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Artículos Científicos

Vittoria Aleotti e Isabella Leonarda, compositoras del barroco italiano

*Vittoria Aleotti and Isabella Leonarda, composers of the Italian
baroque*

Vittoria Aleotti e Isabella Leonarda, compostadores do barroco italiano

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Resumen

En el presente artículo se realizará un recorrido histórico del barroco musical Italiano en el que se describirán cuáles eran las posibilidades de algunas mujeres músicas en este periodo así como las posibilidades que tenían para formarse y posteriormente dedicarse a la composición. Así también, se hará mención de la vida y obra de Vittoria Aleotti e Isabella Leonarda, dos de las compositoras más representativas de los siglos XVI y XVII del barroco italiano. Sus obras fueron fundamentalmente vocales y se escribieron para una, dos, tres y/o cuatro voces. Todo ello tuvo lugar en un momento histórico en el que la voz femenina era cada vez más aclamada por el público.

Palabras clave: mujeres; música; compositora; Italia; barroco.

Abstract

In this article we will make a historical appeal of the Italian musical baroque in which we will describe what were the possibilities of women musicians in this period as well as the possibilities they had to study and later dedicate themselves to composition. It will also be mention the life and works of Vittoria Aleotti and Isabella Leonarda, two of the most representative composers of the 16th and 17th centuries of the Italian



Baroque. Their works were mainly vocal and were written for one, two, three and/or four voices. All this took place at a historical moment when the public increasingly acclaimed the female voice.

Keywords: women; music; composers; Italy; baroque.

Resumo

Neste artigo, será realizada uma viagem histórica pelo barroco musical italiano em que serão descritas as possibilidades de algumas músicas nesse período, bem como as possibilidades que tiveram de se formar e depois se dedicar à composição. Além disso, será feita menção à vida e obra de Vittoria Aleotti e Isabella Leonarda, duas das compositoras mais representativas dos séculos XVI e XVII do barroco italiano. Suas obras eram principalmente vocais e escritas para uma, duas, três e / ou quatro vozes. Tudo isso aconteceu em um momento histórico em que a voz feminina foi cada vez mais aclamada pelo público.

Palavras-chave: mulheres; música; compositor; Itália; barroco.

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Introduction: the Italian musical baroque

The musical Baroque was a period that lasted approximately between 1600 and 1750, the date on which the famous German musician Johan Sebastian Bach died. During this historical moment there were several social, political and economic transformations that had a direct impact on the arts. It was in the Italian peninsula where the Baroque style was born, and from there it spread throughout the rest of the European territory. In general, Baroque art was characterized by greater drama and tension in works of art.

One of the changes that took place during the baroque and that influenced religious music were the different ecclesiastical reforms. The Counter-Reformation reinforced the idea that the message of the Church was the only true reality that led to salvation. For this reason, the ecclesiastical institution was in charge of controlling human creativity and expressiveness. Thus, the two most important institutions, the Church and the State, generated an environment of insecurity in society. The control of human expressiveness had a direct impact on musical creation. For this reason, from the Counter-Reformation, art was controlled and at the total disposal of the Church.



During the Renaissance, the castrati emerged, children who had been subjected to castration to preserve their high voice, thus replacing the female voice. Later, during the baroque period, female figures called Primadonna appeared on the scene, coinciding with the birth of opera. These women musicians, in addition to singers, were composers. The role of these vocal music performers did not leave the audience indifferent. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, public devotion to them developed into a cult of celebrity. In this period, women who wanted to dedicate themselves to music (either as composers and / or performers) had to face several difficulties in order to develop their musical creativity. In general, they were able to do it mainly in:

- The court, those women who came from wealthy families. They could only do so before getting married, since once married they had to start a family and dedicate themselves to caring for it.
- The convents continued to be centers of musical production. In them music was composed whose purpose was its use in religious celebrations. In many convents on the Italian peninsula, works composed and signed by women have been found. Some of the most prominent are the Convents of Sta. Ágata and that of San Marino de Leano in Pavia; the Convents of Sta. Caterina, that of Sta. Margarita in Milan; that of Sta. Cristina in Bologna. The Radegonda convent (Milan) must have been a center of great importance due to the allusions that travelers of the time make of it. In addition to the convents, the ospedali (conservatories) in Venice in the 17th and 18th centuries, stand as one of the most important institutions where women could study, compose and perform music.
- Marry a musician in order to work alongside him (sometimes under anonymity).

