

# NOTES FROM THE SILENCE

This book is a celebration of the achievements of a handful of women over four centuries of Western European history. Neither angels nor sorceresses, merely formidably talented human beings, these female composers demonstrate, again and again, their ‘high intellectual gifts’; they express, again and again, ‘powerful feeling drawn from deep conviction.’ They created their music in societies that made certain places off-limits for a woman, from the opera house to the university, from the conductor’s podium to the music publisher – societies where certain jobs, whether in cathedral, court or conservatoire, were ones for which they could not even apply.

But it is the cultures of belief within which they lived that made their task all the harder. From seventeenth-century Florence to twentieth-century London, women creating music triggered some profound and enduring fears. The Book of Samuel states that ‘listening to a woman’s voice is sexual enticement’, and that was enough to silence women, in church and synagogue, if not beyond. It is a fairly straightforward step from the Book of Samuel to the recommendation made by an early Christian Father that nuns should sing their prayers, but make no sound, ‘so that their lips move, but the ears of others do not hear’. These prohibitions upon woman’s expression may have taken less draconian forms as the years passed, but the fear underlying them, of the sexualized threat

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

of the creative woman, remained. This is why each composer in this book composed her music in the shadow of the courtesan, her sexual life scrutinized, her virtue questioned, simply because of her trade.

Every female composer knew that her work would always be understood in terms of her sex, or, rather, what her society believed her sex was capable of achieving. When, in 1919, a violin sonata by British-born American Rebecca Clarke won an important prize, questions were asked. Had the work actually been submitted by the male composers Ernest Bloch or Maurice Ravel under a pseudonym? How could a woman have created such a formally rigorous yet powerful work? Rebecca Clarke could and did do just that in 1919, but her career was not to be sustained. Clarke was not the first, nor would she be the last, woman to give up composing, worn down by her society's ability to silence her, succumbing to her own self-doubts. Because women, just as much as men, believed the stories we tell ourselves about genius, so often an exclusive men-only club. Clara Wieck, soon to be married to (the tortured genius) Robert Schumann, wrote: 'I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose – not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?' The world-renowned teacher of composition, Nadia Boulanger, knew what she had to sacrifice in order to pursue her successful career in music: 'Artists think only of their art, and they consider it is totally incompatible with the joys of family life. From the day a woman wants to play her one true role – that of mother and wife – it is impossible for her to be an artist as well.'

How to exorcize the ghost of Clara's despair? How to challenge Nadia's definition of the 'impossible'? The pioneering efforts of feminist musicologists offer one response to Clara Schumann. These scholars were, and remain, determined to show that women were 'able to do it' (the *International Encyclopedia of Women*

## NOTES FROM THE SILENCE

*Composers* alone has more than six thousand entries) and it is both revelatory and humbling to read of the experiences of some of the early feminist researchers. Back in 1979, Professor Marcia Citron, seeking to find out more about Fanny Hensel's music, first started work in the Mendelssohn Archiv at the Stattsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz (West Berlin). There was no library catalogue of Hensel holdings. Instead, the director Rudolf Elvers informed scholars as to what they were, or were not, allowed to see. Professor Citron battled on, often desperately copying out scores by hand in the justified fear that she would not be allowed to see the same manuscript again on her next visit. She was therefore surprised, in 1986, when the director, Rudolf Elvers, said that there had been no 'qualified musicologists' interested in the Hensel manuscripts. He was, in his own words, 'waiting for the right man to come along', and, in the meantime, expressed his irritation with 'all these piano-playing girls who are just in love with Fanny'. Elvers's verdict on Hensel? 'She was nothing. She was just a wife.'

Marcia Citron, and her fellow recuperative scholars, believed that their work would not only reveal hidden music, but inspire women of today to claim their place as equals in the world of composition, and encourage orchestras to put female composers on their programmes. They, along with many other commentators, are bemused that neither of these things has quite happened. It 'is difficult to understand the hesitancy to explore and promote music composed by women that persists today', write the editors of a major study of women composers, whilst the music writer Fiona Maddocks admits that 'it seems baffling, if not shocking, that even now we still use the two words *woman* and *composer* together as a collective noun, whereas it has long been out of date to refer to Barbara Hepworth or Tracey Emin as *women artists*'.

