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TARQUINIA MOLZA (1542-1617): A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN, MUSIC AND SOCIETY IN THE RENAISSANCE

Why is it that the pages of all history glow with the names of illustrious men, while only here and there a lone woman appears who, like the eccentric comet, marks the centuries?

Susan B. Anthony¹

INTRODUCTION

The life and career of Tarquinia Molza (1542-1617), an Italian musician of the late Renaissance, provide an illuminating response to Susan B. Anthony's question. Molza worked at the Este court of Ferrara in the 1580's with several other women collectively referred to at the time as the concerto delle donne. The vocal virtuosity of this group of women supposedly inspired famous male composers to write madrigals featuring ornamented soprano parts that undermined the "equal-voiced" madrigal ideal, and paved the way for the "concertante" principle of the Baroque.² However, contradictions and questions still surround the historical contribution of the "singing Ladies of Ferrara"-- questions that can be satisfyingly answered only after examining the roles of both women and men in the musical life of 16th century Italy. As historian Gerda Lerner insists, "Gender must be included as an analytical category to history. When gender is considered with race, class, ethnicity and religious affiliation in analyzing any given period or event, an entirely new dimension is added to social history."³

This essay will examine Tarquinia Molza's life and career in light of Lerner's exhortation. It will offer, in a substantial revision of the traditional view of secular song in 16th century Italy, some striking conclusions: that women and men had distinctly separate musical styles in the first half of the century, and that Tarquinia Molza, who was trained in both styles, was largely instrumental in their eventual combination in the luxuriant madrigal, an important musical development of the late Renaissance. The accuracy of these conclusions was confirmed late in the research process by the delightfully unexpected rediscovery of a document written in 1577 by Molza's friend Francesco Patrizi, which gives priceless details of her life and musical practice. Information from that manuscript will be presented toward the end of this essay as corroborative evidence.

MOLZA'S LIFE AND CAREER: THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

Tarquinia Molza is mentioned in most of the standard sources dealing with music in the Renaissance. A composite overview of her life--unchallenged until recently--as compiled from the works of such researchers as Vandelli, Solerti, Einstein and Reese, would look like this:

Tarquinia Molza was born in 1542, the oldest of nine children born to a noble family in the city of Modena. Her father allowed her to study along with her brothers, Ludovico and Niccolo, with the best masters he could find. Tarquinia proved herself to be something of a prodigy, learning Greek, Latin, Hebrew, astronomy and philosophy at a very early age, writing commendable poetry, and teaching herself music from books. All of these endeavors were highly praised by the Most learned scholars and musicians of her time.

In 1582, after her husband died, Signora Tarquinia was recruited by Duke Alfonso II d'Este of Ferrara as a lady-in-waiting to his bride, Margherita Gonzaga. In that capacity Tarquinia won great fame as a virtuoso singer, along with two other ladies who sang with her at court functions. These "Three Ladies of Ferrara" as they were called, had such beautiful voices that they inspired gifted composers such as Giaches Wert, Luca Marenzio, Giulio Caccini, and many others, to compose madrigals that featured three prominent soprano parts against the two lower parts, an exciting new style.

EXAMPLE 1: Mus. Ex. 1: The opening measures of Giaches Wert's madrigal a 5, "Tu canti e cant'anch'io". In this example of proto-concertante style, Wert highlights the ornamented trio of women's voices for three measures before bringing in the paired tenor and bass.

Tarquinia was banished from court in 1589 because of a love affair⁴ with Giaches de Wert, a low-born musician considered unfit company for a woman of her noble rank. So she retired to her hometown, where she was surrounded by literati and musicians who delighted in her knowledge and ready wit. In 1601, Tarquinia Molza was made an honorary citizen of Rome, the only time that privilege was ever accorded a woman. She died in 1617, at the age of 75, leaving behind a will made out in Latin, Greek and Italian.

This, Tarquinia Molza's "official" biography, offers us a familiar picture of an educated, talented Renaissance woman inspiring men of genius. But does this portrayal explain Molza's inclusion in Western music history? The female "muses" of countless male composers are never given historical recognition--why is she? Furthermore, why is she consistently singled out for special mention over the other Ladies of Ferrara if their function was supposedly the same? Why were her composer/admirers so numerous (Wert, Caccini, Striggio, Virchi, Luzzaschi and more) when most male artists make use of an exclusively personal romantic muse? Could it be that active creative influence--and not merely admiration for voice, face and body--obliged historians to include Molza in their accounts, albeit recast as a passive, minor figure? With these questions in mind, let

us briefly review the social and musical history of women and men in 16th century Italy in the generation preceding Molza's birth.

SOCIAL AND MUSICAL LIFE IN 16TH CENTURY ITALY

Sixteenth century life was separated into two well-defined spheres--public and private. Among the aristocracy, the inner court circle constituted the private sphere, presided over by women responsible for maintaining standards of cultural sensibility. The inner court circle was the birthplace of the frottola and related secular song forms generally performed as solos to lute or keyboard accompaniment by women. Improvisation was a defining element of these early secular song forms, both in the extemporaneous creation of verses and melodies, and in the often intricate embellishment and ornamentation of the melodies. The verses for these songs were usually unsentimental, "cheerful, sensuous, ironic, with a tendency to parody even in expressions of pain",⁵ and the music was homophonic, with the accompaniment supplied by the singer.