Vocal music

The rise of female vocal ensembles during the first decades of the baroque period was an important moment in the history of music, as the female sex managed to achieve outstanding recognition for their musical talent. Due to the increasing popularity of female vocal ensembles that resulted after the establishment of the concerto delle donne in 1580, female composers in 17th and 18th century Italy gained greater access to musical training. This situation led to a significant increase



in musical productivity among female composers, particularly in the field of vocal music (Jezic and Wood, 1994).

The fascination for female voices extended to a great diversity of vocal genres, but it was above all in the operatic genre in which they reached the peak of the profession during the first decades of the seventeenth century. These female musicians were paid and widely acclaimed for their musical performances. The association that a few decades later authors such as Monteverdi made of acute voices with virtuosity reflects the importance of female voices that dates back to the concerto delle donne in Ferrara and even earlier in court shows where the presence of castrati. In addition to the female voice, the castrati were trusted to interpret the highest voices. The castrati first performed in the Sistine Chapel choir in the 1560s and were considered opera superstars in the late 17th century. (Freitas, 1998).

When Monteverdi began her career as a musician, female performers were able to perform more frequently in northern Italian courts and court-sponsored theater shows, while at the end of their career they were able to perform before a large audience by performing opera (Treadwell , 2003). One of the factors that made it difficult for women musicians to gain access to the general public was the different facial transformations that they suffered when performing. That is to say, the movements, the breathing, and the corporal expression that the musical interpretation required. Normal breathing maintained body heat, but singing, which required more energy and released more air than breathing, skewed this precious balance by causing women to raise their own body temperature (Cusick, 1995).

When the printing press was invented (the work of the German Johannes Gutenberg that took place during the Renaissance), a greater development and spread of culture was achieved in all its fields, producing a true transformation in politics, religion and the arts. This development culminated during the Baroque, allowing written knowledge to cease to be an elitist heritage and to spread to a large part of society. The musical field was not an exception, since compositions of the time were published, and compositions were spread throughout different territories. In this way, the world was increasingly aware of how it was composed in other countries. Printing techniques evolved in such a way that multiple copies of books, compositions, musical treatises could be run, etc. Becoming a true revolution. The convents and monasteries that had been centers of female musical creation during previous centuries, continued to develop and print new compositions of great musical quality (Garvey, 2003). Therefore, during the Baroque, the increase in printed documents



fostered the recognition and diffusion of women's musical creativity. The creative impulse of baroque women composers could now be printed, interpreted and heard in various places simultaneously (Rodríguez, 2014).

The Italian composers Vittoria Aleotti and Isabella Leonarda enjoyed excellent musical training in the religious sphere, as both lived and trained as musicians in two Italian convents, as will be explained later. As a consequence of the rise of vocal music, most of his compositions belong to vocal music with a religious character and content. Another point in common that Vittoria and Isabella have is that they were both born and lived in northern Italy. The first in Ferrara and the second in Novara. They did not make great trips or trips through Europe, not even in Italy itself, something that could have taken place between the different convents of the congregations to which they belonged.

In 1620, the year in which Vittoria Aleotti passed away, it was precisely when Isabella Leonarda was born. The first one was born and formed in the late Renaissance and early Italian musical Baroque. This fact may explain why Isabella published a large number of works (many more than Vittoria), since the printing press and the importance of wanting to record the works in writing to be interpreted in the future, was something that was gaining more and more. relevance over the years.

Likewise, it is observed in Isabella's instrumental music compositions that the compositional style follows the second practice, a method possibly unknown by Aleotti.

Instrumental music

The emancipation of instrumental music that had begun during the Renaissance, culminated in the Baroque period. At this historical moment, a double style in instrumental music was achieved: on the one hand, a performance style and on the other, a type of composition appropriate for each type of musical instrument.

The development of instrumental music during the Baroque was also defined and conditioned by the perfection in the manufacture of the instruments and by compositional innovations. The latter were associated with the different aesthetic-musical approaches that emerged and developed during these centuries (Bianconi, 1986).



The piano, an instrument invented by the Italian Bartolomeu Cristofori of Padua, debuted in 1750. The piano was a key and highly relevant factor in the development of women as composers and performers, so that families that could afford it financially had a piano in the living room of their homes that was often played by them, since a large number of women were instructed in the practice of the instrument. Due to its aesthetics and position to make it sound, it soon became the ideal instrument to be played by a woman. Many families acquired the instrument so that their daughters could play it and receive a musical education from childhood. The unlimited dynamics and sonority options offered by the piano made it possible for this to become the most popular instrument in all of Europe, becoming one of the means through which women began to enter the field of composition.