Perhaps the ghost of Clara's despair will not be laid to rest by yet another recuperative scholarly exercise. Perhaps it is not enough

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

simply to, in the words of one scholar, ‘rewrite music history on the principle of *add women and stir*’, although those women do need to be added to the mix. As the composer Rhian Samuel, born in 1944, remarks: ‘I have always been aware of women composers . . . Not that they were considered normal; they were considered absolute freaks, but they did exist.’ It is not only that we need to think again about what constitutes ‘greatness’. Above all, we need to find new ways of telling stories about creative, powerful women.

Take, for example, Kassia, probably the earliest female composer for whom there is surviving music. Her hymn to Mary Magdalene, written in the mid-800s, is still sung in Greek Orthodox churches in the early hours of Holy Wednesday. Kassia’s music, written on the seventh hill of Constantinople, the Xerolophos, in a now vanished Byzantine world, has therefore lived on, astonishingly, for twelve centuries. But, if Kassia is remembered at all, she is not remembered for breaking new ground, nor for her concise, syllabic settings of text, or her groundbreaking use of musical motifs ‘to symbolize and mirror the words’ (word painting *avant la lettre*). No: the story goes that her beauty and wisdom led to her being offered, amongst others, as a wife to the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus. The wise and cautious emperor questioned his prospective brides before he saw them, in order not to be blinded by their appearance. Kassia’s witty responses, however, apparently humbled, perhaps humiliated, the mighty Theophilus, who therefore rejected her. The convent swiftly followed, from where Kassia was said to have written her penitential hymn on Mary Magdalene because *she* felt shamed by her desire for the emperor.

These kinds of stories provide the pegs upon which to hang the woman’s life, whether the nun taken from the world, the sacrificial wife or the courtesan composer. Love, marriage, motherhood and (proper and improper) sex: these can all be lovely things, but they are not the only things to define the lives of the women in this

## NOTES FROM THE SILENCE

book, and they certainly do not define their compositions. A quick glance at pre-Romantic ideas about marriage and motherhood acts as a reminder that love had very little to do with the former, whilst, for centuries, carrying and bearing a child was simply something one tried to survive, rather than the event that defined one as a woman. Love (and loved children) exist alongside rape and prostitution, madness, despair, illness and loneliness in death.

Then again, the romanticization and sexualization of women's lives at least offers an alternative to catalogues of injustice and despair. Take the composer Johanna Kinkel. Born in Bonn in July 1810, she was mentored by Felix Mendelssohn, taught by some of the great figures in German music, praised by Robert Schumann for her songs, and walked out of an abusive first marriage. Kinkel responded to the life imprisonment of her politically radical second husband by fleeing with him and their four children to England, where she earned her living teaching music and writing, holding the family together both financially and emotionally while her husband continued on his revolutionary path, now in America. Once in England, she did not compose again. Before she died, Kinkel wrote a novel, with a struggling, desperate composer for a hero: the fact that the hero is a man does little to conceal the work's status as misery memoir. A visiting friend noted that she 'accepted her lot, but not without serious dejection'. Her health was deteriorating, 'conditions of nervousness' began to appear, the news from America 'did not suffice to cheer the darkened soul of the lonely woman'. Kinkel's life ended on the pavement below her home in St John's Wood, north-west London. She fell, or threw herself, from an upper window. The composer's posthumous life is just as dispiriting. An enemy, one Karl Marx (also exiled in London), viewed her as an 'old harridan' and was disgusted that her husband, his political opponent, received sympathy merely because his wife had

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

‘broken her neck’. Mr Kinkel, for his part, never realized his plan to publish his wife’s compositions.

It would have been all too easy to find a bookful of Kinkels, to represent every female composer’s life as a futile struggle against impossible odds. Instead, I want to celebrate the achievements of the eight composers here – Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Marianna Martines, Fanny Hensel, Clara Schumann, Lili Boulanger and Elizabeth ‘Betty’ Maconchy – to show how they overcame the obstacles in their path, to glory in the songs and sonatas that they did write, rather than grieve for the operas and symphonies that they could not. In doing so, I am working within what has been described as a narrative of ‘overcoming’, exemplified in music history by Beethoven, the composer who decided to grab fate by the throat and – instead of killing himself over the loss of his hearing – continued to compose. In recent years, scholars of disability have shown that these kinds of narratives, in which a person such as Beethoven overcomes his impairment, work primarily to reassure the able-bodied in their anxieties about experiencing similar fates, whilst at the same time diminishing the lived experience of the person who has the disability. Here, if each woman in this book is seen to overcome the obstacles in her path and still make her music, not only are those obstacles and struggles minimized but we might well be comforted and reassured to the point of complacency.