Musical Example 2 frottola Mus. Ex. 2: An excerpt from an early frottola. a) plain form, ca. 1460-1470) and b) embellished form, ca. 1505.

Women's role as principal performers of this style is rarely acknowledged by historians. But it is abundantly clear from 16th century sources that proficiency in secular song performance was a required part of the noble female role, as indicated by the following sampling:

Annibal Guasco to his daughter Lavinia re the proper manners of a court lady: "Her eyes should be held on linen and needle, on clavichord or songbook, or whatever she is occupied with, not darting them here and there."⁶ "As to what Signora Irene [Spilimbergo] learned in playing, and in singing to the lute, the harpsichord, and the viol, and how on each of these instruments, far beyond the usual custom and intellect of women, she approximated the very best in these arts, I say nothing, for it would take too long."⁷ (my translation). "Not only would I have [the ideal court lady] engage in robust and manly exercises, but even in those that are becoming to a woman I would have her practice in a measured way[.] And so, when she dances, I should not wish to see her make movements that are too energetic or violent; nor when she sings or plays, use those loud and oft-repeated diminutions that show more art than sweetness, likewise the musical instruments that she plays ought to be appropriate to this intent."⁸

No mention is made here of whether a woman should perform or not, but only that when she play or sing she do it with discretion, in which case it is altogether "becoming to a woman," "well-suited to a woman,"--an integral part of her role.⁹ This kind of language presses for the inference of an extended tradition of female performance in the private court sphere. Many, many women sang and played; some were spectacular, like Irene Spilimbergo, some were terrible, and the majority were most likely mediocre, but all were necessary to give substance to the musical style.

The public sphere of life in the 16th century consisted of the church, the battlefield and the political arena, then as now dominated by men. At the dawning of the century, the

attention of noble males was occupied with matters of church and state, and secular music-making was rigorously discouraged for its supposedly deleterious effects on men's commitment to the public realm. As Castiglione had one of his characters state in his widely popular handbook on court etiquette:

"I think that music, along with many other vanities, is indeed well-suited to women, and perhaps also to others who have the appearance of men, but not to real men; for the latter ought not to render their minds effeminate and afraid of death."¹⁰

Noble men were educated in the science of acoustics and the theory of counterpoint, but their experience by no means extended to the performance of secular songs about love, which were deemed a frivolous waste of time.¹¹

Over the course of the 16th century, the public sphere became a realm of tension and defeat for the Italian aristocracy, as an increasingly dismal set of circumstances spelled out their diminishing power. Giuliano Procacci details this process in his History of the Italians; a synopsis of part of his argument follows.

Beginning with Charles VIII's invasion of Italy in 1494, France and Spain fought out their battles for control of Western Europe on Italian soil, with the Italian city states as pawns in the game. On another front, the Roman Catholic Church, long aligned with the Italian aristocracy, was undergoing the profound upheaval of the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Yet one more threat to the stability of the aristocracy was the so-called "price revolution" of the latter 1500's, when vast amounts of silver imported from the Americas "acted as a solvent of existing social relations, and, gradually, as the midwife of new social groups and classes."¹².

This complicated knot of social problems, plus the simple fact that, after the 1529 Treaty of Cambrai, noble men were in residence at the court instead of on the battlefield, caused noble men to withdraw into the inner court circle to explore the diversions offered there. For unlike the then tumultuous, unstable public sphere, the inner court was a controllable arena where a magnificent world of pomp and refinement could be constructed, providing diversion, security and image reinforcement for the beleaguered aristocracy.¹³.

Thus, during the early 1500's, noble males became involved in the secular song style. Such a step was not easy for noblemen, due to the social stigma hitherto attached to secular song performance on their part,¹⁴ so a gradual process of acclimatization was necessary. In part, noble men were drawn into the performing circle in the early 1500's by the far-reaching efforts of a noble woman, the prodigious Isabella d'Este (1474-1533). Isabella routinely solicited poetic offerings from noble male friends, which she then set to music and performed, or else had one of her court musicians set to music.¹⁵ Consider the following excerpts from her correspondence:

1504--Isabella d'Este to Niccolò da Correggio: "Since I want to have a canzone of Petrarch set to music, I beg of Your Excellency to select one that pleases you, and to send me the initium, along with one or two of your own verses."¹⁶.

1505--Pietro Bembo to Isabella d'Este, including 12 of his own poems, begging Isabella to perform them: "I would really like to have my verses sung by your Highness, remembering as I do the sweetness and elegance with which you sang the others on that happy evening."¹⁷.

1494--Antonio Tebaldeo to Isabella d'Este: "I have seen the strambotto composed by Your Ladyship on the plants stripped of their foliage, and I like it very much."¹⁸ (This poem appears in Petrucci's Book II, but is listed as anonymously composed.)

Isabella's artistic activities place her squarely in the midst of the humanist campaign to upgrade Italian poetic sensibility, based on the Petrarchan revival led by the Pietro Bembo. Creating verses subject to critical appraisal by their noble peers provided a desirable combination of national pride, diversion, and image-reinforcement for the nobility. Especially important for noble males was the supposed literary refinement and exclusiveness newly associated with the writing of verses.

