C. Reymers, 1769), 264.

<sup>2</sup> James Boswell and John Wilson Croker, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: George Dearborn, 1833), 61-2.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Redford, *Venice and the Grand Tour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 7.

effect like enchantment; and indeed the more than magical sweetness of Venetian manners, dialect, and address, confirms one's notion."<sup>4</sup>

Paradoxically, among these indulgences, visitors also heard some of the finest religious music radiating from cloistered nunneries. This juxtaposition of Venice's sights and sounds, both extravagant and free while still religiously devout and structured, characterized tourists' reflections on their time in Venice. They observed courtesans, wearing makeup and lavish jewelry, openly displaying themselves in the streets, while they would see other women veiled and protected by male companions.

Numerous tourists wrote accounts of their experiences in Venice, and, as expected, their descriptions vary widely from fascination and adoration to moral repugnance. During his Grand Tour between 1758-1765, Edward Gibbons exemplified both extremes in his travel account: "The spectacle of Venice afforded some hours of astonishment and some days of disgust."<sup>5</sup> Influential travel writer Thomas Coryat, one of the first to make a Grand Tour of Europe, poetically described Venice as "this incomparable city, this most beautifull Queene, this untainted virgine, this Paradise, this Tempe, this rich Diademe and most flourishing garland of Christendome."<sup>6</sup> Conversely, in 1712, Charles Baldwyn presented an extreme, yet representative response to Venetian life: "They enjoy a sort of liberty but it is only to be libertines and they are grown so

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<sup>4</sup> Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey to Italy, and Germany* (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1789), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Memoires of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1966), 135; cited in Bruce Redford, *Venice and the Grand Tour* (New York: Yale University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* Vol. 1 (Glasgow: Robert MacLehose & Company Ltd., 1905), 427.

scandalous that I think their whole City may well be term'd the Brothell house of Europe.”<sup>7</sup>

These contrasting interpretations characterized not only visitors' perceptions of Venice as a whole, but also of specific features of the city, including that of the Ospedali Grandi. For instance, an Italian journal titled *Pallade Veneta*, published between 1687-1751, labeled the ospedali girls “angels” and “virgins,” as well as “sirens.”<sup>8</sup> In 1655, Robert Bargrave, a merchant and amateur composer, recalled the ospedali and their musicians as, “Nunneries” and “Nunns,”<sup>9</sup> only to be echoed by Sir Philip Skippon in 1664.<sup>10</sup> A century later, however, Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the girls “longed-for beauties,” and Pier Jean Grosley de Troyes evoked Lais and Aspasia, well-known Grecian courtesans.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the female singers at the ospedali – known as figlie del coro – were constructed around the commonly expressed virgin/whore dichotomy. To travelers they were both divine and titillating. By examining traveler's accounts of their trips to Venice,

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<sup>7</sup> Brinsley Ford Archive, Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art (s.v. “Baldwyn”); cited in Redford, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field, ed. *Pallade Veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society 1650-1750* (Venice: Fondazione Levi, 1985); translated in Jane L. Berdes and Joan Whittemore's *Guide to Ospedali Research* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2012), 33, 45-7.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Bargrave, *A Relation of Sundry Voyages and Journeys* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS.C.7 99), 162-3; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Skippon, *An Account of a Journey Made thro' Part of the Low Countries, Germany, Italy, and France* (London: Churchill, 1752), 513; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 24.

<sup>11</sup> See quote above. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Vol. 1, Part 7, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1876) trans. W. Conynham Mallory from the French (New York: Modern Library, 1980), 162; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 64.

I tease out these incongruous perceptions of the *ospedali figlie* and situate them in the larger context of contemporary gender constructions. This examination leads to an analysis of how the eighteenth-century Venetian travel guides have continued to inform historical literature about the *ospedali* today.

### *Venice and Music*

Tourists believed Venice possessed some of the finest arts and music in Europe; the city became the primary tourist stop for a full cultural experience. In 1636, for example, Venice opened the first ever opera house for a paying public, providing a popular attraction for both artists and tourists.<sup>12</sup> Other notable musical tourist attractions included the Basilica di San Marco, which had been performing sacred music with a trained choir since before the fifteenth century, and the Venetian *scuole*, charitable confraternities that supported the arts and were well known for their promotion of instrumental music and participation in public ceremonies and festivals.

These encouraging artistic conditions attracted foreign musicians who added to the prestige of the city's music. Musicians, like other artists, had the opportunity to earn an income from several sources – performing in festivals, composing for churches and patrons, teaching, or composing for the opera. Additionally, Venetian publishers were some of the most important in all of Italy, supplying a large amount of readily available writings and music throughout the city. By the middle of the eighteenth century,

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<sup>12</sup> Jane L. Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice: Musican Foundations 1525-1855* (New York: Oxford University Press), 41.

composers and musicians were flocking from Naples and other surrounding areas to have productive and profitable careers in Venice.<sup>13</sup>

The Ospedali Grandi were among the most popular musical attractions in Venice. Many composers, who wanted to work and train in Venice, would begin by writing music for an ospedale, a stepping-stone for more prestigious careers in an opera house or San Marco. Because the ospedali had a stable corps of musicians readily available, composers could write difficult, virtuosic pieces.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the ospedali composers were expected to write prolifically; the governors demanded new music regularly to keep audiences interested. Consequently, ospedale music was usually high quality and distinctive.<sup>15</sup>

Visitors recognized that the music at the ospedali was some of the best in the city. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau proclaimed, the music at the ospedali had “not its like, either in Italy or the rest of the world,”<sup>16</sup> and Charles Burney believed that the ospedali were “admirable musical seminaries” – that “there is not in all Italy any establishment of the same kind.”<sup>17</sup> Rousseau and Burney’s comments alone attracted subsequent tourists, but the distinction of the ospedale music was a result of two main factors:<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Talbot, “Vivaldi’s Venice,” *The Musical Times* 119, no. 1622 (1978): 316-17.

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field, “Music Before Vivaldi,” *Early Music* 14, no. 3 (Aug., 1986): 378.

<sup>16</sup> Rousseau, 162; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Burney, 137.

<sup>18</sup> Grand Tourists who mention Burney’s visit to the ospedali include Arthur Young and Alexander Bicknell. See Arthur Young, *Travels in France and Italy During the Years*

First, uncommon of most sacred traditions, the ospedali promoted instrumental music. As early as 1704, an anonymous writer reported: “On Sunday the *figlie del coro* of the Pietà presented in their Vespers a *sinfonia* of instruments placed in every niche of the church with such harmony and with such novelty of ideas that people were ecstatic at the marvels produced and supposed that such manifestations must come from Heaven rather than from Earth.”<sup>19</sup> Fifty years later, August Fryderyk Moszynski, a diplomat of the Polish king, still commented on the amusement from the instrumental music: “There is nothing as entertaining to see as double basses, horns, and bassoons accompanying the alto and tenor voices of the singing sisters.”<sup>20</sup> The ospedali owned instruments that were quite rare in other Italian musical organizations, including the *viola all’inglese* and the timpani.<sup>21</sup> Charles de Brosses, who visited the ospedali in 1739, remarked, “There is no instrument, however unwieldy, that can frighten them.”<sup>22</sup>

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1787, 1788, and 1789 (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1915), 255; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 94; Joe Collier, Alexander Bicknell, Peter Beckford, Thomas Day, and George Veall, *Musical Travels Through England* (London: G. Kearsly, 1775), iii-iv; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Pallade Veneta* (17-24 Maggio 1704, f.1); Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Cod.It.vii-1834 [7622]; cited in Selfridge-Field, “Music at the Pietà before Vivaldi,” *Early Music* 14, no. 3 (Aug., 1986): 381.

<sup>20</sup> Original text: “Nic zabawniejszego jak widziec siostre-kontrabas, siostre- róg myśliwski, siostre-fagot i inne instrumety towarzyszące ich altom i ich tenorom.” August Moszynski, *Dziennik podróży dp Francji I Wloch* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1970), 597; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Talbot, “Vivaldi’s Venice,” 316.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Pincherle, *Vivaldi: Genius of the Baroque* (London: V. Gollancz, 1958), 19; cited in Denis Arnold, “Instruments and Instrumental Teaching,” *The Galpin Society Journal* 18 (1965), 78.



Second, visitors were most astonished by the all-female membership of the musical ensembles. Throughout Europe, all-female instrumental ensembles were rare. In 1740, Frederic Christian, the Prince-Elector of Saxony, admitted, “What makes the Pietà so famous is not just that all of the instrumentalists are truly excellent musicians, but an even rarer fact, which is that all of the instruments are being played by females without any males in the ensemble at all.”<sup>23</sup> To portray the astonishment commonly experienced, in his travel diary of 1780, William Beckford juxtaposes the expected feminine traits of delicacy with what he saw: “The sight of the orchestra still makes me smile. You know I suppose, it is entirely of the feminine gender, and that nothing is more common than to see a delicate white hand journeying across an enormous double bass, or a pair of roseate cheeks puffing, with all their efforts, at a French horn.”<sup>24</sup>

The visitors found the ospedali instrumental ensembles fascinating because all-female ensembles, especially containing the wide variety of instruments known to the ospedali, were unheard of in the rest of Europe. In the 1700s, during the ospedali’s prime, women who did practice an instrument most commonly played keyboards or plucked-string instruments, because the performer’s face would not be obstructed, and she could sing while playing the instrument. Furthermore, most keyboard and plucked-string

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<sup>23</sup> Frederic Christian, “Journal,” 2:263; cited in Jane Berdes, “Anna Maria della Pietà: The Woman Musician of Venice Personified,” in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds. *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 136.

<sup>24</sup> William Beckford, *Italy: Sketches* (Paris and Lyons: Cormon and Blank, 1835) in Guy Chapman, *The Travel Diaries of William Beckford of Fonthiel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 95; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 89.

instruments required a modest sitting position, nothing unsightly for a “proper” woman.<sup>25</sup>

Wind instruments, on the other hand, were normally reserved for men because woodwinds were considered phallic symbols, and brass instruments were big and cumbersome, therefore obstructing the performer’s beauty.<sup>26</sup> Brass instruments were also associated with the military and a loud, heavy nature, which was identified as masculine. Even string instruments such as the violin were considered unattractive for women to play throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

### *Angelic Messengers of God*

The city of Venice connected heaven and earth through art and music.<sup>28</sup> As seen in the mosaics of the Basilica di San Marco, art was the “Bible of the Illiterate” to teach all people religious devotion.<sup>29</sup> Sacred music and art especially exemplified Venice’s holy agenda. For example, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo’s *Triumph of Faith* painted in the Pietà, depicts choirs of angels descending from heaven to earth. Such artwork represented

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<sup>25</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 56.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Davidson and Richard Edgar, "Gender and Race Bias in the Judgment of Western Art Music Performance," *Music Education Research* 5 (July 2003): 170.