An image of Kinkel’s broken body on a pavement in St John’s Wood is one way to challenge complacency, but a less stark, but perhaps more profound, way of understanding what it was, what it is, to be a woman and composer is to explore the often complex experiences of individuals. Looking across the Atlantic, for example, at first sight the beliefs that informed and controlled the lives of women in Europe transferred effortlessly into the New World, proving powerful enough to ensure that, a generation after Kinkel,

## NOTES FROM THE SILENCE

the virtuoso composer Amy Beach, able to hold a tune at the age of one and to pick out melodies on the piano by the age of two, would receive only the scantiest of educations in composition; would be married at eighteen and then have her public performances limited to one recital a year, for charity of course. A closer look at Beach's career suggests, however, a constant give and take between the social forces and cultural beliefs that were designed to stop a woman in her tracks and those that enabled her to move forward as a composer. Sometimes, paradoxically, a single belief – about 'women's intuition', for example – could work both ways, to stifle and to inspire. On the one hand, the teenage Amy was denied lessons in composition because her husband believed that instruction would spoil his wife's 'natural' ability: 'unspoken, but obvious, is Dr Beach's assumption that his wife's musical competency is intuitive; a gift, not a learned skill; received, not achieved', as the scholar A.F. Block explains. Beach, as a woman, is ill-equipped by biology or temperament to benefit from intellectually rigorous training, a new quasi-scientific take on the old idea of talented women as gifted angels, not professional human beings. On the other hand, precisely because her society valued her 'instinctual' ability, Beach was permitted, indeed encouraged, by her family and social circle to compose music, to publish that music and to have her music performed (by others). Her special gift needed to be used, not wasted, and Beach promptly broke new ground for women by writing large-scale orchestral works, such as her *Gaelic Symphony* premiered in 1896. A member of the extremely privileged artistic and social New England set in which Beach moved was fulsome in his praise:

I always feel a thrill of pride myself whenever I hear a fine new work by any one of us, and as such you will have to be counted in, whether you will or not – one of the boys.

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

Her prize may have been to be ‘one of the boys’; she may only have had the opportunity to compose because she was ‘one of us’; she may not have been permitted to engage in a professional career as a pianist; and her hard work and professionalism might have been overlooked – but Beach, like all the women in this book, had found her own unique way to be a woman and composer. She was not yet thirty.

As the following chapters will show, again and again, individual women evaded, confronted and ignored the ideologies and practices that sought to exclude them from the world of composition. Again and again, a woman made her choice, took her chances, whether in the private, female sphere, or the public, male world. Many did this despite subscribing to their society’s beliefs as to what they were capable of as a woman, how they should live as a woman, and, crucially, what they could (and could not) compose as a woman. Perhaps the overcoming of their own mind-forged manacles is where their true courage lies.

Often they worked in communities where to be a woman and a composer was a part of ordinary life – the Medici court in Italy, the city of Venice, a salon in Berlin, the court of the Sun King in France – for in these communities, virtuoso female musicians were expected to write music to display their own virtuosity, whether as a servant of the Church (and thus to the ultimate glory of God) or a servant to a prince (and thus to the ultimate glory of the patron) or a precocious daughter (and thus to the ultimate glory of the family). They wrote their music in cultures where performance and composition were inextricably linked, virtuoso performers and composers who cut their teeth on, and made their name by, writing works that only they would, sometimes only they *could*, perform. Others worked quietly but effectively to create environments in which they, and their successors, would find it just that bit easier to be both composer and woman.

## NOTES FROM THE SILENCE

Above all, these composers were pragmatic. They did not seek out, or seek to create, a female tradition, nor did they wait for a female teacher or mentor. They invariably worked with, and within, a male-dominated musical culture. They countered, over and over again, the attacks on their reputations. They wrote what they could, when they could. If they were permitted to only write sacred music, then sacred music it was. If only lieder, then lieder by the dozen. If it is, and remains, against the odds to be a woman composer, then the ways in which individual women have beaten those odds bears telling.