There is no evidence to indicate that noble men musically performed the sentimental verses they so copiously poured out at this early stage--that had to wait until the "frivolous" music of the frottola took an analogous step up in "refinement." They did not have to wait long, for "the musicians of the early 16th century, at first Netherlands composers working in Italy (Verdelot, Willaert, Arcadelt), cooperated with the poets in order to achieve a new style of artistic refinement and expression."¹⁹.

It is extremely significant that the earliest composers of this new courtly style were Netherlanders, for it suggests a predisposition to "refine" the frottola by applying the ideal of a polyphonic texture. The Netherlands style was characterized by a level of contrapuntal complexity unknown to the homophonic frottola. The infiltration of the frottola by the "learned" contrapuntal techniques of the Netherlanders can be traced in Petrucci's publications, the result being, of course, the Italian madrigal, usually considered the century's sublime form of musical expression. The madrigal can be defined as a non-improvised polyphonic piece based on the motet principle of equal, independent voice lines, through-composed, and often performed a cappella.

Mus. Ex. 3: The opening of Arcadelt's madrigal of 1540, "Crudel'acerb'inesorabil morte."

The displacement of the homophonic solo song style by the madrigal is described as a smooth, organic musical development by most musicologists. But Alfred Einstein uses the following vehement language: "The transition from song form to motet form about 1520 had been one of the greatest revolutions in music history. The secular counterpart of the motet, the madrigal, had as it were degraded the song forms proper, one after the other, to a less aristocratic level, the level of second-rate music."²⁰ To his credit, Einstein alone recognized that the transition was anything but a natural development. A revolution had indeed taken place, with socio-cultural as well as musical implications. The social role and personnel involved in aristocratic secular music had been transformed based on the needs and aims of noble men.

The performance of the classic madrigal was decidedly reserved for men, as evidenced by the fact that "early madrigals were scored for[...]men's voices--bass, two tenors and falsetto." "The woman," Einstein observed, "is the object of all these serenades and mattinate. She takes part in them only as a listener."²¹ Noblemen at last felt comfortable performing a style of music all their own, a style projected as elite, fashionable and intricate. "It was considered elegant to follow one's part in a complex ensemble, more elegant, certainly, than to appear as a singer to lute accompaniment."²² (emphasis mine). Moreover, secular music-making suddenly became, with the madrigal, a style aimed at the delectation of the performer, instead of the audience. Noble males saw themselves as subjects in an artistic process, not as entertaining objects to be observed and admired, which is how men perceived women musicians. And so, the role of the audience was altogether dispensed with, as men entertained themselves and each other in the activity of performing.

Skill at sight-reading and part-singing was assumed in madrigal performance, as well as vertical improvisation (not to be confused with the linear improvisation of embellishments and diminutions found in the solo song style). Vertical improvisation involved adding yet another voice to a contrapuntal texture, or using one voice of a madrigal as a cantus firmus and adding other voices to it.²³

Mus. Ex. 4: "A mente counterpoint" by Gioseffo Zarlino. A canon at the unison on a plainsong melody. The procedure is the same as the 16th century technique of adding improvised lines to one of the voices of a madrigal.

While men were cultivating the classic madrigal, what were women doing, musically speaking? They continued to develop the solo song forms, adding to their repertoires reductions of contrapuntal madrigals, arranged for solo voice and lute accompaniment. Unfortunately, we have no clear record of innovations made by women musicians during these years, since their improvised performances were seldom, if ever, notated.

We do know that in the evolution of musical style, homophonic textures were the wave of the future, to again be the dominant texture in Western secular music from 1600 to the present. The classic madrigal, in Einstein's judgment an "aberration, a deviation from the natural course of development initiated by the frottola,"²⁴ was destined to give way sooner or later to the reassertion of the homophonic principle. The first signs of a reversal in the polyphonic trend crop up in mid-century, when a few male composers (e.g. Willaert) experimented with writing more "tuneful" madrigals (madrigali ariosi), in which "musical interest was not centered on the interplay of equal voices but rather in the progress of a melodic upper voice placed against a harmonic background."²⁵ In effect these composers were applying the ideal of the homophonic song forms to the polyphonic texture of the madrigal. Other significant features of the women's solo style were soon incorporated into the written madrigal-- virtuoso vocal display and intricate melodic embellishment, both of which automatically undermine the equal-voice ideal of the madrigal.²⁶ In view of women's traditional expertise in the solo song style, it is not surprising that they entered the madrigal scene as performers at precisely the same time that the key elements of their song style were creeping into the written madrigal.

Women's crossover into the polyphonic style is evident in rising vocal registers and new scorings for mixed voices in manuscripts from the 1550's onwards. At this crossroads, Tarquinia Molza enters the picture.

TARQUINIA MOLZA'S MUSICAL CAREER

Tarquinia Molza was, predictably, proficient at playing viola da mano, clavier and lute, and improvising verses to her own accompaniment as part of her socialization into the noble female role. However, there is evidence to suggest that unlike most women of her time, Molza also studied contrapuntal theory. One of her earliest biographers, Domenico Vandelli, wrote in 1750:

As a child, Tarquinia began to learn music for enjoyment, and as a diversion from her more serious studies, such that in the briefest time, she surpassed by far all of the women who had sung to great acclaim...