<sup>27</sup> Karin Pendle, ed. *Women & Music - A History* 2nd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 169-70.

<sup>28</sup> Berdes, 16, 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> Most laypeople were not familiar with Latin, which was commonly used in religious services. In 599, Pope Gregory the Great declared, “a picture is displayed in churches... in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books.” As cited in Thomas E. A. Dale and John Mitchell, eds., *Shaping Sacred Space and Institutional Identity in Romanesque Mural Paintings* (London: The Pindar Press, 2004), 1. Also see Lawrence G. Duggan, “Was art really the ‘book of the illiterate’?” *Words and Images* 5 (1989), 227-251.

the angelic nature of the institution. Additionally, the indulgence system was common throughout Venice and attracted those on pilgrimage; visitors believed that by contributing to the income of charitable institutions such as the ospedali they would be fulfilling their Christian duty, therefore complementing their own religious fervor.<sup>30</sup>

The ospedali governors made specific decisions to promote the holy appearance of their institutions in accordance with Venice atmosphere. Their monastic routines, for example, encouraged a religious and obedient air. Charles Burney noted this devoutness: “There seemed to be great decorum and good discipline observed in every particular; for these admirable performers, who are of different ages, all behaved with great propriety, and seemed to be well educated.”<sup>31</sup> Giacomo Vincenti, in a letter, also explained that he believed he could safely donate music to the institution because the girls were “well-known as much for [their] virtuous qualities as for [their] virtuosity as performers.”<sup>32</sup>

So that their music would always contain religious connotations, the ospedali always sang in Latin, even though vernacular had become popular after the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the ospedali composers almost always wrote music about religious topics, especially about the Virgin Mary (who was the Pietà’s patron saint). The Assumption and Coronation of the Blessed Mary were conducive themes to the portrayal

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<sup>30</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Burney, 136-7.

<sup>32</sup> Giacomo Vincenti, “Dedica,” in R. Giovannelli, *Sacrarum modulationum quas vulgo Motecta appellant, quae Quinis et Octonis vocibus concinuntur*, trans. Jane Berdes (Venice: Vincenti, 1598); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 30.

of a “large angel orchestra.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, many ospedali works were composed for or about Mary (and other female saints) since the governors thought these religious women were good role models for the all-girls choirs; the girls could both easily relate to and easily represent the female characters.<sup>34</sup>

Adding to a convent-like nature of the ospedali, the governors also hid the girls behind grates during performances.<sup>35</sup> In 1730, Edward Wright explained, “their Performance is surprisingly good; and many excellent Voices there are among them: and there is somewhat still more amusing, in that their Persons are conceal’d from view.” Tourist after tourist, including Charles Burney, Samuel Sharp, James Edward Smith, and Marie Anne Fiquet Du Boccage, commented on the fact that the girls were hidden. In 1783, Richard Edgcume affirmed, “Not only all the vocal, but the instrumental parts were executed by women, concealed from view by a great gallery.”<sup>36</sup> By concealing the female musicians behind grates, the visitors did not get the pleasure of gazing upon them. Instead they were protected, similar to sequestered nuns.

The act of hiding the girls behind a lattice had explicit religious connotations. Not only did the act follow papal restrictions on church choirs, but it also protected the girls’

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<sup>33</sup> Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 30.

<sup>34</sup> Berdes, 421.

<sup>35</sup> For contemporary descriptions of the grates, see Michael Tilmouth, “Music in the Travels of an English Merchant: Robert Bargrave (1626-61),” *Music and Letters*, 53 (1972): 155-6; Thomas Addison, *Remarks on Several parts of Italy, etc. in the years 1701, 1702, and 1703: Works of the Honourable Joseph Addison Collected by M. Tickel* (London: Printed for Vernon and Hood, 1804).

<sup>36</sup> Richard Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences Chiefly Respecting the Italian Opera in England* (London: W. Clarke, 1827), 33; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 92.

moral purity. In 1765, Samuel Sharp perceived the governors' fear of corruption from sight:

The founders of this charity have, as it appears, too exalted an opinion of the power of musick; for, however beautiful the girls may be, they trust only to their melody being intercepted from the sight of the audience by a black gauze hung over the rails of the gallery in which they perform; it is transparent enough to show the figures of women, but not in the least their features and complexion.<sup>37</sup>

In 1787, James Edward Smith also commented, "The voices were all female, as we were told, for the performers were concealed from our *profane* sight."<sup>38</sup> [Italics added.] His use of the word "profane" alludes to the belief that viewing the girls would cause immoral thoughts.

For others, however, hiding the singers caused them to sound more heavenly, as their unseen voices floated down from the rafters to the audiences. This affect was noted by Marie Anne Fiquet Du Boccage (1710-1802): "A grate, which has a curtain before it, conceals them from curious eyes, and gives their songs a still stronger resemblance to angelic melody."<sup>39</sup> To many, the religious music was not necessarily threatening; only the sight of young, female bodies caused the immoral thoughts. Depriving the audience of that seductive visual, however, made the girls seem otherworldly and unobtainable, and, therefore, safe.

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<sup>37</sup> Samuel Sharp, *Letters from Italy Describing the Customs and Manners of that Country, in the Years 1765 and 1766*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Henry and Cave, 1765), 28; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 76-7.

<sup>38</sup> James Edward Smith, *A Sketch of A Tour on the Continent*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 395; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Marie Anne Fiquet Du Boccage, *Letters Concerning England, Holland and Italy* (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1770); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 73.

Anyone who wished to see the ospedali girls had to receive permission from the governors, who were quite selective and protective. Charles Burney reported his experience:

This evening, in order to make myself more full acquainted with the nature of the conservatorios, and to finish my musical enquiries here, I obtained permission to be admitted into the music school of the *Mendicanti*, and was favoured with a concert, which was performed wholly on my account, and lasted two hours, by the best vocal and instrumental performers of this hospital: it was really curious to *see*, as well as to *hear* every part of this excellent concert, performed by female violins, hautbois, tenors, bases, harpsichords, french-horns, and even double bases.<sup>40</sup>

Jean-Jacques Rousseau also received permission to view the girls, only after expressing profound frustration and “despair” because of the “confounded gratings, which only allowed the sounds to pass through, and hid from sight the angels of beauty, of whom they were worthy.”<sup>41</sup> When he realized that the girls were not the angelic beauties of his imagination, but were actually disfigured due to the poor conditions and hard labor of the ospedali, his fantasy was suspended. Still, even after seeing the girls, he confessed, “I continued to find their singing delicious, and their voices lent such [a fictitious charm] to their faces that, as long as they were singing, I persisted in thinking them beautiful, in spite of my eyes.”<sup>42</sup>

Accompanying their seclusion, all members of the ospedali wore specific colors when performing for the public. The musicians at the Incurabili wore blue – a symbol of faith and chastity, also the color most often seen on the Virgin Mary – the students at the

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<sup>40</sup> Burney, 136.

<sup>41</sup> Rousseau, 162; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Mendicanti wore purple (thought to be a mixture of red and black) – a color of mourning – the Derelitti wards wore white – the color of virginity – and the Pietà musicians usually wore red – the symbol of charity.<sup>43</sup> Charles de Brosses described one example of performance attire for the figlie del coro: a white robe with pomegranate flowers over their ears.<sup>44</sup> As white was an understood symbol of virginity, this attire emphasized their purity. Additionally, the pomegranate commonly symbolized holiness, as seen in paintings of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus holding a pomegranate.<sup>45</sup>

Another instance of color being used symbolically in the clothing of the ospedali wards occurred during the visit of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Württemberg in 1781. Countess Giustiniana Whyne Orsini-Rosenberg wrote an account of the event: “One hundred Girls taken from the Conservatories or the Grand Ospedali of the city, *wearing black uniforms appropriate to their station*, executed a Cantata for several voices interspersed within the choir.” [Italics added.]<sup>46</sup> All Venetians wore black (the traditional color of Venice), especially during special events, processions, and feast-days. Black reflected both the city’s power and reverence. It symbolized gravity, piety, and virtue.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians in Venice*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> Charles de Brosses, *L’Italie il y a cent ans ou Lettres écrites d’Italie à quelques amis en 1739 et 1740*, ed. M. R. Colomb, vol. 1 (Paris: A. Levassieur, 1836), 214.

<sup>45</sup> Two notable paintings include Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate* and Sandro Boticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (ca. 1487).

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to Dr. John A. Rice for bringing this quotation to my attention. Giustiniana Contessa degli Orsini e Rosenberg, *Del soggiorno de’ Conti del Nord in Venezia nel Gennaio 1782: Lettera al signor Riccardo Wynne suo fratello a Londra* (Venice: Turra, 1782), 34.

<sup>47</sup> John Harvey, *Men in Black* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 67-8.

By wearing black at a special performance for the Grand Duke and Duchess, the ospedali performers sent the message that they were virtuous women who behaved reverently towards their art. Black could also have linked the girls to convents, as it was the most common color worn by nuns.

It is clear that the ospedali governors thought the sexual purity (or at least the image of sexual purity) of their wards was essential. *La Pallade Veneta* revealed the figlie as “the singing Virgins” or “musical Virgins”<sup>48</sup> – four times in the 1701 edition, three times in the 1716 edition, and again three times between 1739-51.<sup>49</sup> The ospedali also took advantage of the free advertising in the *Gazzetta Veneta*, a periodical published by Gasparo Gozzi in 1760, which described the ospedali women as, “Virgines prudentes et fatuae.”<sup>50</sup> The ospedali governors also printed the Latin terms “virginibus” and “virgines” on countless libretti, which would have been handed out to audiences at ospedali performances.

These religious attributes, performance practices, and representations in advertisements lent themselves to divine interpretations of the ospedali musicians. Some tourists, such as Robert Bargrave, Thomas Addison, Louise Miller, and Peter Andreevič

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<sup>48</sup> *La Pallade Veneta* was an Italian periodical targeted towards wealthy, educated audiences outside of Venice. It served as a sort of diplomatic newsletter. Published sporadically between 1687-1750, the periodical discusses politically important people and the cultural activities associated with them. For a full description of *La Pallade Veneta*, see Eleanor Selfridge-Field, ed. *Pallade Veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society 1650-1750* (Venice: Fondazione Levi, 1985).

<sup>49</sup> *Pallade Veneta - II* (unpublished); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 45-7; *Pallade Veneta - V* (unpublished); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Gasparo Gozzi, *Gazzetta Veneta* No. 30 (Venice, 7 April 1760-1); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 73-4.



