

Celestial Sirens: Music from Italian & Mexican Convents in the 17th-century
The Newberry Consort, directed by Ellen Hargis

Notes on the Program

This program gives a sense of the wide variety of sacred music written for and by women in convents in the 17th-century Catholic world. Although nuns' music in a number of Italian cities has been studied, there is also direct or indirect evidence for convent music in Austria, Germany, Poland, France, the Low Countries, Spain, Portugal, and colonial Spanish America (Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru). Indeed, a set of manuscripts owned by the Newberry Library is the most important accessible source for female monastic polyphony in 17th-century Mexico, and its contents provide the second half of the program.

One aspect of performance in these all-female institutions is that, in most places, direct musical collaboration with male musicians was unusual or even forbidden. For that reason, these performances, in their use of all-female voices and a bass viola da gamba (to cover the lowest line, not singable by women), attempt to recreate something of the "heavenly" sonic quality of performances in nuns' churches; this does involve some transposition of tenor or bass lines, or even of entire pieces, upwards by those intervals common in the period.

In Italy, cloistered sisters were among the most renowned musicians of cities like Milan, Ferrara, Bologna, and Siena. The first half of the program includes a motet by a Franciscan nun in the northeastern Italian city of Vicenza, Alba Tressina, along with one by her teacher, Leone Leoni. Several other pieces have to do with the Camaldolese house of S. Cristina in Bologna (the subject of an excellent monograph by Craig Monson, entitled *Nuns Behaving Badly*), including a piece from a collection dedicated to the sisters, Cesena's *Cantabant sancti*, which would have required all of the house's musical forces. More directly related to the life of the convent, as heard and expressed by one of its sisters, are two motets for festive occasions, including one probably for the dedication of a new altar, by S. Cristina's Lucrezia Vizzana. The pieces by Tressina and Vizzana are in the new, small-scale but expressive style of early 17th-century music, with close attention to individual phrases of the text.

In Milan, the Benedictine nun Chiara Margarita Cozzolani published four collections of sacred music between 1640 and 1650, probably the repertory of her house of S. Radegonda. *Laudate pueri*, another 8-voice piece, would also have required the musical forces of the convent; it is a psalm for the festive service of Vespers, usable on any number of liturgical occasions, and its joyous repeat of the opening verse (technically, "troping") gives a sense of how extrovert and special musical Vespers at S. Radegonda must have been.

The first half also includes organ music of the time, playable by nuns in or out of liturgy, as well as Angelo Notari's virtuoso variations on the satirical folk tune *La monaca*, which describes an unwillingly cloistered young woman, a situation which occurred with some frequency. Finally, in a later generation, the Ursuline nun Maria Xaviera Perucona wrote her motet for the Common of Saints (i.e., any major sanctoral feast) from her house of S. Orsola in Galliate, outside Novara, and published it in 1675. Its opening reflection on the vanity of the world is given, in the original print, to a virtuoso bass solo, here performed up an octave by alto, again to recreate some sense of convent performance.

—Robert Kendrick, Professor of Music, The University of Chicago

The second half of the program is dedicated to Mexican convent music. All the vocal pieces come from six manuscripts known as the Mexican Choirbooks, housed at the Newberry Library. The choirbooks contain music for Mass and Office. They belonged to the *Encarnación* convent, a cloister of the Conceptionist order in Mexico City founded at the end of the 16th century. This part of the concert also includes two organ pieces that could have been played in Mexico's convents: *Tiento de medio registro a dos tiples* and *Pois con tanta graça*.

Tiento de medio registro a dos tiples is by Pablo Bruna, the blind organist of Daroca, Spain. He is primarily known for his organ *tientos*, pieces meant to demonstrate a keyboardist's skills and the strengths of a specific organ. The words *medio registro* indicate that this *tiento* is written to make use of a split keyboard in which the left half and the right half of the keyboard sound different groups of organ pipes. This mechanism, so prevalent in Spanish organs, made it possible to play independent tone colors on one keyboard, a phenomenon normally requiring at least two keyboards. The other organ piece—second to last on the program—is a *villancico* by Gaspar Fernandes, a Portuguese priest who came to the New World and established himself as chapel master at the famed cathedral of Puebla, Mexico. The 17th-century *villancico* was primarily a sacred work with vernacular text. The theme was usually drawn from biblical stories or liturgical texts. Many *villancicos* were written for Christmas and in contemporary usage, the term *villancico* is practically synonymous with the word carol. *Pois con tanta graça* is a Christmas piece for six voices in Fernandes's native Portuguese. The organist might have accompanied the singers or improvised on any of the six lines of the *villancico* in alternation with the singers. In this program, we will hear a solo organ rendition. Any professional organist in 17th-century Mexico would have been able to play these or similar organ works in their respective churches.

The nuns at the *Encarnación*—and in many other convents—were known for offering dowry waivers to trained female musicians interested in taking vows. Their choirbooks indicate that the nuns performed the works of both European and Mexican composers alike: the celebrated Tomás Luis de Victoria, whose jubilee year just ended; Fabián Pérez Ximeno, chapel master of Mexico City Cathedral; and Juan de Lienas, among others. We know almost nothing about Lienas, though according to the writing in the margins of the manuscripts, his wife might have cheated on him.

When the nuns of the *Encarnación* weren't busy educating the daughters of Mexico City's elite citizens, they were fulfilling their religious obligation in the church choir. The architectural structure in the church, called the *coro* or choir, allowed the nuns to attend and sing the Mass and Office, while remaining cloistered. With the exception of *Vidi aquam*, all of the vocal pieces in this half of the concert are polychoral. The elaborate polychoral style, said to have developed in Venice, calls for at least two vocal ensembles to sing together or in call-and-response. The works play with acoustic effects and often give a sense of aural grandeur, often maneuvering through challenging rhythmic passages and lush harmonies. Singing in the *coro* was among the little communal time the nuns at the *Encarnación* spent. Rather than living the stereotypical communal life, where activities of daily living, such as eating meals, were done together, the nuns of the *Encarnación*, like many nuns belonging to the Conceptionist order, lived a private life style. The majority of their time was spent secluded in their individual apartments, attended by personal servants. When a nun died, her remains were taken to the *coro* and buried under its floor after the funeral service. Burial in the *coro* was the epitome of the cloistered life.

—Cesar Favila, Graduate Student in Music History, The University of Chicago