She acquired control of her voice according to the true rules from books, not by memorizing the words of masters in the art, some of whom had the laudable desire to be able to show her something unusual in this profession. These were, among others, Giaches Wert, Luzzascho Luzzaschi and Orazio [della Viola²⁷] on which instrument (viola bastarda²⁸) she used to musically play one part, uniting to it another part with her voice. She did this with such skill and knowledge that one could not hope for better.²⁹

For Vandelli to specify Molza's ability to skillfully "play one part, uniting it to another part with her voice" is to refer to the polyphonic style. For the art of providing accompaniment for solo songs was referred to in sixteenth century documents as cantando al liuto ("singing to the lute") or accompanandosi ("accompanying oneself"). Moreover, the musicians he lists were all associated with the polyphonic style--Wert and Luzzaschi as madrigalists, and della Viola as a virtuoso on the viola bastarda, famous for his madrigal transcriptions and contrapuntal improvisations³⁰.

Mus. Ex.5: a) four measures of Cipriano di Rore's widely popular madrigal "Anchor che co'l partire", with two ornamented lines by dalla Casa (b and c). The last was intended for performance on viola bastarda.

If Molza was in fact an expert in the techniques of both the solo song style (learned as part of her enculturation into the noble female role) and the contrapuntal style (learned from books and from interactions with established male musicians), then her contribution to the music of the late Renaissance becomes clear. She actively aided in synthesizing two distinct musical traditions, solo and contrapuntal. The result of this synthesis, was the so-called "luxuriant madrigal," understood to be "the most significant [development] in the history of the style of the madrigal during the 1580's."³¹ The luxuriant style represented the final stage in the breakdown of the equal-voice madrigal, for it involved

simultaneous diminution of the rhythmic values of several voices, those diminutions eventually being employed in a thematic way.³²

Mus. Ex. 6: An excerpt from a madrigal in the luxuriant style, "O dolcezze amarissime d'amore", by Luzzasco Luzzaschi, court organist at Ferrara.

Musicians involved in developing this new style would necessarily have to be well-schooled in the solo song style practices (i.e. linear improvisation), and the polyphonic style (note-reading, rules of harmony, vertical improvisation.) As we have seen, Molza appears to have provided herself with precisely this training.

One puzzling feature of historical accounts of the concerto delle donne is that, after her arrival at court in 1583, Molza is never explicitly mentioned as a performer with that ensemble, but as a respected singer and instrumentalist known to have played some significant role in the group. Her absence from the roster of singing ladies can now be reasonably explained by assuming that she organized and taught the trio of women musicians who caused such a stir, passing on to them a unique approach to the stylistic problems related to simultaneous improvisation. We know these women rehearsed from two to six hours daily, and that they succeeded in deeply impressing musically astute listeners, as is reflected in the following excerpt from a letter written by composer Alessandro Striggio to his patron in 1589:

This concerto delle donne is truly exceptional. [a] These ladies sing excellently both with instruments and from partbooks, and they are sure in improvisation. [b] The Duke showed me in writing all the works which they improvise upon, with all the runs and passages that they do. (Emphasis mine; see discussion below)

I hope that your excellency will soon permit me to return to Mantova (...) and there I will be able to compose more easily some pieces for Your Highness' ensemble, in imitation of these songs of Ferrara³³.

This is but one example of the many encomia directed to the women by professional musicians, several of whom profess a desire to imitate the ladies' style, while others attest to the wondrous changes wrought in their own madrigals by the women's innovative improvisations. But every musicologist commenting on this phenomenon insists that the women's influence was limited to their virtuosic ability in singing runs and embellishments at sight, thus inspiring composers to supply them with repertoire. To support this theory, otherwise astute scholars pass on astonishing examples of faulty translation and misinterpretation. Consider, for instance, two lines from Striggio's letter in the original Italian:

[a] Quelle Signore cantano eccellentemente et nel loro conserto [sic] e a libro, e alimproviso son sicure.

[b] Il Sig. Duca mi favorisse di continuo di mostrarme in scritto tutte le oppere che cantano a la mente, con tutte le tirate e passaggi che vi fanno.

The operative words here are alimproviso and a la mente, which in modern Italian usage mean "impromptu" and "by memory" respectively. But in 16th century Italian, as used by Striggio, both words were meant to describe the women's proficiency at contrapuntal improvisation. Definitive proof is supplied by Ernest Ferand, on the basis of his exhaustive study of 16th century musical treatises:

The most widely accepted term by which the entire practice of improvised counterpoint became known, especially in Italy, was contrappunto a mente, or alla mente [...], literally "mental counterpoint".[...] In Italian treatises, the singing of counterpoint was referred to as contrapuntizzare, and it could be performed alla sprovveduta, all'improviso, al'improvista, de improvviso,[...]etc.³⁴.

"Alimproviso" and "alla mente", therefore, were both terms for contrapuntal improvisation.

That musicologists over the centuries have assumed that the "Ladies of Ferrara" were imitative rather than creative musicians becomes painfully clear from translations of the above passages by two of the most meticulous scholars in the field. Anthony Newcombe mistakenly translates "alimproviso" as "without rehearsal", then adds a semicolon and passes over a comma in the original, so that his translation reads:

[a] "Those ladies sing excellently; both when singing in their concerto (from memory) and when singing at sight from part books they are secure.