Tolstoy, mislabeled the ospedali as “nunneries” and “convents.” In 1698, Russian diplomat Peter Andreevič Tolstoy, for example, wrote that people came from all around to “refresh themselves with these *angelic* songs, above all those of the *Convent* of the *Incurabili*.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, in 1757, Frenchwoman Marie Anne Fiquet Du Boccage associated the ospedali with the heavenly, remarking, “The voices, the instruments, and everything relating to them, are divine.”<sup>52</sup> Francesco Coli, an author of *La Pallade Veneta* in 1698, claimed audiences were “moved into ecstasy” from hearing their music. He wrote, “It made one think that such music could only have been composed in Heaven rather than by a mere human.”<sup>53</sup>

These references to angels and virgins reflect both the public representation and the nature of the ospedali, but calling the figlie angels could also have been a technique for mythologizing and distancing the ospedali girls from their listeners. The audience and their publications idealized the ospedali women as both angelic and enchanting; thus, they became more imaginary than real. As “angels” and “virgins” who were hidden from view, they were otherworldly and unattainable. Therefore audiences could feel safe from moral corruption, while the ospedali girls were protected from losing their virtue.

#### *Contradictory Accounts*

Despite the efforts of the ospedali governors to propagate a pious image, visitors still related the ospedali to licentious behaviors. In 1608, Thomas Coryat, travelling

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Tolstoy, “Commentary,” in W. Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 10.

<sup>52</sup> Du Boccage; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 73.

<sup>53</sup> *Pallade Veneta - II* (unpublished); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 45-7.

primarily by foot, made one of the first Grand Tours of Europe. In an attempt to portray himself as an intellectual to Prince Henry of Wales's court, Coryat described his voyage using meticulous detail. His writing style caused his travelogue *Coryat's Crudities*, published in 1611, to become immensely popular in England.<sup>54</sup> He became known for popularizing the idea of the Grand Tour and for even introducing the fork to England. Unfortunately, Coryat also instigated a misperception about the ospedali when he recalled a notable behavior in Venice:

If any of [the courtesans] happen to have any children (as indeede they have but few, for according to the olde proverbe the best carpenters make the fewest chips) they are brought up either at their own charge, or in a certaine house of the citie appointed for no other use but onely for the bringing up of the Cortezans bastards, which I saw Eastward above Saint Markes streete neare to the sea side. In the south wall of which building that looketh towards the sea, I observed a certaine yron grate interted into a hallow peece of the wall, betwixt which grate and a plaine stone beneath it, there is a convenient little space to put in an infant. Hither doth the mother or some body for her bring the child shortly after it is borne into the world [...] Those that are brought up in this foresaid house, are removed therehence when they come to yeares of discretion, and many of the male children are employed in the warres, or to serve in the Arsenall, or Galleys at sea, or some other publique service for the Common weale. And many of the females if they bee faire doe *matrizare*, that is, imitate their mothers in their gainful facultie, and get their living by prostituting their bodies to their favourites.<sup>55</sup>

It is possible that some children deposited at the Ospedale della Pietà may have become courtesans or prostitutes, but due to the strict monastic regulations imposed by the ospedali governors, this is highly unlikely. In fact, as noted by German tourist Johann Georg Keyßler in 1730, the ospedali girls were “not permitted to quit the hospital, except

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Strachan, "Coryate, Thomas (c. 1577-1617)," in *Literature of Travel and Exploration: an Encyclopedia* Vol. 1 (2003): 285-87.

<sup>55</sup> Coryat, 407.

if to be married: and even that is not without great difficulty, because it is no easy task to fill those vacancies; besides, the expense of their education is very considerable.”<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, Coryat’s inaccurate account influenced many writers and travelers. Most seventeenth-century English tourists, for example, refused to visit the Ospedali Grandi, as a rule, because of religious qualms.<sup>57</sup> Thomas Addison, who visited Venice sometime between 1701-1703, bypassed the performances at the ospedali like other Englishmen. He, however, was one of the first to question the representation of immoral conduct. He wrote, “[The Venetian nuns] have operas within their own walls, and after go out of their bounds to meet their admirers, *or they are very much misrepresented.*”<sup>58</sup> [Italics added.] Addison, however, also suggested that the ospedali girls had lovers “that converse with them daily at the grate,” and that they “are very free to admit a visit from a stranger,” so a perception of misconduct obviously still persisted.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Johann Gerg Keyßler, *Travels through Germany, Hungary, Bohemia, Switzerland, Italy, and Lorrain* (London: M. Godfrey Schutze, 1758), 196-7.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Raymond, an English politician and judge who visited Venice in 1634, was an exception to the British guideline. He clarified that he went to the ospedali churches simple “for the music’s sake, which was very excellent.” Thomas Raymond, *Raymond and Guise Memoirs 1622-1737*, G. Davies, ed. (London: Camden Society, 1917) in Berdes and Whittemore, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Addison, 185.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. In English literature, the convent was often fantasized as a prison, a place of freedom for women, or a brothel house (a place where women lived with and served men). Gothic novelists used convents as an “exotic background” to romantic stories. Gothic novels of this kind include: Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796); and Ann Radcliff’s *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and *The Italian* (1797). For a full discussion of eighteenth-century novels about convents, see Katharine M. Rogers, “Fantasy and Reality in Fictional Convents of the Eighteenth Century,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1985).

In 1769, Hester Thrale Piozzi, an Englishwoman, author, and patron of the arts, expressed contrasting opinions of the ospedali performances:

We were this evening carried to a well-known conservatory called the Medicanti, who performed an oratorio in church with great, and I dare say, deserved applause. It was difficult for me to persuade myself that all the performers were women, till, watching carefully, our eyes convinced us, as they were but slightly grated. The sight of girls, however, handling the double bass, and blowing into the bassoon, did not much please me: and the deep-toned voice of her who sang the part of Saul, seemed an odd unnatural thing enough.

Well! These pretty sirens were delight to seize upon us and press our visit to their parlour with a sweetness that I know not who would have resisted. We had no such intent; and amply did their performance repay my curiosity for visiting Venetian beauties, so justly celebrated for their seducing manners and soft address. They accompanied their voices with the fortepiano, and sung a thousand buffo songs with all that gay voluptuousness for which their country is renowned.<sup>60</sup>

Thrale Piozzi's account shows both fascination and moral apprehension. She, like many other listeners, was delighted by the music, but the sight of woman playing instruments took her aback. Furthermore, she connected the music and conduct to seduction and voluptuousness, and described the ospedali girls as "Venetian beauties." If we know the governors secluded the ospedali girls behind screens during performances, and tourists, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, did not consider the girls beautiful when seen, Thrale Piozzi must have also been associating the ospedali girls to other Venetian women who

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<sup>60</sup> Hester Thrale Piozzi, *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861) in *As Woman of Letters* (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 176-7; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 81.

were celebrated and renowned throughout Europe for their “seducing manners” – the courtesans.<sup>61</sup>

### *Seductive Courtesans*

To understand why visitors compared the ospedali girls to courtesans, a description of what visitors were experiencing is necessary. Throughout Europe, Italy gained a reputation for its seductive environment; it was a place where wealthy men could escape conventional mores in their native country to experience freedom and indulge in pleasure.<sup>62</sup> To protect their reputations, most tourists wrote only of their educational pursuits while in Venice. We know, however, that many also devoted time to sexual adventure.<sup>63</sup> In 1751, Mary Wortley Montagu cautioned her daughter, “[Travelers to Italy] return no more instructed than they might have been at home by the help of a map. The boys only remember where they met with the best wine or the prettiest women.”<sup>64</sup> One account, confessed by James Boswell, demonstrated a common experience of male travelers: “My fancy was stirred by the brilliant stories I had heard of Venetian courtesans. I went to see them [...] What is worse, my Lord Mountstuart was of

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<sup>61</sup> Louise Miller also expressed disgust at seeing the ospedali women. Her account will be discussed in the third chapter. See Louise Miller, *Letters from Italy Describing the Manners Customs, Antiquities, Paintings, etc. of that Country in the Years MDCCLXX MDCCLXXI To a Friend Residing in France, By an English Woman* (London: For E. and C. Dilly, 1776).

<sup>62</sup> Gary C. Thomas, “Was George Frideric Handel Gay?,” *Queering the Pitch* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 173.

<sup>63</sup> Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* (New York: Yale University Press, 2003), 118.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *Letters from the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (London: J.M. Dent & Company, 1906), 402.

the party. He saw that I was agitated, and demanded to know what I was intending to do. I told him I was going out to look for girls, to taste the pleasures of Venice and learn the fashion.”<sup>65</sup>

Thomas Coryat was one of the few who described Venetian courtesans in detail.<sup>66</sup> His initial trepidation about discussing the topic, however, portrayed an overarching fear of the courtesans’ immorality. His fear of censure led him to offer a lengthy justification for his writings; he only knew about “these famous gallants” because he tried to convert one from her wanton ways.<sup>67</sup> Fortunately, he overcame concerns about his own reputation and explained that he felt obligated to write about the courtesans because others rarely did. Additionally, since the courtesans drew “many to Venice from some of the remotest parts of Christiandome, to contemplate their beauties, and enjoy their pleasing alliances,” their omission would have left a poor representation of the city.<sup>68</sup>

Coryat described the courtesans’ homes, clothing, looks, and behaviors. Courtesans, who were richly compensated by their suitors, were often decked in the finest ornaments. Coryat explained, “The ornaments of her body are so rich, that except thou dost even geld thy affections or carry with thee... some antidote against those venereous

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<sup>65</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand tour: Italy, Corsica, and France, 1765-1766*, Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle, eds. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), 11.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Coryat was employed as a courtier for Henry, Prince of Wales, son of James I. He traveled Europe twice, mostly on foot, influencing many others to follow his path, and possibly single-handedly initiating the Grand Tour. *Coryat’s Crudities* was a popular and influential travelogue dedicated to Prince Henry about his first journey, written in expressive, poetic detail. See R.E. Pritchard, *Odd Tom Coryate* (Gloucestershire: The History Press Ltd., 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Coryat, 408.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

titillations, shee will very neare benumme and captivate thy senses, and make reason vale bonnet to affection.”<sup>69</sup> If the silk, lace, diamonds, gold, and fragrant perfumes were not enough, courtesans would then turn to their other training – good manners, rhetoric, musicianship, and intellect. As Susan Griffin explained, “A courtesan had to be highly cultivated. Often born to poverty, with no education and lacking upper-class manners, a young woman would have to be taught many skills in order to play her new role.”<sup>70</sup> This training would enable the courtesan to converse about any number of topics while in a patrician’s company.