Working in landscapes of belief that would silence the vast majority of women, these eight composers each found a way to express their exceptional talent, often within an exceptional community. Brought together, their stories provide a complex and inspirational picture of artistic endeavour and achievement across the centuries, which deserves to be, but is not currently, part of our cultural heritage. We are the poorer for it.



'She worked such stunning effects in the minds of her listeners that she changed them from what they had been' Cristofano Bronzini

## Chapter One

# CACCINI

It is carnival time in Florence, and the Medici court is celebrating a great military victory against the Ottoman Turk achieved by their honoured guest, Crown-Prince Wladislaw Sigismund Vasa of Poland. No matter that the Battle of Khotyn, four years earlier, had been in reality a shambolic, bloody stalemate in which Wladislaw had played little active part. A lavish, spectacular entertainment is needed, one that not only demonstrates the triumph of goodness over evil, but the immense wealth and power of the Medici family, rulers of the grand duchy of Tuscany. The story chosen will tell of a wicked sorceress, Alcina, who seduces a knight, Ruggiero, entrapping him on her island in order to take her pleasure. Worse still, he, and a host of other previous victims, seem to enjoy the experience. Fortunately, however, a 'good' witch, Melissa, triumphs over Alcina, and liberates Ruggiero and his fellows. Part opera, part ballet, no expense is spared in the production, which will end with an extraordinary *balletto a cavallo* (dancing horses) that the audience watches from the balconies and terraces of the Villa Poggio Imperiale, a ruinously expensive symbol of Medici power, linked to the city of Florence below by a tree-lined avenue.

The date is 3 February 1625, and the entertainment is *La Liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* (The Liberation of Roger from the Island of Alcina). The composer is thirty-six-year-old Francesca Caccini, working at the height of her career. Many forces

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

and factors have contributed towards this remarkable moment: Caccini was, for example, lucky to be the daughter of two exceptional musicians; she was fortunate to have been born in Florence, the creative centre of the Medici world. But these propitious circumstances of breeding and location are as nothing when set against the simple fact that Francesca Caccini is a woman. Every note on every score that Caccini writes offers a challenge to the dominant values of the world beyond Villa Poggio Imperiale. *La Liberazione* is a hard-won triumph.

As a young girl, Francesca had been set on her path to this remarkable February day in the hills above Florence by Giulio, her ambitious, talented father. Her mother, Lucia di Filippo Gagnolandi, died when Francesca was only five, leaving her daughter with little except the inheritance of a beautiful singing voice, and leaving her husband with three children under the age of six, and a son, Pompeo, aged fourteen, from an earlier liaison. Giulio's second marriage to an impoverished eighteen-year-old singer, Margherita di Agostino della Scala, known as '*Bargialli*', did nothing to shore up his finances, but did introduce another talented singer to the Caccini stable. Growing up as the daughter of Giulio Caccini would prove to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he was the second most highly paid composer and musician on the staff of the Medici household, and renowned as the author of by far the most influential singing manual of the seventeenth century, *Le nuove musiche*, published in 1601, and then translated and imitated throughout Europe.\* On the other hand, Giulio was proud to the point of self-destructiveness (house arrest followed his refusal to acknowledge a social superior

\* As late as 1694, John Playford's English translation of Caccini's work told his readers that they could approximate the sound of the *trillo* by shaking the finger upon the throat, and also that it could be done by imitating the 'breaking of a sound in the throat which men use when they lure their hawks'.

## CACCINI

in the street); profligate financially and sexually (a love of gambling made it hard to support his, at a guess, ten children by three women); and sought to dominate his immediate family, sometimes, it seems, simply for the sake of it, as when he withheld the dowry of Francesca's younger sister, Settimia. Pompeo, Giulio's eldest son, even apparently allowed himself to be charged with the rape of his intended wife, Ginevra, so that the courts would require him to marry the young woman, since it was the only way to circumvent his father's opposition to the union. As for Settimia, Giulio eventually paid the dowry in 1611 when her new husband's family abducted her and held her for ransom in the city of Lucca. This particular crisis precipitated the final break-up of the Caccini family as a performing group, but until that point, and for many years, Giulio's women had been used to showcase his exceptional talents as a composer and a teacher. Living or dead, they served to display his ability, as he explained to his readers: 'How excellently the tremolo and the trill were learned by my late wife [Lucia] . . . may be adjudged by those who heard her sing during her life, as also I leave to the judgment of those who can now hear in the present wife [Margherita] how exquisitely they are done by her.'