[b] The Duke favored me continually by showing me written out all the pieces that they sing by memory, with all the diminutions [tirate e passaggi] that they do."³⁵.

Alfred Einstein properly translates "alimproviso son sicure" as "they are sure-footed in improvisation", but he reveals his bias in the next line of the letter, when he takes "a la mente" to mean rote memory:

[b] The Duke[...]show(ed) me in manuscript everything that they sing by heart.³⁶

Perhaps Einstein was misled by the information that Duke Alfonso presented his visitor with a book containing the women's repertoire--surely an impossibility if the music were improvised. But no, the existence of such a book does not undermine the fundamentally improvisatory nature of the women's work. As the theorist Vincentino advised in 1555 in his paradoxically entitled chapter "Modo di comporre alla mente sopra i canti fermi" ("How to compose extemporaneously upon a cantus firmus"):

[Even in a well-prepared group] the true counterpoint--or rather the true composition--will be one in which all the voices that are sung alla mente are written down.³⁷.

Apparently it was a highly regarded practice during this period to write down previously improvised parts, in order to study them, or to work out problems--problems of simultaneous diminution in the case of the women of Ferrara.³⁸.

The "Ladies of Ferrara" were also famous for their renditions of currently popular madrigals, but again, scholars claim their reputations were won by vocal quality and sight-singing ability, whereas eyewitnesses credit their creative use of improvisatory techniques. Paolo Virchi, court organist, in the dedication of his First Book of Madrigals a 5 to Duke Alfonso II, in 1584:

"I do not attribute [the success of my madrigals] so much to my own artifice as to the sweetness of the voices of the Illustrious Ladies who sing them, who, with a marvelous new approach (dispositione) and in a new way--not fully understood--of diminutions and ornamentation, easily increase the pleasure of my music, so that I am not equal to their reputation for such excellence."³⁹

In this gracious and matter-of-fact way, Virchi confirms our premise that the women of Ferrara were independently creative musicians with a genuinely avant-garde aura. By extension, he also gives weight to Ernest Ferand's rarely-honored exhortation:

"In the vocal and instrumental music of [the Renaissance and early Baroque] we have[...]a practice in which[...]the performer's contribution often exceeded that of the composer. It should never be forgotten that the compositions of that time that have come down to us in manuscript or print often present only a pale outline of how they actually sounded, and that the composers themselves often considered it to be their task merely to sketch their work on paper, to present a skeleton and to leave the details of clothing it to the performing singers or players."⁴⁰

Thus, the concerto di donne of Ferrara, with Tarquinia Molza as their mentor, contributed much more to 16th century music than lovely stage presence and coloratura voices. They actively effected a synthesis between two distinct musical styles.

To recapitulate, the use of untapped historical documents, and the reinterpretation of familiar material have led to these conclusions:

1. Tarquinia Molza was instructed in the art of solo singing, including linear improvisation (diminution and embellishment) as part of her training into the noble female role.
2. In addition, Molza learned contrapuntal theory and vertical improvisation, considered the preserve of males.
3. At the court of Ferrara, Molza was involved in developing a style of music which employed simultaneous improvised diminution in a contrapuntal setting--a synthesis of contrapuntal and solo song styles known as the "luxuriant madrigal".
4. Tarquinia Molza taught and guided the "Ladies of Ferrara" whose public improvisations in this new style excited well-known male composers to imitate them in written compositions.

CORROBORATIVE EVIDENCE: PATRIZI'S MANUSCRIPT

Having reached this point in my research in 1979, I was to some extent confronting an impasse. On one hand, the process had yielded sensible solutions to recurring contradictions in the scholarship on this period. On the other hand, the amount of supporting documentation was minimal, given the dearth of published information about women, and the prohibitive distance of Italian archives and libraries. Especially lacking was further corroboration of Tarquinia Molza's involvement in the contrapuntal style, a critical link in the chain. Imagine, then, the excitement I felt when I stumbled upon the priceless document L'Amorosa filosofia, written by Molza's good friend Francesco Patrizi when she was thirty-five years old and still residing in Modena.

Patrizi had known Molza since she was a child, and in 1577 he set down a detailed, though unfinished, account of her personality, appearance, philosophical theories and musical practice. Since Patrizi's manuscript was neither revised nor published in his lifetime, it is remarkably free from the conventional flattery that distorts much biographical writing of the Renaissance. The original manuscript gathered dust in the library of Parma until 1963, when it was edited and published in the original Italian by John Charles Nelson, a scholar interested only in those parts of the text dealing with philosophy. Nelson's interest was in Patrizi himself, and in Platonic philosophy; he was unbelievably supercilious regarding Molza's philosophical views as aired in the manuscript, and passed over the detailed references to her musicality with the words, "her musical ability cannot be easily documented." And so this document escaped the notice of musicologists for fifteen years, while it circulated lamely among philosophers and academics. Finally, in 1978, two self-described "musical dilettanti", Anna Martellotti and Elio Durante, brought Patrizi's work to the attention of musicologists. In their brilliantly insightful book, Cronistoria del Concerto, they used Patrizi's account to accurately assess Tarquinia Molza's guiding role in the work of the concerto delle donne, although they did not recognize the significance of her knowledge of counterpoint. The following are excerpts from Patrizi's manuscript--his first-hand observations of Tarquinia Molza's education and musical practice.