Prima prattica and seconda prattica

During the first decades of the seventeenth century, Italian music distinguished between the *Prima prattica* and the *Seconda prattica*. The *Prima prattica* (in Italian, first practice) refers to baroque music that followed the compositional style of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594), or the style codified by Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590). This music contrasted with that of the *Seconda prattica*, which followed the new compositional models. Both terms arose during the controversy between Claudio Monteverdi and the theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi in the early seventeenth century regarding the controversy over the use of dissonance. From Monteverdi on, the old music or *stile antico*, was equivalent to the Renaissance, and the new or modern style to the baroque.

The musical forms that emerged in the early seventeenth century such as the suite, the sonata, the concert were exponents of the modern style. During the first half of the seventeenth century, these forms coexisted with musical genres that emerged during the previous period and which were therefore considered to follow the *antico* style. They are, for example, forms based on imitation, such as the *canzona*, the *ricercare*, the *capriccio* or *fantasy*, among others. The old style was not stopped using although it was preserved as a second language mainly in the repertoire of sacred music.

Composing in the modern style was not suitable for women. However, the famous composer Leonarda Isabella (who will be discussed later) was educated in formal counterpoint by using it in some of her pieces (Bowers and Tick 1986, pp.



128). The use of Leonarda's harmonies gave the author ample space for creativity. Although her compositions have elements of both styles, most of her repertoire was closer to the antico style in her sacred vocal works and closer to the modern style in her instrumental works.

Vittoria Aleotti (1575 – 1620)

Giovanni Battista Aleotti was an Italian engineer and architect who worked for the Este family of Ferrara. His five daughters, Raphaela, Vittoria, Beatrice, Cinzia, Camilla and Armanda received musical training. Of all of them, Raphaela and Vittoria were the most recognized composers of the Aleotti family. His father made sure to provide an ecclesiastical education for his eldest daughter, Raphaela. The musical studies of her were carried out by the teacher Alessandro Milleville. In 1593 he composed and published the book of motets for the choral ensemble of the convent of San Vito titled *Sacrae cantiones: quinque, septem, octo & decem vocibus decantande*. It was his only publication and he dedicated it to the Bishop of Ferrara. These motets, one of the first printed works in history composed by a woman, show the talents of Raphaela, whose vocal writing was clear, used a simple texture and a new independence of two choirs singing in a modern declamatory style. She was also known as an excellent organist. During the years that she lived in the convent, she was possibly more devoted to teaching and acting than to composition.

The convent of San Vito, during most of the late Renaissance, offered the public interpretations of sophisticated musical works. Some nuns, in addition to vocal music performers, played wind instruments such as cornets, trombones. Hercole Bottrigari, an Italian scholar and musician, published a discussion in his work, *Il Desiderio*, describing the talented female musicians of San Vito, with Raphaela probably the leader and teacher of many of them.

Vittoria, Aleotti's second daughter, was largely self-taught as she was able to observe her older sister during private music lessons. Vittoria, who was already playing the harpsichord at the age of 4 or 5, studied with the masters Milleville and Ercole Pasquini. She lived in the Convent of San Vito for several years before choosing to dedicate her life to God and take her vows at the age of 14. She remained in the convent for forty-nine years, serving as a musician, conductor, keyboardist, and composer. She then published a madrigal in 1591 titled *Giardino de 'musicci ferraresi*, and a book of madrigals in 1593 titled *Ghirlanda de madrigali a quattro*



voce. In addition to these two works, the author's best-known compositions were *T'amo mia vita, Io v'amo vito mia; Exurgat Deus; Ego flos campi; Sacrae cantiones: quinque, septem, octo & decem vocibus decantande*. All works of sacred vocal music.

Isabella Leonarda (1620 – 1704)

The Leonardi family were an ancient and prominent Novara family. Among the different members were prominent church and civil society officials and Palatine knights. Isabella's father, who held the title of earl, was a great legal expert (Carter, 1988).

Isabella studied composition with Gasparo Casati, Master of the Chapel of the Novara Cathedral from 1635 to 1641. The Ursulines were a teaching order and the convent bore the title of Collegio. This was probably the institution where Isabella received some kind of education. Although Gasparo is not mentioned as Isabella's teacher, the tradition of including a student's composition in her teacher's publication makes it seem likely. Thus, in the Third Book of the Sacred Concerts *Terzo book desacri concerti* published in 1640, there are several works dedicated by the author to the Reverend Father ". D. Sebastiano Contarini abbate di Santo Ambrogio Maggiore di Milano, Conte di Campione, Limonta, et Civenna, as well as two motets by M. rev. Signora Isabella Leonarda Vergine nella Congregatione di S. Orsola di Novara. Although little is known of Isabella's teaching work, in 1658 she is mentioned as a music teacher and mother and secretary of the convent (Carter, 1988) From his later compositions published in 1686, 1693, 1695, 1696 and finally 1700 it can be deduced that he rose to positions in the convent from the Mother Vicarage to Superior and finally *Consigliera* in 1700.