It was Francesca's exceptional musical talent, however, that offered Giulio his greatest opportunity. For years, his ego and drive had ensured his success as a composer, performer and teacher in the competitive and changing musical world of the early seventeenth century. He knew only too well that singers required higher and higher levels of ability, since he himself was creating the new music that was making new demands on performers. As one anxious father noted, 'there are so many musical compositions and the level of difficulty has reached the most difficult possible', thus his daughter needed to be able to handle 'with ease any song, no matter how weird or hard'. Now there was Francesca. Her voice, they said, spun 'a finely focused thread of sound'. Not only that, but she had the musical

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

intelligence to use that voice creatively, adding ‘dissonances’ that seemed to ‘offend’ but, paradoxically, like a lover mixing disdain with kindness, opened the way to a ‘more delightful path to harmonic sweetness’.

Giulio’s response to Francesca’s raw talent was to educate his daughter as if she did not belong to the artisan class into which he and she had been born. She studied Latin, rhetoric, poetics, geometry, astrology, philosophy, contemporary languages, ‘humanistic studies’ and even a little Greek. Crucially, she also learned composition, primarily to enhance her performances, since it was expected that singers should be able to improvise and, on occasion, perform their own song settings. Francesca’s progress was rapid. Just turned thirteen, on 9 October 1600 she was ready to appear in one of her father’s works, *Il rapimento di Cefalo* (The Abduction of Cephalus), alongside three, maybe four, other performing members of her family. It was the young Francesca’s first introduction to court spectacle: her stage, the Uffizi Palace in Florence; the occasion, the celebrations attending the proxy wedding of Henry IV of France and Marie de’ Medici; the audience, three thousand gentlemen and eight hundred ladies; the work, an opera lasting five hours; the cost, sixty thousand scudi, around three hundred years of salary for Francesca’s father.

*Il rapimento* provided a further lesson for the young Francesca, one in the politics of the music industry. Her father’s opera had been intended to be the primary spectacle of the Florentine 1600 winter season, but it was overshadowed by a work that had been performed just three days earlier at the Medici’s Pitti Palace: Jacobo Peri’s *Euridice*. Peri’s work has entered the music history books as the earliest opera for which complete music has survived, but, on the day, Peri quite simply judged his audience better than had Caccini. He not only gave the tragic story of Orpheus and Eurydice a happy ending, fitting for the happy occasion of Henry and Marie’s

## CACCINI

nuptials, but used to great effect a striking new technique, continuous recitatives between the set choral numbers.

Four years on, and Francesca's breakthrough came when, in the summer of 1604, and the young singer approaching her seventeenth birthday, Henry IV and Marie de' Medici, the royal couple for whom Giulio had written *Il rapimento*, asked the rulers of Tuscany if they could 'borrow for several months' Giulio's ensemble 'and his daughters'. And so it came to pass that Giulio, his second wife, two daughters, a son, a boy singing pupil, two carriages, six mules and 450 scudi (more than twice his annual salary) left the grand duchy on the last day of September 1604. They journeyed through the northern regions of a politically fractured land, for it would be more than 250 years until the first precarious unification of the Italian peninsula under one king. They stopped at Modena to sing for the ruling Este family; at Milan (controlled by the Spanish Habsburgs) because Francesca contracted malaria; then at Turin, where they performed for the Duke and Duchess of Savoy, and Francesca and her sister Settimia received gifts of jewellery. After just over two months of travelling, the Caccini family and entourage arrived in Paris on 6 December 1604 where they stayed with the resident Florentine ambassador – the happy recipients of kitchen privileges, firewood and wine. Giulio presented the time as the high point of his career, with visits from aristocrats, money available to 'dress my women in French fashion' and regular opportunities to perform for the French sovereigns.

The reality was slightly different, at least at first. Giulio's arrogance made him few friends at the French court, and the monarchs themselves quarrelled over which of them would pay for the musicians. Everything changed, however, when Francesca sang. Henry IV declared her to be the best singer in France. It was reported that Queen Marie was so keen to secure Francesca for her own court that she was even willing to provide 'the other', Settimia, Francesca's sister,

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

with a dowry ‘enough that she could marry.’ (The convention of the time was to provide both a job and a husband to women musicians.)