Musical ability was one of the most significant talents of the courtesan. In fact, “the art of music, sensual and highly intangible, is akin to the art of courtesanship.”<sup>71</sup> Courtesans used music, along with other arts, to transcend mere bodily desire and reach an intellectual level equal to that of men. Coryat’s description of their musical abilities portrays this accomplishment: “Moreover shee will endeavour to enchaunt thee partly with her melodious notes that she warbles out upon her lute, which shee fingers with as laudable a stroake as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of Musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice.”<sup>72</sup> Courtesans had to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Griffin, *The Book of the Courtesans* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), 4.

<sup>71</sup> Feldman, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 405.

be talented enough that they could use their skills as musicians and companions as an alternative to careers as nuns or wives.<sup>73</sup>

Most importantly, a courtesan's career provided freedom. She was tied to no man. In fact, if she decided to get married, she would be forced to end her career. Otherwise, courtesans could manage their own finances, come and go as they please, and be involved in upper-class social affairs. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote, courtesans "created for themselves a situation almost equivalent to that of a man..." free in behavior and conversation, attaining "the rarest intellectual liberty."<sup>74</sup>

Venetians were proud of their courtesans. While sexually provocative women may have been titillating and shocking to travelers, Venetians believed they served a utilitarian purpose. Venetians, who upheld family honor at all costs (even to the extent of abandoning illegitimate children more than anywhere else in Europe), believed that a sexually assaulted woman dishonored her family and her husband.<sup>75</sup> Courtesans, on the other hand, were considered "places of evacuation."<sup>76</sup> By having courtesans roam the

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<sup>73</sup> Newcomb, 93.

<sup>74</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 597.

<sup>75</sup> In fact, Venetians were so afraid of their wives being assaulted that women were rarely allowed to walk around alone. Coryate describes the situation in his travelogue: "The Gentlemen do even coope up their wives alwaies within the walles of their houses for feare of these inconveniences, as much as if there were no Cortezans at all in the City. So that you shall very seldome see a Venetian Gentleman's wife but either at the solemnization of a great marriage, or at the Christning of a Jew, or late in the evening rowing in a Gondola." Coryat, 404.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



streets, men could satiate their sexual desires and were therefore less likely to assault or seduce other men's wives. Thus, courtesans were not immoral, but protectors of honor.

Courtesans also brought in large amounts of revenue to the city; Venice relied on the patronage of travelers who came from around the continent to see them. Venetian citizens also added to the city's prosperity by paying fees to the Republic for the tolerance of courtesan presence. These fees maintained the large trade ships and naval forces of Venice, saving shippers large shipping costs.<sup>77</sup>

Italians often supported broadening roles for women.<sup>78</sup> The most admired royal courts kept groups of professionally trained female musicians as they brought both prestige and pleasure. A musical woman was unique, beautiful, and impressive.<sup>79</sup> To Venetians, courtesans added to the artistic, elevated reputation of Venice. As Patricia Labalme explained, "Feminine magnificence served patriarchal pride."<sup>80</sup> For example, patrician moralists often used their women's dress and behavior as an image of their class and virtue.<sup>81</sup> The Republic of Venice, however, had another presentation in mind. Venice aimed to be, and eventually became, a main attraction on the Grand Tour. The city exuded pomp – festivals, art, music, and lavish lifestyles. Courtesans were, of course,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Newcomb, "Courtesans, Music, or Musicians?: Professional Women Musicians in Sixteenth-Century Italy," in Anthony Newcomb, ed. *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 90.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>80</sup> Patricia H. Labalme, *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 134.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 133.

among these pleasurable attractions. The extravagant dress and cultivation of the courtesans demonstrated Venetian wealth, refinement, and power. “A city which prided itself on its wealth and beauty could not but take pride in its beautiful women.”<sup>82</sup>

Still, the courtesans were also frowned upon. In her treatise *On the Worth of Women*, published in 1600, Venetian Modesta Pozzo, under the pseudonym Moderata Fonte, described the menace of courtesans:

What about all those shameless and corrupt women who dishonor our sex publicly, soliciting men openly and selling off their honor to the first bidder? Such women destroy men, stripping them of all their money and often bringing them to the point of death [...] These women, wretched as they are, preserve a little more dignity than the men they consort with, because at least they aren't the ones paying the men; whereas men fall into their traps like animals.<sup>83</sup>

Courtesans not only endangered men's self worth, since “desire in men is so powerful that their senses overpower their reason,”<sup>84</sup> but they also posed a threat to women. Any woman who practiced public writing, speaking, or singing received scrutiny even if she was not involved in the sex trade, because of the associations of these arts with the courtesans.<sup>85</sup>

The ospedali musicians fell into this category of women who publically practiced music, in addition to exhibiting many similar qualities to courtesans including a superior education, fine musicianship, economic and political freedom, and attracting audiences.

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<sup>82</sup> Labalme, 134.

<sup>83</sup> Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, trans. Virginia Cox (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 88.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>85</sup> Bonnie Gordon, “The Courtesan's Singing Body as Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy,” in Feldman, 188.

Born into poverty like many courtesans, the *figlie del coro* were raised and educated to appeal to a high-class society from a young age. The education they received inside the institution was even considered better than that available outside.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, their education included the best musical training available.

Like courtesans, the *ospedali* girls also exhibited talents that were considered equal to and even surpassing those of men. Karl Ludwig von Pöllnitz, a baron of Prussia, believed that Apollonia and Anna Maria, two *figlie* at L'Ospedale della Pietà, were leading musicians in Italy.<sup>87</sup> Charles de Brosse even regarded Anna Maria as “unsurpassed” by any woman or man.<sup>88</sup> Martin Folks also proclaimed that the *ospedali* musicians were “said to be some of the best performers and voices in Italy.”<sup>89</sup> Among the numerous compliments of the *ospedali*, visitors called the female musicians, “glorious,” “musical muses,” and even “tiny little instruments of gold upon whom the god Apollo has showered all of the most exalted privileges of his divine art.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> M. V. Constable, “The Education of the Venetian Orphans from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century,” in M. L. Kuntz, ed., *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo* (Florence: Olschki, 1988), 14.

<sup>87</sup> As foundlings, the *ospedali figlie* do not have surnames. They typically go by their institution – “della Pietà” – or their instrument – “del Basso.” Berdes, “Anna Maria,” 135-6.

<sup>88</sup> Karl Ludwig von Pöllnitz, *Lettres: Nouveaux mémoires contenant l'histoire de sa vie et la relation de ses premiers voyages*, trans. S. Whatley, 4 vols. (Liège, 1734; 2nd ed., London: D. Brown, 1737-8), 113; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 57.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Folks, “Journal” (Oxford, Bodleian Library, unpublished), Misc. d. 444, f. 7; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 56.

<sup>90</sup> Francesco Coli, *Pallade Veneta- I* (Venice, 1687-8); cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 33.

Like courtesans, the ospedali girls could achieve intellectual and economic freedom. Their daily organization was self-supporting, as the funds that sustained the ospedali primarily came from patrons' gifts and legacies, as well as payments for private performances, donations during public performances, and the selling of *scagni* (concert chairs); the Venetian state never gave direct aid.<sup>91</sup> Each figlia was paid one third of the profits from every performance. Those who gained more skills, such as playing multiple instruments, soloing, or teaching, would even be paid higher amounts.<sup>92</sup> The girls, who partially controlled their own wealth, used their money on food and other allotments, as they were expected to support themselves. The rest of their money would be deposited in the ospedali bank to be used for dowries to the church or a husband.<sup>93</sup> The ability to save money for these costly expenses was beyond what many Italian women (aside from courtesans) could accomplish.

Additionally, word of the ospedali choirs attracted tourists from around Europe. The governors enhanced their musical education to especially entice wealthy visitors, such as royalty. Their virtuosic talents gave the ospedali girls a certain amount of celebrity. The names of the most famous circulated European writing, including Maddalena Lombardini, Anna Maria della Pietà, Apollonia, and Maria La Bolognese, among others.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Denis Arnold, "Orphans and Ladies: the Venetian Conservatories," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 89<sup>th</sup> Sess. (1962-3): 32; Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 87.

<sup>93</sup> Each ospedale ran its own trust funds and loans, a credit-union type banking system. *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, "Sonetto: Concerning the putte in the coro at the Pietà," I-Vmc Cod Cic., 1178 ff. 206r-212v; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 67-70.

The most distinguishing feature of the ospedali was that the female musicians primarily trained and managed themselves. The male Maestri di Coro, in contrast, only acted as the in-house composers, solely writing music for the coro and conducting the most prestigious performances. Charles Burney described the structure as explained by Gaetano Latilla, a Maestro di Coro at the Pietà:

He says that the expense on account of the music is very inconsiderable, there being but 5 or 6 Masters to each of these schools for singing and the several instruments, as the elder girls teach the young; the Maestro di Cappella, only composes and directs; sometimes, indeed, he writes down closes [cadences] to suit particular airs, and attends the rehearsals and public performances.<sup>95</sup>

The maestri lived and worked outside of the institution itself. Most would only enter the ospedali (under supervision, of course) to teach select students two or three days a week, while those few exemplary students would then pass on their education to the younger, more inexperienced girls.<sup>96</sup>

The Priora and the Maestra di Coro (the female supervisors of the general female population and the choirs, respectively) were the institutions' actual daily supervisors. While following general regulations set by the governors, the Priora organized routines and chores, handled punishments, supervised transfers of money, made assignments for devotions, and taught classes.<sup>97</sup> The Maestra di Coro fulfilled these same duties solely for the figlie del coro. She also maintained all musical activities of the ospedali. She ran rehearsals, cared for instruments, taught private lessons, took part in auditions, organized

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<sup>95</sup> Burney, 121-2.

<sup>96</sup> Arnold, "Music at the Ospedali," 160.

<sup>97</sup> Berdes, 122-3.

the music library, managed new compositions written for the coro, supervised the male maestri who taught lessons, and even conducted some performances.<sup>98</sup>

If the ospedali had not been regulated and sequestered by the governors, this self-governing behavior may have been suspicious, similar to any women who were not linked to a husband, or another man in the form of a constant companion, protector, or sponsor. Still, the figlie del coro utilized the impressive and novel aspects of their performances to attract audiences, earning both money and fame. Visitors, unable to comprehend the figlie within models of conventional femininity, compared them to something they could understand – courtesans. The only thing differentiating the figlie from courtesans was a performance context within a religious institution, regulated and supervised by a governing body of males.

### *Shaping Historical Literature*

The descriptions of the ospedali girls as immoral or as courtesans have affected modern historical literature. For instance, in 1880, Antonio Gasparella published a confusing and controversial biography of Teresa Ventura-Venier, an artist and singer who lived in the Ospedale dei Mendicanti. She left the institution at the age of sixteen when she married her patron, and eventually became a noted artist, but her marriage did not last. She remarried a nobleman and became known for attracting more suitors, including the “weird-looking” Count Alessandro Pepoli, “which Teresa often spoke of in the preface to her performances.”<sup>99</sup> Even though she trained outside of the ospedali and

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>99</sup> Antonio Gasparella, *I Musicisti Vicentini* (Vicenza, 1880), I-Vnm, Musica 1443.

never actually performed with the cori, her association to the ospedali left a blemish on the ospedali's reputation.