Most of the nuns who composed works wrote vocal works such as motets and / or madrigals. However, this was not the case for Isabella, who although she composed primarily religious vocal music (she also wrote some sacred songs alone with vernacular lyrics), she also composed instrumental music in the Italian baroque style. The Opus 16 sonatas are believed to be the first instrumental sonatas (for violin and continuous) published by a female composer. They were published in 1693, when Isabella was 73 years old. This first edition (as seen in image 2) is an example of musical printing on mobile characters in which the heads of the musical figures take an oval shape. Although sometimes its musical reading is not easy, it must be taken



into account that this was the fastest way (although it involved a high cost) in relatively short runs.

Isabella was one of the most prolific composers of the Italian Baroque, publishing more than two hundred works. She was a highly regarded composer in her hometown, though little known in the rest of Italy. Her published compositions of hers span a period of about 60 years that began with the dialogues of 1640 and ended with the solo voice of Mottetti of 1700.

Interpretation of the compositions of Isabella Leonarda and Vittoria Aleotti before and today

All the music Isabella composed, including the instrumental sonatas, was appropriate to be performed in any religious context. However, it has not yet been investigated whether her music was used on a few or many occasions. We also do not know where it was interpreted (if it was). However, some of her works have reached the present time incomplete. It is supposed that some of her works were performed in the convent, since in them musical training and musical interpretation were part of daily life. This ignorance also occurs with the pieces composed by Vittoria Aleotti.

At present, Isabella Leonarda's works are part of some concert programs and musical groups such as the English group Cappella Fede, which specializes in secular and sacred vocal and instrumental music from 1650 to 1790. Other groups such as the Bristol Ensemble continues to interpret his works such as the aforementioned Sonata Duodecima, which is considered to be the first violin sonata composed by a woman. This piece is part of a collection of 12 sonatas, therefore, it is the last sonata and the most harmonically advanced one that closes this cycle of sonatas for violin and continuous.

Vocal groups such as The Philharmonic Society of Arlington (Massachusetts) perform a repertoire made up solely and exclusively of compositions by Vittoria Aleotti, Isabella Loenarda among other musics such as Maddalena Casulana, Barbara Strozzi as well as works by composers from later centuries such as Fanny Hensel, Clara Schumann , Amy Marcy Cheney Beach, Mabel Wheeler Daniels or Gwyneth Walker among others.



Conclusions

During the Italian Baroque, the vast majority of pieces were never printed, since the fact that the compositions lasted over time was not always the objective for which the works were composed. Despite this, in addition to the two aforementioned composers, other famous composers such as Bárbara Strozzi, also from Italy, saw eight volumes of their madrigals published.

The life and work of Vittoria Aleotti and Isabella Leonarda can be described as atypical in a historical moment in which women had as their primary objective the care of the family and the performance of domestic tasks. Through her life and work, we have been able to know her compositions, which followed the compositional styles of the time and that any of her male counterparts could compose. Despite living and developing as musicians in a patriarchal society, the successful professional careers of these two composers during the Italian Baroque testify to the increasing access to better female musical training after 1580.

Despite the fact that their some of their works are considered to be of extraordinary quality and that they followed the compositional methods of the time in which they lived, the number of works by these and other composers that are part of the concert programs is scarce. of baroque vocal and / or instrumental music. For this reason, we believe and vindicate the need for his pieces to be included in the programming and that his works can be disseminated and heard by all humanity.

Future lines of research

There are several lines of research that remain open today and continue to be developed with the aim of knowing more about the life and work of authors from different historical periods.

Although the biography of musics that developed their artistic career during the Baroque period is documented, it is difficult to know the exact number of works composed by the female sex. Unfortunately we cannot know how his works sounded either, since a great majority were never published or even interpreted. Therefore, from the present 21st century, we can remember her contribution to the artistic world and continue to interpret her compositions and release those that have never been heard by an audience. The latter, interpretation, is one of the very interesting future lines of research with the double objective of bringing these works back to life so that the public can enjoy them.



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