Yet no deal was done. Giulio gave the impression that the Grand-Duke of Tuscany himself had refused Caccini permission to accept the job for Francesca from Marie de’ Medici, but in fact he had his own agenda, writing that he had ‘invested’ much ‘labour’ in Francesca, and he did not want to lose his controlling interest, even to a French queen. Marie, in turn, gradually lost interest and the moment passed. Nevertheless, although Giulio was unwilling to admit it, a subtle shift in the balance of power between father and daughter occurred in Paris in the early months of 1605. He was now as much the father of ‘*La Cecchina*’ (little Francesca) as she was the daughter of the great Giulio Caccini.\*

Francesca’s social and musical education continued apace. She knew about the precarious nature of a musician’s life from her own parents’ history. Her mother, Lucia, had been fired from her job as a musician only a year after Francesca’s birth, collateral damage from the arrival of the new duke, Ferdinando I, who wanted to purge his predecessor’s luxuries, or at least be seen to do so. Francesco I had been something of a text-book Medici villain, known to history as debauched and cruel if also scholarly and introverted, so it is unsurprising that Ferdinando wanted to make a break with the past. Did Francesca also know that, six months after Lucia’s death, her father lost his job in highly suggestive circumstances? A courtesan, known as ‘*La Gambarella*’, was having singing lessons with Giulio. Rumours began. *La Gambarella*’s lover, who was bank-rolling the lessons, had Giulio fired. The case did

\* This chapter draws heavily throughout on Suzanne Cusick’s groundbreaking academic study, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), which notes for example this shift in the balance of power.

## CACCINI

not help Giulio to recruit young female singers to his studio in Florence, and for a time his career stuttered horribly. One Duke Vincenzo, for example, wanted his protégée, Caterina Martinelli, to gain more experience, but not in Caccini's house, the duke writing that Giulio 'insisted on trying to make me understand that she would be safe, but I closed his mouth with a single word'. Martinelli went elsewhere.

The return journey to Tuscany provided a chance for Francesca to test out the effectiveness of her social, political and musical education. Whilst the rest of the Caccini family returned to Florence, Francesca, approaching eighteen, remained for six months at the Este court in Modena, where she taught Giulia d'Este, a couple of years her junior, to 'sing in the French style'. There, Caccini applied all the lessons she had learned about how to survive (or not) the vagaries of high politics and sexual intrigue, and gained yet more insight into the workings of the elite families for whom she might one day work. The Este family did not want her to return to Florence.

Then came the carnival season of 1607. The Medici family, led by the Grand-Duchess, Christine de Lorraine, were at the time based in Pisa, and were planning a court spectacle. It needed to be impressive, but also cheap (perhaps costumes could be reused, suggests Christine) and to allow dancing amongst the cast and the guests. Christine turned to Michelangelo Buonarroti, great-nephew of *the* Michelangelo, who designed and scripted what would be the major entertainment for the carnival that year: a *barriera*, a dance representative of a battle. It was Michelangelo who chose Francesca Caccini, not yet twenty, to write the music. With the 'advice and consent of her father' Francesca seized the opportunity, not only producing her scores efficiently but creating 'very beautiful' music, in Michelangelo's words.

We will never be able to judge for ourselves if Michelangelo was

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

right, because, as with so many of Caccini's works, the music has not survived. According to her contemporaries, however, *La stiava* (The Slavegirl) was more than beautiful; it was '*una musica stupenda*'. The performance began with a *sinfonia* 'for many instruments' during which the cast entered, and ended with a five-voice chorus to which both the cast and audience danced, as per the command of the work's patron, Christine de Lorraine. Francesca embraced the new Florentine *stile recitativo* (now simply known as recitative), which had been championed by her own father, who, in the preface to his *Le nuove musiche*, praised its ability to make the singer 'speak in music' by employing a certain *sprezzatura di canto*. *Sprezzatura*, the hallmark of Renaissance sophistication, involved, in the words of its champion, the writer Castiglione, 'a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it'. To sing with *sprezzatura* one had to have the skill to make the performance effortless and natural. Father and daughter, both experts in precisely this skill, asserted the new style in direct competition with the music being composed by Venice's musical avant-garde, led by that city's star composer Monteverdi, but also in competition with their own colleagues in Florence, composers such as Jacobo Peri, who had set out his own groundbreaking take on this middle ground between speech and song in his notes to his opera *Euridice*.