In the preface to his 1897 catalogue *I Teatri Musicali Veneziani*, Taddeo Wiel, an Italian composer and music historian, described the ospedali as institutions that, instead of using music to educate and purify, often “became houses of scandalous libertinism.”<sup>100</sup> Pulling his sources from eighteenth-century commentaries, such as De Brosses, Rousseau, Burney, and Goethe, he accuses the figlie of feigning “angelic behavior” and of visitors “desecrating the temple.”<sup>101</sup> He insinuates that no restraint existed within the walls of the Pietà; the girls were allowed to have visitors during the night while the older, female supervisors would pretend not to see. Wiel writes: “Nor was the love of art, or piety, the sentiment that filled the churches of these conservatories. The music and the charity were often pretext with which gentlemen and citizen used to get near the damsels, and draw them in their homes, taken as servants, or accepted as a form of charity.”<sup>102</sup>

Percy Scholes, Charles Burney's twentieth-century editor, renewed Wiel's sentiments. In a footnote that supplements Burney's praises of the ospedali, Scholes wrote:

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<sup>100</sup> Taddeo Wiel, *I Teatri musicali veneziani del settecento: Catalogo delle opera in musica rappresentate nel secolo XVIII in Venezia (1701-1800)* (Venice: Visentini 1897), p. xviii.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Original text: “ne era amor dell'arte, or pietà, il sentimento che riempiva le chiese de conservatori. La musica e la beneficenza erano spesse volte pretesti, con che gentiluomini e cittadini avvicnavano le donzelle, e le attiravano poi nelle loro case, come prese a servizio, o accolte per carità.” Ibid.

The *conservatorios*. None of these now exist, they having been suppressed at various dates on economic grounds. Possibly, also, there were other reasons for suppression. Taddeo Wiel, in his *Il teatro musicale veneziano del settecento* (Venice, 1897) says that they “were too often places of scandalous libertinism: not all those girls with angels’ voice were angelic in their habits,” and it is on record, he says, that at the Pietà visits went on until 1 a.m. on certain days, and young men used to come to meet the girls.<sup>103</sup>

In one of the most studied travelogues of the eighteenth century, the ospedali are now presented as institutions that may have shut down due to immoral behavior. Scholes neglected to note that the entire city of Venice had been struggling economically for decades, bankrupting the ospedali, and that Napoleon invaded and ultimately suppressed Venice in 1797, burning libraries that included large parts of the ospedali repertoire and records.

Even though ospedali governors projected a devout appearance, contemporary male audiences still found the ospedali figlie’s gender and cultivated talents titillating. Viewed as seductive objects of desire, the girls had to be concealed or distanced to obviate a breach of moral virtue. By calling them angels, virgins, courtesans, and sirens, governors and visitors produced distance and protection. Accordingly, the legacy of these self-supporting, talented female musicians has been marginalized in historical literature. Their lives have been defined by the men who gazed upon them, and who ultimately misrepresented them.

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<sup>103</sup> Footnote 1 in Burney, 112.



### CHAPTER 3: Attracting the Masses: Music at the Ospedali Grandi

Visitors not only expressed contrasting views of the ospedali girls, but also of the music itself. After his trip across France and Italy in 1770, Charles Burney declared, “Vocal music seems at present in its highest state of perfection in the *conservatorios* of Venice, where only the natural voices of females can be heard; so that the greatest crime of which the Italians seem guilty is having dared to apply to their softer language a species of music more delicate and refined, than is to be found in the rest of Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Other visitors, however, expressed a concern about the ospedali repertoire. In 1777, for instance, Ange Goudar, French adventurer and writer, exclaimed: “The traditional church music that worshippers expected to hear at the ospedali had become infected with the stylistic corruption that had over taken secular music, and the plainchant Mass was now merely a spectacle to attract and hold the devotion of the faithful.”<sup>2</sup>

These contrasting attitudes stemmed from the governors’ purposes for the music. While it was religious, serving religious functions, the music was also meant to attract visitors. The governors adapted musical conditions at the ospedali to this end. They allowed the composers to incorporate innovative compositional techniques to produce novelty, and they formed routine practice schedules to create the highest quality music possible. To attract wealthier visitors, the governors put on private shows for prominent guests and royalty, who were expected to donate large sums for their special treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Burney, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe*, ed. Percy A. Scholes (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 320.

<sup>2</sup> A. Goudar, *Le Brigandage de la musique italienne* (Paris, 1777) p. 48-65.

They even hired out the ospedali girls to perform as special entertainment in private homes.

Eventually, the music's function became more economic than religious – a means for bringing in revenue to support the ospedali. Since the Venetian state never funded the ospedali, the institutions needed visitors' donations to function. Consequently, the governors competed with the Venetian public opera to attract wealthy tourists (whose monetary contributions mimicked opera ticket sales), and the ospedali composers began writing music to appeal to the opera houses' larger audiences. Thus, their compositions became more operatic in nature, the ensembles grew, and the compositions featured more instruments.

In this chapter, I examine two specific changes in the ospedali repertoire – instrumentation and operatic virtuosity – while addressing how tourists responded to these changes. In particular, I analyze works by Antonio Vivaldi and Giovanni Porta, two maestri at the Ospedale della Pietà. Through their works, I illustrate what musical techniques the composers may have used to appeal to audiences. I will conclude with a discussion on how further analyses can supplement our current understanding of the ospedali.

### *Instruments*

Despite Papal regulations, the Ospedali Grandi encouraged instrumental music. Pieces written for the orphan girls called for the use of viola d'amore, lute, theorbo, chalumeau, viola all'inglese, psaltery, and mandolin, as well as recorder, organ, oboe,

cello, bassoon, horn, timpani, plus the occasional trumpet or trombone.<sup>3</sup> The Basilica di San Marco did not use flutes until 1750, because flutes were considered to have “lascivious associations.”<sup>4</sup> The ospedali students, however, did play flutes. In 1706, the Pietà’s account books noted a repair to four flutes.<sup>5</sup> Records also show the Pietà owned oboes and bassoons by 1710, horns by 1740, and timpani by 1750. The Mendicanti also owned many brass instruments – including cornets, horns, trombones, and trumpets – all by 1707.<sup>6</sup>

Instruments became important to the ospedali due to the nature of their ensembles. Sacred music at the Basilica di San Marco and other religious institutions was commonly written *a cappella* to emphasize the sacred text. The sacred performances at the ospedali, however, mostly featured vocal choirs with small orchestras and organs. The ospedali composers often added instruments to fill in the tenor and bass parts that could not always be naturally covered by the female voices.<sup>7</sup> Lower instruments, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Talbot, “Vivaldi’s Venice,” *The Musical Times* 119, no. 1622 (1978): 316.

<sup>4</sup> Giulio Ongaro, et al. “Venice,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed March 24, 2013), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41311>.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Arnold, “Instruments and Instrumental Teaching,” *The Galpin Society Journal* 18 (1965): 76.

<sup>6</sup> The use of brass instruments, however, was not unusual, as Venetian nuns formed brass ensembles within their convents throughout Venice. Brass instruments were commonly used for ceremonial processions (often performed in Venetian festivals). See Jane L. Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 171; Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1994), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Denis Arnold, “Orphans and Ladies,” *Proceedings of the Royal Music Academy* 89<sup>th</sup> Sess. (1962-3): 38.

the cello, double bass, and bassoon, became popular because they could substitute for the missing voice. Each performance also included instrumental works (overtures, symphonies, and concertos) that featured the whole orchestra to show off the ospedali girls' instrumental expertise.<sup>8</sup>

Since Venetian operas traditionally used an assortment of instruments for effect, the ospedali composers followed suit to attract patrons who already enjoyed the opera. The ospedali's performances did not contain the extra-musical effects such as scenery and acting of the opera, but their music developed a dramatic musical language to stimulate similar associations. For instance, they incorporated long-standing musical symbolism to help convey certain imagery. Continuing from Renaissance associations, bassoons and trombones often represented the underworld, while harps evoked heaven. Trumpets and drums were traditionally associated with the military and triumphant celebrations, while violins often denoted lamentation and piety. The use of all different types of instruments at once, however, was uncommon throughout Europe. German bands typically contained wind instruments, while Rome, France, and England employed all-string ensembles.<sup>9</sup> Venetians were the first to use wind, brass, and string instruments all in one piece.

Like the opera, the ospedali used contrasting timbres to give distinct impressions to their audiences, especially in their oratorios, which replaced the operatic entertainment

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Burney declared, "They always finish with a symphony." See Charles Burney, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe*, ed. Percy A. Scholes (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 124.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

during Lent.<sup>10</sup> For example, Antonio Vivaldi carefully chose the instrumentation for his oratorio *Juditha Triumphans*.<sup>11</sup> Vivaldi (1678-1741) wrote this oratorio to be performed by the Ospedale della Pietà choir to celebrate the victory of the Venetian republic over the Turks in 1716. The plot tells the Biblical story of the young Jewish widow Judith (allegorically representing Venice), who implores Holofernes (the general of the Assyrian army, representing the Turkish Sultan), to spare her town Bethulia. Holofernes falls in love with Judith, who betrays and beheads him while sleeping, and saves her town. In this oratorio, Vivaldi composes arias accompanied by *viola d'amore*, theorbos, harpsichords, mandolin, violins, oboe, organ, clarinets, recorders, and viols, each chosen for distinct meanings. The *viola d'amore*, for example, conveyed the sweet, pious nature of Juditha (and consequently Venice), while the trumpets, drums, and strings of the *sinfonia* embodied a triumphant, martial entrance of Holofernes's army. Vivaldi was unable to use similar instrumentation in most of his operas.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the emphasis on instruments, the ospedali composers wrote their ospedali music with balance and recognition of the text. Venetians believed in the balance and

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<sup>10</sup> In Venice, violins were usually associated with the church, so the ospedali typically featured a choir with a string orchestra for sacred pieces. Other instruments were most often used in purely instrumental works or oratorios. Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music*, 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> For a larger discussion of this oratorio, see Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Opera houses did not own the variety of instruments Vivaldi liked to employ, but the ospedali did. Michael Talbot, *Juditha Triumphans*, liner notes, Hyperion Records, CD A67281.

unity of music (similar to the balance and unity of their whole society).<sup>13</sup> If one part stood out from among the rest in one section, the other parts would balance it in a subsequent section. Consequently, if the instrumental accompaniment were strong or technical, the voices would equally counter with clear articulation and virtuosity. Additionally, an instruction manual printed for the ospedali singers in 1752 directed the musicians to pay attention to every single inflection to emphasize the significance of the sacred text.<sup>14</sup> Charles Burney highly praised the way the instruments performed: “I must likewise do justice to the orchestra, which is here under the most exact discipline; no one of the instrumental performers seemed ambitious of shining at the expense of the vocal part, but each was under that kind of subordination which is requisite in a servant to a superior.”<sup>15</sup> He believed that the orchestral accompaniment was “free from that kind of confusion which disturbs and covers the voice.”<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, visitors had mixed responses to the instrumental music at the ospedali. Most were quite impressed; they considered the instrumental music another pleasing novelty of Venetian entertainment. Emperor Joseph II of Austria, during his 1769 visit, was awestruck by the one hundred figlie “arranged in three balconies,” with “violins, violoncellos, harps, and harpsichords [...] oboes, flutes, bassoons, and traverse

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<sup>13</sup> Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music*, 209.