Education

Cavalier Camillo [Tarquinia's father] kept a certain Don Politiani at the house, a man of rare goodness, and learned in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and entrusted to him the care of his sons [figli maschi]. Tarquinia, along with her sisters, was set to the feminine pursuit of needlework by their mother, an exercise she used to flee from whenever she could.

Tarquinia so longed to hold a book in her hand--even before she knew her alphabet--to look at when her mother wasn't present, that she smuggled one to hide under her mantle--a little girl who didn't yet know her ABC's! She was caught many times in this noble thievery, both by her mother (who disapproved of it), and by her father (who took infinite delight in it). And Tarquinia so pleaded with her father to let Don Giovanni teach her along with her brothers that he just had to give in to her charms[...] Thus, while still a young girl, she showed such a

lively intellect that she effortlessly learned all of the reading and grammar taught her by her instructor, and surpassed, not only her brothers, but all the others who also came there to learn.

Tarquinia's father and teacher died within a short time of each other, and Tarquinia, again under the authority of her mother, gave up the studies and books to which she was so strongly drawn, and attended to those activities of home and self that young ladies engage in. She occupied herself in this fashion for five years, until she was married.⁴¹

What a difference there is between this compelling eyewitness report and the romantic claims of historians that women and men had equal access to education in the Renaissance!⁴² The two brothers with whom Molza begged to study were both younger than she--their education was considered a birthright, hers a fond concession to a charmingly persistent child. The formal education Molza fought so hard for was brought to an end upon the death of her father when she was only thirteen years old. Patrizi goes on to inform us that she picked up her studies again of her own accord ("with her husband's permission"⁴³) five years after her marriage, and at that time secured teachers for herself.

Patrizi's observations delineate two spheres of activity within one household: a literary sphere occupying the male children, presided over by the father, and a female domestic sphere presided over by the mother. Tarquinia Molza's refusal to be relegated to the domestic sphere as a young child was but the first of the crossovers she was to make into the public sphere--an act she invariably accomplished with the persistence and brilliance that marked her early, hard-won education.

Musical Training

It happened one day that Cesarino came upon Tarquinia sitting by the fire, singing some poem or other by Petrarch as a song, which she knew how to do. Upon hearing the sweetness of her voice, the placement, the grace of her control, he was astounded, and wanted her to learn to sing in all ways.

And so, unknown to her husband, he began to teach her. And not a month had passed before she was singing securely everything he had shown her. Then she was found out by her husband, but when he saw the effect, he was happy to have her continue. She succeeded so incredibly that within three months she was accomplished enough to sing by note, effortlessly and gracefully, any music whatsoever that they place in front of her, no matter how difficult and embellished it might be.⁴⁴

What could be more clear? At a point when she was already proficient at singing improvised verses, probably to her own accompaniment, Molza's ability so impressed a male musician that he insisted on teaching her another style of music--an undertaking so unconventional that she had to hide her efforts from her husband! But Patrizi wants there

to be no mistaking the fact that this extraordinary woman was indeed engaged in two different styles of music. So he deluges us with endless fascinating details, the following of which is only a sampling:

*No woman has a voice so sweet and round in singing, nor such pleasing of every manner of trills, runs, and diminutions. Neither is any woman so secure in any difficult composition, nor able to sing so angelically to the lute, to play the bass on the viola and sing the soprano at the same time, nor to so understand counterpoint and the art in its entirety.*⁴⁵

*And she does many things excellently--not through mere practice, nor because they were shown her by her teachers, as is the case with women who sing nowadays..., but rather due to her marvelous and unusual ear, which detects both errors and excellence, however minute, and due to her accomplished knowledge of counterpoint. In evidence of this last is the counterpoint I saw which she superimposed on Cipriano's famous madrigal "Anchorche col partire."*⁴⁶

*One day Pietro Vinci arrived while she was singing some of his madrigals, and stationing himself rather far away where he could listen with careful attention, onlookers saw him raise his hands to heaven..., weeping from the sweetness of it. And when she finished singing, he rushed to embrace her, saying, "Oh, my child, I thank God and you for giving me the consolation of hearing ny works sung as I never would have thought I should, or could, hear them." And he spoke many words in this fashion, thus testifying to the elements of her singing style.*⁴⁷

Patrizi's manuscript breaks off after ninety-four pages, the last dated August 27, 1577--six years before Molza's arrival at the court of Ferrara. But although we are sadly deprived of his observations of her career at court, Patrizi does describe Molza's introductory performance for Alfonso II d'Este, her eventual patron, in 1568. Note well the references made to two entirely different areas of expertise: singing a contrapuntal madrigal, and solo performance to her own accompaniment of a poem by Petrarch.