Not only Caccini's compositional talent, but her sheer professionalism, was on display in *La stiava*. She was not expected to travel to Pisa for the performance but she did everything she could to ensure the work was a success from her base in Florence, insisting not only that the parts were 'sung many times' under her own supervision, but writing them 'in a way that they can be revised there', at Pisa, during the final rehearsals. The pressure she was working under is visible when a last-minute addition to the text

## CACCINI

arrived, for which she had to produce music. She dashed off the necessary bars and sent it to Pisa, her half-brother Pompeo as courier, that very same evening.

*La stiava* was Caccini's breakthrough work as a composer and it provided her with vital insights into the politics of music at the Medici court, insights that would shape her future career. Christine de Lorraine, the most powerful person in the court, had insisted not only that Michelangelo change his original plot, but then that he transform the motivations of its male heroes. Faced with a Persian slave woman who, predictably, given the genre, is revealed actually to be the King of Persia's daughter captured by pirates en route to her planned marriage with the King of India, the knights fight for the honour of taking the princess to her proper consort now they know she is 'twice a queen.' Christine de Lorraine intervened to insist that the knights should be inspired to fight not by the slave's beauty but by her 'nobility, or novelty, or other evident merits'. As musicologist Suzanne Cusick writes, although 'presented amid many of the usual Florentine trappings of spectacle – music, brilliantly coloured costumes, mock battles, and solo and ensemble song – one overarching theme of the plot was the transformation of a woman from an object of desire, competition and exchange to a sovereign subject, a transformation wrought by her own self-defining voice.'

Christine de Lorraine's intervention was only to be expected in a world in which artists of all kinds knew that they had to tailor their work to the tastes of the particular individual, the patron, who had commissioned the work and upon whom they were dependent for their livelihood. The patron's power, whether political or religious, permitted him or her to tell an artist, composer or writer exactly what to do in their next work, and then, of course, to change his or her mind half-way through rehearsals.

Christine de Lorraine had come to wield power only recently.

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

She had been married to Grand-Duke Ferdinando in 1589, and spent the best part of two decades in the provinces, physically safe but politically marginalized. Now, Ferdinando was a very ill man, and Grand-Duchess Christine was beginning to flex her muscles. Her husband's death the following year, and the succession of the couple's son, Cosimo II, did not halt Christine's emergence from the shadows, because Grand-Duke Cosimo's health was bad at the best of times and he was confined to his bed for months at a time. Although without an official title, Christine remained the *de facto* leader of the Medici state.

In 1607, therefore, Francesca Caccini was in the right place, at the right time: a woman composer for what was becoming a woman's court. It was Christine de Lorraine who counted, and it was Christine de Lorraine who, on 15 November 1607, appointed Francesca Caccini as *la musica* to the Grand-Duke of Tuscany. She would be paid ten scudi per month for which she would sing, both as a solo virtuosa, whether improvising or *sopra'l libro* (by the book), and in ensembles, whether in church, chamber or theatrical settings. She would also play the lute, theorbo, harpsichord, guitar, harp 'and every sort of stringed instrument'. Although only twenty, she was hired to evaluate the performances of others and, crucially, to compose new music and prepare its performance in a wide variety of settings, in Florence and beyond. Musicologists Carter and Goldthwaite have recently revealed, in remarkable detail, just how dynamic, economically and artistically, Medici music-making was. To take just one carnival season, 1610–11, the first to be celebrated during Grand-Duke Cosimo II's reign because the court had been in mourning the previous year for the death of Ferdinando I: this season was to be filled with jousts, *sbarre*, comedies, a *balletto* (by Ottavio Rinuccini), a pastoral (by Michelangelo Buonarroti the younger), and a revival of Rinuccini's *Dafne*. In the *balletto*, performed at court on the last Monday of carnival (14 February),

## CACCINI

Jacobo Peri sang the part of Neptune ‘in his customary manner and to great applause’, and was also charged with setting to music, in his ‘most noble’ recitative style, the remainder of the text, except for a few verses that were to be set to music by the same women who sang them: Vittoria Archilei, Settimia Caccini and Francesca Caccini, who sang two, and therefore presumably composed two.