<sup>14</sup> *Salmi che si Cantato in tutti Le Vesperi Dei Giorni Festivi di tutto l'Anno* (Venice, Museo Correr: Antonio Groppo, 1752), *Opusculi Provenienze Diverse*, 6581; cited in Faun Stacy Tanenbaum, “The Partbook Collection from the Ospedale della Pietà,” (PhD diss., New York University, 1993), 78.

<sup>15</sup> Burney, 127.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

flutes, and brass [trumpets and *corni di caccia*].”<sup>17</sup> After the performance, he donated 200 Hungarian *regali* to the ospedali to show how please he was with the performance. James Edward Smith, an English botanist who went on a grand tour in 1786-8, expressed similar sentiments. Even though he knew the girls played instruments, he still related them to the divine: “We went to the famous conservatory, La Pietà and heard a similar piece [to an oratorio of Susanna] most divinely performed indeed. We could just distinguish the girls through the lattice, fiddling, playing on the French horn, etc. One song, with the flute accompaniment, was the sweetest thing I have ever heard.”<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, the instrumental music attracted visitors as a novelty, rather than as a religious function.

Other visitors believed that using instruments detracted from the ospedali’s religious fervor. They believed sacred music should typically feature vocal ensembles with light accompaniment to allow the text to be heard. Henriette Louise d’Oberkirch, Countess of de Montbrison in the late eighteenth century, exclaimed that the instrumental music at ospedali covered up the important text:

The symphonies at these concerts are excellent, but it is impossible to distinguish a single word; it would seem as if the voices were but a secondary consideration, and the instruments everything; the music was

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<sup>17</sup> N. Balbi, “Testimonianze,” in Emmanuele Antonio Cicogna, ed., *Delle iscrizioni veneziane raccolte ed illustrate*, trans. Jane Berdes (Venice: G. Orlandelli, 1824- 53), 548-51.

<sup>18</sup> James Edward Smith, *A Sketch of a Tour on the Continent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1807), 396.

altogether too noisy and too confused, and the singers did not appear to be able to keep the different notes distinct.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, after his visit, Pierre Jean Grosley declared, “The words are nothing but a most wretched uncouth jumble of Latin phrases in rhyme, and stuffed rather with barbarisms and solecisms, than any thing of sense and propriety.”<sup>20</sup>

Eventually visitors’ comments on the ospedali reflected their opinions of female instrumentalists. During her visit in 1776, for instance, Louise Miller expressed complete disgust over what she witnessed:

When I entered [the tribune at the Pietà] I was seized with so violent a fit of laughter, that I am surprised that they had not driven me out again. You cannot wonder that my risibility was excited, when upon entering the tribune, my eyes were struck with the sight of a dozen or fourteen beldames [belles dames] ugly and old; one blowing a French horn, another sweating at the bass-viol, another playing first fiddle, and beating time with her foot in the greatest rage; others performing on bassoons, hautboys, and clarionets [sic.]; these with several young girls who formed the choir, and one who played upon the organ composed the concert, but after I had seen it, I could no longer bear to hear it, so much had the sight of the performers disgusted me.<sup>21</sup>

Again, in 1780, William Beckford called the older female performers “Amazonian” for abandoning marriage to play timpani and bassoons.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, visitors believed that performing on instruments was “unfeminine.”

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<sup>19</sup> Henriette Louise d’Oberkirch, *Mémoires of the Baroness d’Oberkirche, of de Montbrison, Written by Herself and Edited by her Grandson* Vol. 3, ed. Count de Montbrison (London: Colburn, 1852), 109-10.

<sup>20</sup> Pier Jean Grosley, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l’Italie et les Italiens*, trans. T. Nugent (London: L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1769), 264.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Miller, *Letters from Italy Describing the Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Paintings, etc. of that Country* (London: For E. and C. Dilly, 1776), 281-2.

<sup>22</sup> William Beckford, *Italy: Sketches* (Paris-Lyons: Cormon and Blanc, 1835), 35.



## *Operatic Virtuosity*

Because the Ospedali Grandi competed with the operas for patrons, their music followed operatic styles. The ospedali had to follow the most popular trends to keep audiences interested.<sup>23</sup> In 1770, Charles Burney noticed this tendency: “The music, which was of the higher sort of *theatric stile*, though it was performed in a church, was not mixed with the church service, and the audience sat the whole time, as at a concert; and, indeed, this might be called a *concerto* spiritual, with great propriety.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, many of the ospedali composers wrote for both the ospedali and the opera houses, using the same composition techniques in each location. They used no strict division between their secular and sacred music.<sup>25</sup>

We know the ospedali musicians employed operatic techniques, such as coloratura, in their singing as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Robert Bargrave, who left one of the most descriptive accounts of their music, claimed that a “most famous Nunn” sang trills throughout her performance so that audiences could “observe her excellency above the others.”<sup>26</sup> Eventually, the music at the ospedali became so operatic, that visitors confused the ospedali girls for operatic performers (even though the ospedali girls were never allowed to sing in a theater). Baroness Henriette Louise d’Oberkirch

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<sup>23</sup> Tanenbaum, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Burney, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Arnold, “Music at the Ospedali,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113, no. 2 (1988): 165.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Bargrave, *A Relation of Sundry Voyages and Journeys made by Mee Robert Bargrave [1628]* (BG-Ob, Rawlinson, MS. C.7 99); A. Rode, *Robert Bargrave, ein englischer Reisender des XVII Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg, 1905), 162-3; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 24.

proclaimed, “They sang the ‘De profundis’, and ‘Miserere’, which only shocked my Protestant ears when uttered by the lips of *professed actors*.” [Italics added.]<sup>27</sup>

By 1720, the maestri composed in what Jane L. Berdes referred to as *terzo stile*, a style not oriented towards the church or to popular operatic music, but instead written to show off the individual performer.<sup>28</sup> Concertos, for example, transitioned from the concerto grosso style (which featured a small ensemble) to solo concertos. This new form, used often by Antonio Vivaldi, allowed the top performers to display their technical skills.

Antonio Vivaldi is the most well known composer from the Ospedali Grandi. He is credited with solidifying the form of the concerto as well as contributing to virtuosic violin technique and orchestration. He began working at the Pietà in 1703 as the maestro di violino. After struggling to keep his position (which was likely removed once the talented, older ospedali students started teaching the younger), Vivaldi was finally appointed to maestro di concerti in 1716. In this position, he was able to write sacred music for the ospedali (including masses, vespers, oratorios, and motets), while he also wrote secular music (concertos, sonatas, and operas) for other venues in Venice. Vivaldi’s music is known for its peculiar attention to rhythms – including Lombardic rhythms, syncopation, juxtaposed fast and slow rhythms, and hemiolas – as well as octave leaps, arpeggios, sequential patterns, and technically intricate instrumental work.

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<sup>27</sup> Henriette Louis d’Oberkirche was a Baroness in Alsace, France. Her reaction is not surprising since actors in France were commonly excommunicated and denied Christian burial unless they confessed and gave up their profession before death. Oberkirche, 109-10.

<sup>28</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 206.

He left the Pietà in 1718 to stimulate his career elsewhere, but he continued to write works for the ospedali, which he often sent to them by post. The Pietà's accounts confirm payment for over 140 of Vivaldi's concertos between 1723-9.<sup>29</sup>

By looking at Vivaldi's violin concertos, we can discern the level of virtuosity performed by soloists.<sup>30</sup> For example, Vivaldi's Violin Concerto RV 343 (mid-1720s)<sup>31</sup> contains complex technical passages to demonstrate Anna Maria della Pietà's skill.<sup>32</sup> RV 343 was written for *scordatura* (cross-tuned) violin to allow for quick arpeggios and scales. This piece also features quick leaps between registers, rapid ornamentations, triple and quadruple stops, and high register passages, indeed, remarkable achievements for a baroque violinist. (See Figure 1.)

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<sup>29</sup> To read more about Vivaldi, see Michael Talbot, *Vivaldi* (New York, Schirmer Books, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> All solo parts for the ospedali are now lost, except for those Antonio Vivaldi composed for Anna Maria della Pietà. Tanenbaum, 205.

<sup>31</sup> Antonio Vivaldi, *Concerto con Violini Scordatura* (not published: Sächsische Landesbibliothek), 2389.0.112.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Maria della Pietà was a foundling, born around 1696. She was considered the leading violinist of Europe by many, including Joachim Christoph Nemeitz, a north German court councilor, the German flutist, composer and theorist, Johann Joachim Quantz, and Karl Ludwig von Pöllnitz, a baron of Prussia. Charles de Brosses even regarded her as "unsurpassed" by any woman or man. She commissioned many concertos, including some by Antonio Vivaldi, Giuseppe Tartini, Giovanni Francesco Brusa, and Mauro D'Alay. For more information on her, see Jane L. Berdes, "Anna Maria della Pietà: The Woman Musician of Venice Personified," in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, ed. *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994.), 135-6; Federico Guglielmo, *Six Violin Concertos for Anna Maria*, with L'Arte dell'Arco, 2005 by Classic Produktion Osnabrück, CPO 777 078-2, Compact disc liner notes, 12.

The image displays a musical score for the solo violin cadenza of Antonio Vivaldi's Violin Concerto RV 343, measures 79-101. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of seven staves of music. The first two staves feature a continuous, flowing sixteenth-note melody. The third and fourth staves show a more rhythmic accompaniment with dotted rhythms and sustained notes. The fifth and sixth staves continue the melodic line with various articulations and dynamics. The seventh staff concludes the cadenza with a trill (tr) and a final note.