*On that occasion, His Highness wanted to hear her perform some difficult madrigals of Vincio in the company of the top musicians of his cappella. In that test, everyone else missed certain passages, while she held firm and sustained (her note) so as to give the others a chance to recover. And so the Duke, after reproving his musicians, praised her, saying that he had never heard anywhere a more secure part than hers.*⁴⁸

*But there is nothing to be heard in the whole world that is more sweet, wonderful and divine, that her singing to lute accompaniment. This singing amazed Duke Alfonso and Duchess Barbara[...]. Signora Tarquinia sang various things for them, but the Duke's very favorite was Petrarch's sonnet "Hor ch'il ciel", which--because of the wonder he found in it--he had her repeat four to six more times.*⁴⁹

Before this episode occurred, Alfonso II had taken no particular interest in music, his activities being generally of a more "manly" sort: horsemanship, arms, ballplaying,

alchemy. He did maintain the usual cappella di musica, which supplied music for court functions, but the soprano parts in all cases were taken by males, whether young boys, falsettists, or castrati.⁵⁰ No wonder, then, that Alfonso was intrigued by the novelty of Molza's range, expertise and innovations. Durante and Martellotti suggest that it was precisely the experience of hearing Molza that sparked Alfonso's interest in female singing practice of a particular, highly innovative kind. In the succeeding two decades, Alfonso energetically promoted women singers, to the point where his involvement was deemed almost obsessive by his noble peers. The "Ladies of Ferrara" became renowned throughout Italy and beyond, at first due to their performances within the female accompanied song style, and then, after Tarquinia Molza's arrival in 1583, as innovators of the "luxuriant madrigal" style, which combined solo and contrapuntal techniques.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC HISTORY

This brief analysis of the secular music scene in 16th century Italy is neither polished nor fully documented. We still know too little about the standards for the solo song style and how they were determined, details of the linear improvisation practice, the identities of the women who were masters of that style, the reactions of female musicians to the "madrigal revolution" of the 1520's, and much more.

It is possible that after further investigation we will conclude that Western music history between the mid-fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries formed a continuum held together by women, based on the development of the homophonic ideal of a single expressive line supported by functional harmonies--a continuum broken for a few years by the interloping madrigal. "The madrigal is artificial," wrote Einstein, "in every sense of the term: in its origins, its practice, and as a work of art."⁵¹ But because Einstein did not apply gender as an analytical category, he was at a loss to explain the phenomenon he so rightly observed regarding the madrigal, simply marvelling "strange are the ways of history!"⁵² Strange indeed are the ways of an historical process that ignores the contributions of half the population, then wonders why the results seem patchy! How, then, shall we answer Susan B. Anthony's haunting question? Why do history's pages glow with the names of illustrious men while a woman appears only here and there? Here is Gerda Lerner's reply: "Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history that are inappropriate to women."⁵³

Tarquinia Molza's life and career amply fortify Lerner's words. Reams of untapped resources, like Patrizi's manuscript, are waiting in libraries and archives all over the world, ready to give up their secrets in response to the appropriate questions. We have finally achieved the ability to conceptualize a history of women and men; there remains now only our happy responsibility to give it substance. Avanti!

NOTES

1. Susan B. Anthony, speech entitled "The True Woman," delivered in 1857, autograph housed at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
2. "Concertante: music that is in some sense soloistic, with a contrasting element, or "concerto-like." In the Baroque period it was sometimes used, more or less interchangeably with concertato, to describe a group of mixed musical forces, generally vocal and instrumental or comprising a larger ensemble and a smaller one." The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Ed. Stanley Sadie, Volume 4, p. 625.
3. Gerda Lerner, The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History (Oxford University Press, 1979), p.172.
4. Tarquinia Molza was indeed dismissed from court due to her relationship with the brilliant and cultured musician Giaches de Wert. However, Tarquinia insisted that their relationship was warm friendship ("I confided in him," she is quoted as saying), and that rumors of a supposed love affair were mere gossip circulated by a certain "Vittorio" out of professional jealousy. (See A. Ramazzini, "I musici fiamminghi alla corte di Ferrara, Giaches Wert e Tarquinia Molza", in Archivio Storico Lombardo, VI, 1879). Tarquinia's defense is supported by a brief note recently unearthed from the archives by Durante and Martellotti. The note was written by a courtier named Alfonso Fontanelli to a friend, on November 11, 1589: "Signora Tarquinia is leaving court, dismissed by His Highness, and Vittorio remains here in that same lord's service--so that, on all accounts, the Signora's case grieves me." (E. Durante and A. Martellotti, Cronistoria del Concerto delle Donne Principalissime di Margherita Gonzaga d'Este; Firenze: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1979, p. 185.)
5. Alfred Einstein, The Italian Madrigal, Volume I (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 110.
6. Ruth Kelso, Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 223.
7. Einstein, p. 50.
8. Baldassare Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, transl. Charles Singleton (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 210.
9. It must be noted that comments of this sort reveal more about the perceptions and determinations of the male author than they do about the talent and aspirations of the female artist. Further illustrating this point is a letter written by Abraham Mendelssohn to his daughter Fanny in 1820, when she was 15 years old: "Music will perhaps become [your brother Felix's] profession, while for you it can and must be only an ornament, never the root of your being and doing...[It] does you credit that you have always shown yourself good and sensible in these matters...Remain true to these sentiments and to this line of conduct; they are feminine, and only what is truly feminine is an ornament to your

sex." Despite this energetic discouragement of her talent, Fanny continued to compose, and three published pieces in Felix's Opus 8 and three in his Opus 9 were actually written by Fanny. See Women in Music: an Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, ed. Carol Neuls-Bates (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 143.