Francesca Caccini truly deserved her title of *la musica*. Day in, day out, she produced new work to order, and to timescales that would horrify most twenty-first-century composers. A suggested timetable for those wishing to put on an early modern opera these days starts at least nine months before the opening night. To secure a famous singer takes even longer, and that nine-month figure does not include, of course, the writing of the opera itself. What takes months and years now, took Caccini days or weeks. Her most important collaborator was the man who had recommended her in 1607, and remained a loyal friend and supporter, Michelangelo Buonarroti. (The history books may have paid little attention to this Michelangelo, precisely because of his giant of a great-uncle, but ironically, it was the great-nephew’s efforts, begun precisely at this time, to create the Casa Buonarroti museum/gallery in Florence that did much, and still does much, to ensure *the* Michelangelo’s iconic status.) Michelangelo would send his poetry to Caccini as soon as the ink was dry on the page; she would set his words to music and then complete the process by teaching the new material to her singers. Caccini urged Buonarroti to stay ahead of the game, suggesting that he ‘should start thinking about some little comedy for eleven actors, for that’s how many we are . . . even though we don’t have a sure decision, I have enough in hand to want to give you a warning, so you won’t be caught off guard’. In addition to court entertainments, Caccini was expected to write for the church year, becoming by the end of the decade the most important composer for Holy Week in Florence. Again and again,

## SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS

she created moments of spiritual wonder, bringing touches of spectacle to familiar ceremonies, as when on 19 April 1618 the congregation heard the voices of her unseen female singers as if by magic because Caccini had placed the performers in the hidden network of corridors that linked, and still link today, the palaces and churches of the Medici.

At other times, Caccini was commissioned to write music that would not merely celebrate Medici God-given power, but serve to protect it. When Christine de Lorraine feared both for her son's life and for the Tuscan state, the one threatened by severe illness, the other by catastrophically bad weather, she was inspired by a divine vision to hold a forty-hour vigil in the Medici church of San Lorenzo. Heaven, purgatory and hell would be depicted in the church; every parish and confraternity would be rewarded if they processed to San Lorenzo; Christine's daughter-in-law, Maria Magdalena, and her young family would walk through the streets among their people, one small prince carrying a cross, followed by his brothers, and then his mother, accompanied by women on foot. It was a remarkably choreographed display of piety and humility, and it was Francesca Caccini who was required to create the music. The composer chose to have voices appearing from four directions, with two groups of men inside the church, and two groups of women in the hidden passageways.

These major, public events were rarer than those in which Caccini performed her own music in private or semi-private settings at the heart of this female court, whether a reception held by Maria Magdalena in her bedroom for the *gentildonne* of Florence to celebrate a successful childbirth, or singing at the bedside of the sickly Cosimo II. The irony is that the private, exclusive nature of her work, such a mark of her success in her own time, is just one of the reasons that Caccini's

## CACCINI

achievements have not been acknowledged in traditional music histories.

Caccini was gaining in confidence with each passing year, and working well with the equally energetic and pragmatic Michelangelo. When it came to massive court spectacles, however, Caccini was often merely a small cog in a very big machine involving poets, composers, singers, instrumentalists, painters and architects, as well as seamstresses, carpenters and masons. Once the poet's idea had been accepted, the superintendent of buildings acted as designer and producer, providing machines for the staging with the help of the court architect, whilst the court wardrobe master provided costumes. The superintendent of music then distributed the work and chose the singers, and the major-domo had to make sure that those who wrote or copied the music and the spoken parts were paid, in order that the parts were circulated in good time for rehearsal and performance.

In this profoundly collaborative working culture, it was only too easy for a woman's name to slip off the list of credits, as it were. Only now are music scholars uncovering Caccini's involvement in significant compositions, such as Marco da Gagliano's five-act, continuously sung and hugely expensive opera, *Sant'Orsola*, for which the scenery alone cost six thousand scudi. Caccini, now earning twenty scudi a month and, as such, one of the best-paid court servants, contributed music (primarily composed for 'her' singers) for both the 1624 and 1625 performances. The opera presented something of a production challenge, since it told the story of 'the martyrdom of Saint Ursula with the eleven thousand virgins her companions'. Gagliano/Caccini ended up with a chorus of eleven virgins. When the work was revived the next year, one of the virgins was found to be pregnant, leading to a rapid recasting.

For all the collaboration, each and every production relied