Figure 1: Antonio Vivaldi, *Violin Concerto* RV 343, solo violin, cadenza, mm.79-101

Vivaldi's *Magnificat* RV 610/11 also offers a glimpse into the level of virtuosity exhibited at the ospedali.<sup>33</sup> Precise instrumental parts, containing complex and exacting rhythms, show the technical demands required of the orchestra. The difficult and intricate vocal solo parts imitate the instrumental lines. They include arpeggios, long melismas, and wide register leaps. This *Magnificat* survives in four different versions: RV610, 610a, 610b, and 611. Two of these are known to have been composed for performances at the Ospedale della Pietà. RV 610b (the oldest version) was composed around 1715, while Vivaldi was working at the Pietà. This version is set for a single SAB chorus and an orchestra, in nine movements. The second movement contains three solos – soprano, contralto, and tenor – and the sixth features a soprano duet. RV 611 is a revised version of RV 610b, in which the second movement is split into three separate solo movements, each designated for a specific ospedali soloist (Apollonia, Maria La Bolognese, and Chiaretta). The sixth movement was rewritten as a contralto solo for Ambrosina, and the eighth for Albetta.<sup>34</sup>

The two different versions of the second movement especially show how Vivaldi's solo writing for the ospedali changed from 1715 to 1739. Both versions contain long melismas in the solo parts, but leaps between registers are much more common in

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<sup>33</sup> Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat: Critical Edition*, ed. Michael Talbot (London: Ricordi, 1999); Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat Ossecensis*, ed. H.C. Robbins Landon (Vienna: Universal, 1961); Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat*, ed. Gian Francesco Malipiero (London: Ricordi, 1964); and Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat*, ed. Clayton Westermann (New York: Kalmus, 1969).

<sup>34</sup> As these musicians were foundlings, they have no surname. Most foundling students were referred to by their institution – “della Pietà” – or by their instrument – “del Basso.”

RV 611. (See Figures 2.1 and 2.2.) RV 611 also features a wider range, modulation in the vocal part instead of in the instrumental accompaniment, and vocal trills. In the first version, the solos are written functionally, each one fitting into Vivaldi's clear ritornello form. In RV 611, however, each soloist received her own movement, with her specific talents in mind. In 1739, the solos were no longer for function and religious discretion. Instead they provided spectacle and a chance for each *virtuosa* to shine.

Soprano

Et ex-ul - ta - vit\_ spi - ri-tus me - us in De-o, sa-lu -

ta - - - - - ri me-o,

*tr*

in De-o, sa-lu - ta - ri me - o.

Figure 2.1: Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat* RV 610b, Second Movement, solo soprano, mm. 8-17

Soprano

Et ex - ul - ta - vit spi - ri - tus  
 me - us spi - ri - tus me - us in De - o sa - lu -  
 ta -  
 ri - me - o,  
 sa - lu - ta -  
 ri me - o.

Figure 2.2: Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat* RV 611, Second Movement, solo soprano, mm. 11-37

Contemporary commentaries indicate that the visitors did not come to see the famous composers, but to hear the most famous female musicians.<sup>35</sup> Burney, for example, was quite impressed by their performance: “The girls played a thousand tricks in singing, particularly in the duets, where there was a trial of skill and of natural powers, as who could go highest, lowest, swell a note the longest, or run divisions with the greatest rapidity.”<sup>36</sup> Charles Burney and other tourists, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles de Brosses, and Count Charles-Louis Pöllnitz, were so impressed by the musicians that they described specific girls by name.<sup>37</sup> Visitors also wrote sonnets praising these talented musicians. One anonymous sonnet, written during Vivaldi’s time, portrays the kind of poetic praise the singers received:

Firstly, let me speak of singers:  
First prize goes to sweetest Apollonia  
Devilishly she outsings all her sisters,  
Melting hearts like mine *ad infinita*.

If she sings of pathos sadly,  
All her listeners are distilled to honey  
If she sings a joyous tune, how gladly  
Hearts and souls shiver with glee!

Clear and vibrant is her voice which  
This soprano exploits skillfully  
Taking hearts into her hands rich  
With caresses, stealing hearts willfully.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This fact is noted in Tanenbaum, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Burney, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Burney, 114; Charles De Brosse, *Lettres Familieres Sur L’Italie*, ed. M.R. Colomb, vol. 1 (Paris: Alphonse Levavasseur, 1836), 214.

<sup>38</sup> Only part of this sonnet is included here. See R. Giazotto, *Vivaldi* (Turin: ERI, 1973), 386-96.



As Berdes argued, the ospedali girls were allowed to stand out more as they became more important to the success and image of Venice. Their showy talent and virtuosity was permitted because it attracted more visitors and patrons, and, therefore, greater revenue.

Nevertheless, as the Ospedali Grandi's music gained more virtuosic elements, their reputations became more circumspect. Their virtuosic skill could easily be compared to that of the opera's *prima donna*, since *prime donne* employed showy vocal displays to attract visitors and gain popular reputations. Unfortunately, opera patrons typically associated *prime donne* with demanding behavior and excessive lavishness.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, as the ospedali's style became more virtuosic (and therefore more similar to a *prima donna*'s singing), their music became less easily associated with devotion and the sacred environment it was supposed to represent. Instead, as women who displayed themselves in the virtuosic manner, the ospedali girls were fully comparable to courtesans or operatic divas that were associated with using their musical talents to seduce men. Polish Count August Moszynsky, for example, associated their singing to flirtatiousness: "This music is more worthy than opera. And when someone allowed us in, we entered and saw the faces in there are very pretty girls who sing, playfully and encouraging men."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ellen T. Harris, "Prima donna" *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed March 24, 2013), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/22349>.

<sup>40</sup> August Moszynski, *Dziennik podróży dp Francji I Wloch* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1970), 597; cited in Berdes and Whittemore, 72.

### *Motivating Audiences*

Most sacred works had fixed Latin texts, so composers often had to employ imaginative compositional techniques (such as contrasting textures, word-painting, new timbres, and technically-difficult passages) to keep audiences interested. As early as 1650, Robert Bargrave noticed word painting in an ospedali performance; he claims the musician expressed “words by singing according to theyr [sic.] sense: as *Morire* dolefully, *Sospiri* sighingly, and *Ridendo* laughingly.”<sup>41</sup> It would not be too far a stretch to imagine that the composers used word painting or other moving techniques in their music to appeal to the affects of the patrons. They could have encouraged pity or humility to convince patrons to donate to the “‘pathos-laden’ ospedali.”<sup>42</sup>

To understand how composers may have used the music to move audiences, I have analyzed two Magnificat settings composed by Giovanni Porta and Antonio Vivaldi. Similar affecting techniques may be found in other ospedali compositions, but I chose to present Magnificats because, as Faun Tanenbaum Tiede demonstrated, psalms like the Magnificat were more prevalent than any other type of work in the ospedali.<sup>43</sup> In fact, each Vespers mass (which was performed daily at the ospedali) closed with a setting of the Magnificat.

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<sup>41</sup> Bargrave, 162-3.

<sup>42</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 133.

<sup>43</sup> Tanenbaum, 76-7.

(1) Magnificat anima mea Dominum:	(1) My soul magnifies the Lord:
(2) Et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutary meo.	(2) And my spirit has found joy in God, my savior.
(3) Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae: ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generations.	(3) For he hath looked graciously upon the lowly state of his handmaiden: for behold, from this time forth all generations shall call me blessed.
(4) Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est: et sancum nomen ejus.	(4) For He who is mighty has done great things for me: and holy is his name.
(5) Et misericordia ejus à progenie in progenies timentibus eum.	(5) And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.
(6) Fecit potentiam in brachio suo: dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.	(6) He has shown strength with His arm: He has scattered the proud for the ideas in their hearts.
(7) Deposuit potentes de sede: et exaltavit humiles.	(7) He has put down the mighty from their thrones: and uplifted the humble.
(8) Esurientes implevit bons: et divites dimisit inanes.	(8) He has filled the hungry with good things: and the rich He has sent away empty.
(9) Suscepit Israel puerum suum, recordatus misericordiae suae.	(9) He has protected His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy.
(10) Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros: Abraham, et semini ejus in saecula.	(10) Just as He declared to our fathers: to Abraham, and his offspring, forever.
(11) Gloria Patri, et Filion, et Spiritui Sancto.	(11) Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
(12) Sicut erat in principio, et nunc et semper, et in saecula saeculorus, Amen.	(12) Just as it was in the beginning, and now and always shall be, And for ever and ever, Amen

Figure 3: Magnificat Text

The Magnificat is the song of the Virgin Mary. During the eighteenth century, Magnificats were typically set in sections that corresponded to lines of the text – either nine sections (lines 2-4 and lines 11-12 combined; see Figure 3), or eleven sections (only lines 11 and 12 combined). By the middle of the eighteenth century, composers usually strived for eleven sections. Each section could either be connect to others through the use of ritornellos or be a self-contained movement (similar to a chorus or an aria). Either

way, each line of text usually ended in a definite cadence. Sections were also occasionally solo movements to feature the virtuosity of the performers, especially at the ospedali. Common to the Baroque period, all Magnificat settings began and ended in the same key, but could travel to other keys during the middle sections. Baroque composers also tended to focus on the importance of the words in sacred music. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, composers began writing freer, symphonic music, forcing the fixed text into their composition later.

Giovanni Porta (c. 1675-1755), one of Francesco Gasparini's students, was already an established and highly regarded opera composer in Venice before he began his position as Maestro di Coro at the Pietà in May 1726.<sup>44</sup> During his time in Venice, Porta wrote dozens of operas (that were often performed throughout northern Italy), along with unknown numbers of sacred works for the Pietà (at least nineteen masses, three Miserere, twelve Magnificats, four Passions, a few oratorios, and hundreds of other psalms). His compositions contain typical characteristics of a Venetian composer, including fast running scales, arpeggios, wide melodic leaps, extended sequences, and tutti unison texture. Many of his works for the Pietà feature the popular ritornello form, as well as virtuosic solo passages. He ended his career at the ospedali in 1734 when he accepted a position at the Bavarian court of the Elector Karl Albrecht in Munich.

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<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed description of Porta's life, see Tanenbaum, 55-66.

Porta's *Primo Magnificat Piena* (written for the Pietà c. 1726)<sup>45</sup> is characteristic of Porta's style; it features a major key, common time, and SAB scoring.<sup>46</sup> While Porta wrote many works featuring two choirs (the polychoral technique first heard in San Marco), *piena* designated a performance for a single choir. *Primo Magnificat* is set in nine sections that correspond to the text, beginning with an immediate entrance of all parts in a homophonic declaration of the "Magnificat" (Line 1, Figure 3). Homophonic sections, like the introduction, are all marked Adagio and alternate with Allegro contrapuntal sections. This Magnificat follows the typical ritornello form with an instrumental theme (echoed by the voices), which continues to appear throughout all the different sections. This theme ties the piece together from beginning to end. The entire composition features homophonic progressions containing many thirds and sixths as well as occasional contrapuntal lines. As usual for Magnificats, the section after "Gloria" (Lines 11 and 12) stays on tonic, brings back the main theme, and closes with the most contrapuntal section of the piece – a fugue and cadence over a repeated "Amen."