10. Castiglione, p. 75.

11. See George Conklin, Aspects of Renaissance Culture (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1953), p. 155.

12. Giuliano Procacci, History of the Italian People, transl. Anthony Paul (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 105, 117.

13. For further development of these points, including a description of a remarkably similar phenomenon in 16th century Java, see Riley, "The Influence of Women on Secular Vocal Music in Sixteenth Century Italy: the Life and Career of Tarquinia Molza", unpublished thesis, Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1980, pp. 35-41 and p. 101.

14. A pathetic example of one courtier's difficulties in adjusting to the new role can be found in the case of Signor Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, an ex-military man with a superb bass voice who was called into the service of Duke Alfonso of Ferrara. From the archives: Letter of February, 1581: "The Duke accepted Signor Brancaccio into his service principally to enjoy his singing ability. Before [Brancaccio] arrived here, the Duke made a pact with him not to talk about things of war, but I don't believe he was informed that he would serve as a musician--and perhaps he doesn't, since he only performs in private in the company of ladies." June, 1581: "Signor Brancaccio always takes part in these entertainments, and is generally good enough about it. However, I know that at certain times it profoundly bothers him--especially that time when Cardinal Farnese was here, since not only the Cardinal but also his entire court attended the performance. Brancaccio tried to take comfort in the fact that on such occasions the Duke introduces him with the words, 'and would Signor Giulio Cesare also care to do us the honor--??' and allows him to remain seated when he sings." August, 1583: "The arrival here of the Duke of Joyeuse has caused the departure of Signor Brancaccio. Duke Alfonso had already lost patience with him and his ways, because Brancaccio always wanted to discuss war topics, to the Duke's annoyance... Now, during the visit of the Duke of Joyeuse, the Duke wanted Brancaccio to sing in the company of the ladies as usual (that being the reason he took him into his service). But Brancaccio resolutely refused to do it, and so, after Monsignor de Joyeuse had left, he was fired." (Archival excerpts in the original Italian in Durante and Martellotti, p. 140, pp. 161f.)

15. Certain professional male musicians, such as Marco Cara, Bartolommeo Tromboncino, Giovanni Testagrossa et al, were involved and influential in the solo singing style. Their numbers were few compared to the numbers of women involved in the style, but they received virtually all of the public recognition because they had been designated "professional" musicians.

16. Walter Rubsamen Literary Sources of Secular Vocal Music in Italy ca. 1500 (NY: Da Capo Press, 1943), p.24.

17. Einstein, p. 552.

18. Ibid., p. 44.

19. Willi Apel, The Harvard Dictionary of Music (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 497.

20. Einstein, p. 552.

21. Ibid., p. 182.

22. Ibid., p. 153.

23. Ernest Ferand, "Improvised Vocal Counterpoint in the Late Renaissance and Early Baroque" in Annales Musicologiques, IV, 1956, p.132.

24. Einstein, p. 153.

25. Anthony Newcombe, The Madrigal at Ferrara 1579-1597 Volume I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 18.

26. Ibid., pp. 48, 49.

27. Orazio della Viccola is one of the appellations of Orazio Bassano, also known as Orazio della Viola, ?1540-?1609. See Newcombe, p. 194.

28. "Viola bastarda: an Italian 16th and early 17th century term for a small bass viol especially suitable for improvising rapid passage-work. Since its compass was so large, it was not limited to carrying a single line, but could skip from voice to voice of a polyphonic composition." Groves, Volume 19, p. 814.

29. Domenico Vandelli, "Vita di Tarquinia Molza detta L'Unica" (Bergamo: Lancellotti, 1750), p. 7.

30. Groves, Volume 2, p. 253.

31. Newcombe, p. 49.

32. Ibid., p. 78.

33. Durante and Martellotti, pp. 164, 165.

34. Ferand, "Improvised Vocal Counterpoint in the Late Renaissance and Early Baroque", p. 141.

35. Newcombe, p. 55.

36. Einstein, p. 846.

37. Ferand, p. 148.

38. Cavicchi p. 17

39. Durante and Martellotti, p. 166.

40. Ernest Ferand, "Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music", in Anthology of Music, Volume 12 ed. K.G. Fellerer (Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag Koln, 1961), p. 13.

41. Francesco Patrizi, L'amorosa filosofia, ed. John Charles Nelson (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1963), pp. 18, 19, 60.

42. Historian Jacob Burckhardt sets forth the standard misperception of a supposedly utopian equality between men and women in this period, in his classic The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 294. He writes: "There was no question of `women's rights' or `emancipation' simply because the thing itself was a matter of course. The educated woman of that time strove, exactly like the man, after a characteristic and complete individuality. The same intellectual and emotional development that perfected the man was demanded for the woman."

43. Patrizi, p. 60.

44. Ibid., p. 38

45. Ibid., p. 40.

46. Ibid., p. 41.

47. Ibid., p. 38.

48. Ibid., p. 38.

49. Ibid., p. 42.

50. Durante and Martellotti, p. 52.

51. Einstein, p. 153.

52. Ibid.

53. Lerner, p. 178.