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<sup>45</sup> Giovanni Porta, *Selected Sacred Music from the Ospedale della Pietà*, ed. Faun Tanenbaum Tiedge (Madison: A-R Editions, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> SAB scores, such as this Magnificat, strongly support the notion that the ospedali women sang a bass part. For a discussion on the performance practice of sacred music at the ospedali, see Michael Talbot, "Tenors and Bases at the Venetian 'Ospedali,'" *Acta Musicologica* 66, Fasc. 2 (Jul. – Dec., 1994): 123-38.

Soprano

De - po - su-it po - ten - tes, po - ten - tes de

Alto

De - po - su-it po - ten - tes, po - ten - tes de

Bass

De - po - su-it po - ten - tes, po - ten - tes de

S

se-de, po-ten - tes de se-de: et ex - al - ta -

A

se-de, po-ten - tes de se-de: et ex - al - ta -

B

se-de, po-ten - tes de se-de:

Figure 4: Giovanni Porta, *Primo Magnificat Piena*, mm. 92-102

Figure 4: (cont'd)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a vocal ensemble (Soprano, Alto, Bass) and piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in Latin, describing the Magnificat.

**System 1:**

- Soprano (S):** vit, ex-al-ta-vit hu - mi - les, et ex - al-ta - - vit, ex-al-
- Alto (A):** vit, ex-al-ta-vit hu - mi - les, ex-la-
- Bass (B):** ex-al-ta-vit hu-mi - les, ex-la-

**System 2:**

- Soprano (S):** ta-vit hu-mi-les, ex-al - ta - - vits, ex-al-ta vit,
- Alto (A):** ta-vit hu-mi-les, ex-al - ta - - vits, ex-al-ta vit,
- Bass (B):** ta-vit hu-mi-les, ex-al - ta - - vits, ex-al-ta vit,

The piano accompaniment consists of two staves: a right-hand staff in treble clef and a left-hand staff in bass clef. The right-hand part features a melodic line with some chromaticism and a final cadence. The left-hand part provides harmonic support with a steady bass line and some rhythmic patterns.

Figure 4: Giovanni Porta, *Primo Magnificat Piena*, mm. 92-102

In Porta's *Primo Magnificat*, the setting of line 7 ("Deposuit potentes de sede: et exaltavit humiles") is notable for its texture. (See Figure 4.) While all other sections feature harmonies of thirds and sixths and are interspersed with contrapuntal melodies, this text is set in unison tutti. Within the entire Magnificat setting, this text stands out from among the rest. Additionally, the composer chose to repeat the words "exaltavit humiles" in a three measure long Adagio section, enclosed between rests. (See Figure 5.) The repetition, while suddenly changing the tempo, emphasizes this text even more.

**Adagio**

Soprano  
ex - al - ta - vit, ex - al - ta - vit hu - mi - les.

Alto  
ex - al - ta - vit, hu - mi - les.

Bass  
ex - al - ta - vit, hu - mi - les.

Figure 5: Giovanni Porta, *Primo Magnificat Piena*, mm. 103-105

Eighteenth-century Venetian composers often used unison tutti and repetition of text to bring out the most passionate or important messages in a setting. In this case, the text translates to the following: "He has put down the mighty from their thrones: and



uplifted the humble.” If it were true that the composers and governors wanted to elicit pity and generosity from their audiences, then no other text in the Magnificat would have better supported their aims. By stressing the words, “put down the mighty from their thrones,” Porta called out to patricians and royalty to humble themselves in order to receive salvation. He would not have wanted to emphasize the text, “the rich He has sent away empty” (the only other line that might have emphasized donation), which could have instilled a fear of bankruptcy. Instead, he just emphasized humility – “God uplifts the humble,” so give to those who are in need.

This exact same compositional technique is used in Vivaldi’s *Magnificat* RV 611 (1739). This Magnificat presents considerably more technical passages for the instruments and voices than Porta’s, as well as more contrapuntal lines. It also contains the virtuosic solos discussed above. Line 7, however, is written completely in unison tutti. (See Figure 6.) After Vivaldi presents line 6 sung in full harmony, accompanied by a loud, rhythmically intense orchestra, all parts suddenly unify to bring out the text “Deposit potentes de sede: et exaltavit humiles.” The following movement (line 8) returns to Vivaldi’s characteristic contrapuntal style, contrasting greatly from the clear tutti that was just presented.

It is unlikely that this similarity was a mere coincidence. Vivaldi and Porta were contemporaries, aware of each other’s music and composing for the same ensemble. These composers were consciously choosing to emphasize this particular text. Additionally, because the girls were instructed to clearly enunciate, the composers knew the lyrics would be heard. Presenting it through a clearer texture would definitely get the audience’s attention.

Voice

De - po-su-it po - ten-tes, po - ten-tes de se-de et ex-al-

ta - - - -

vit hu - mi - les.

Figure 6: Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat* RV610b, 5th Movement, mm. 1-16

Magnificat settings performed at the Basilica di San Marco did not employ similar techniques. Antonio Lotti (1667-1740), who sang and composed for the Basilica di San Marco his entire life, also occasionally composed for the Ospedale degli Incurabili. His setting of the Magnificat follows the typical sectional form and is similar to both Porta and Vivaldi's in harmonic style.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, it is orchestrated for an SATB choir, so we know it was mostly likely composed for San Marco, not for the Incurabili, which favored SSAA scoring.<sup>48</sup> Lotti writes no unison tutti sections throughout the entire piece. In fact, his piece presents a more traditional *stile antico* polyphonic texture than either of the other ospedali composers. He keeps a similar style from beginning to end, only bringing out the "Magnificat" introduction and the "Gloria" in homophonic texture.

Baldassare Galuppi also featured a traditional polyphonic counterpoint in his *Magnificat*. Galuppi worked at the Ospedale dei Mendicanti between 1740-51, at the Basilica di San Marco between 1748-85, and at the Ospedale degli Incurabili between 1762-85. His works are representative of the differing style between the ospedali and San Marco. Denis Arnold argued that Galuppi's works for the Basilica were much more conservative than his works for the ospedali.<sup>49</sup> In his C Major setting of the Magnificat, for example, Galuppi writes in *stile antico* polyphony, using plainsong chant formula and doubling all vocal parts with the instruments. This was the style often favored at San Marco.

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<sup>47</sup> Antonio Lotti, *Magnificat* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1854).

<sup>48</sup> Talbot, "Tenors and Basses," 129.

<sup>49</sup> Arnold, "Orphans and Ladies," 37-9; Patricia J. Cahalan, "The Magnificats of Baldassare Galuppi," *Choral Journal* 33:5 (Dec. 1992), 21-6.

Because few of Galuppi's works from the ospedali survive, contemporary comments can illuminate the style of his compositions. Charles Burney described Galuppi after witnessing a performance at the ospedali: "This ingenious, entertaining, and elegant composer abounds in *novelty*, in *spirit*, and in *delicacy*."<sup>50</sup> For a music historian such as Burney to describe Galuppi's works as "novel," they must have featured more modern techniques, not the *stile antico*. Burney also declared, "[Galuppi's] accompaniments, in particular, are always ingenious, but though full, free from that kind of confusion which disturbs and covers the voice."<sup>51</sup> According to Burney's account, Galuppi was keen to let the lyrics project in his compositions for the ospedali. This would not have been possible in the thick polyphonic style popular at the Basilica. Instead, he probably used the popular operatic galant style and homophonic textures to emphasize portions of the text in his ospedali compositions.

### *Conclusion*

During his 1743 visit, Jean-Jacques Rousseau proclaimed that no man could easily resist the music at the ospedali: "The abundant art, the exquisite taste of the singing, the beauty of the voices, the correctness of the execution – everything in these delightful concerts contributes to produce an impression which is certainly not 'good style'. But against which I doubt whether any man's heart is proof."<sup>52</sup> Even though the visitors have defined the female musicians as strange and even immoral, they still thought

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<sup>50</sup> Burney, 126.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Une sortie digne," in *Confessions* Vol. 1, Part 7 (Paris, 1876) in *Oeuvres complètes*, trans. W. Conynham Mallory (London: Robinson and Bow, 1790; New York: Tutor, 1928; New York: Modern Library, 1980), 162.

the ospedali produced some of the best music in Italy. Through affective musical techniques, novelty, and extraordinary talent, the ospedali musicians attracted patrons, and their music supported the lives and careers of hundreds of musicians against all odds – abandonment, poverty, sickness, and gender stereotypes.

My short analyses are just a few examples of the ways the ospedali composers appealed to tourists and audiences. Unfortunately, much of the music from the Ospedali Grandi that has survived is now in pieces. The music was often bound in partbooks for each individual performer, and many of these partbooks are now destroyed or lost. Accordingly, most compositions only survive in one or two remaining instrumental parts.<sup>53</sup> Few full scores were left with these partbooks, indicating they were not written or the original composers kept them. Due to the nature of these surviving materials, we only have bits and pieces of what their music was actually like.

To gain a better picture of the techniques that the Ospedali Grandi composers employed and the talents the musicians presented, a collaborative effort is needed to uncover the lost music in the Venetian archives. Currently, hundreds of unstudied partbooks remain in Venice. By examining these materials, researchers may be able to piece together a more complete view of the ospedali repertoire. While Faun Tanenbaum Tiedge completed a project on Giovanni Porta's partbooks, similar efforts for other composers could reveal a more comprehensive image.

Dozens of oratorio scores composed by Bonaventura Furlanetto (Maestro di Coro at the Pietà, 1768-1815) remain within the Fondo Esposti archives in the Conservatorio di

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<sup>53</sup> Tanenbaum, 7.

Musica “Benedetto Marcello.” As oratorios contained some of the most operatic and complex instrumental scoring of the ospedali, an analysis of their music would serve fruitful. Additionally, a classification of the type of plots and characters in these oratorios may reveal what messages the governors and composers deemed most suitable for the ospedali performances.

Many Grand Tourists believed music at the Ospedali Grandi was some of the best in all of Europe. It is a shame that it has been lost and mostly forgotten through history. Even though Antonio Vivaldi is the only ospedali composer who has received a serious and comprehensive cataloguing effort, dozens of others contributed more consistently to the institutions. In my future research, I hope to be able to travel to Venice, Italy to uncover some of this lost music. Once it has been studied, we can more fully understand how the music of the Ospedali Grandi contributed to Venetian and European lifestyles, as well as how important the female musicians were to musical performance and technique.

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