

= Concerto delle donne =

The concerto delle donne (lit. consort of ladies) was a group of professional female singers in the late Renaissance court of Ferrara , Italy , renowned for their technical and artistic virtuosity . The ensemble was founded by Alfonso II , Duke of Ferrara , in 1580 and was active until the court was dissolved in 1597 . Giacomo Vincenti , a music publisher , praised the women as " virtuose giovani " (young virtuosas) , echoing the sentiments of contemporaneous diarists and commentators .

The origins of the ensemble lay in an amateur group of high @-@ placed courtiers who performed for each other within the context of the Duke 's informal musica secreta in the 1570s . The ensemble evolved into an all @-@ female group of professional musicians , the concerto delle donne , who performed formal concerts for members of the inner circle of the court and important visitors . Their signature style of florid , highly ornamented singing brought prestige to Ferrara and inspired composers of the time .

The concerto delle donne revolutionized the role of women in professional music , and continued the tradition of the Este court as a musical center . Word of the ladies ' ensemble spread across Italy , inspiring imitations in the powerful courts of the Medici and Orsini . The founding of the concerto delle donne was the most important event in secular Italian music in the late sixteenth century ; the musical innovations established in the court were important in the development of the madrigal , and eventually the seconda pratica .

= = History = =

= = = Formation = = =

At the court in Ferrara , a collection of ladies skilled in music inspired the composer Luzzasco Luzzaschi and caught the Duke 's interest . This group , which led to the formation of the concerto delle donne , performed within the context of the Duke 's musica secreta , a regular series of chamber music concerts performed for an exclusive audience . This preliminary group was originally made up of talented but amateur members of the court : the sisters Lucrezia and Isabella Bendidio , Leonora Sanvitale , and Vittoria Bentivoglio . They were joined by bass Giulio Cesare Brancaccio , who was specifically brought to the court in 1577 for his singing ability . The preliminary ensemble was active throughout the 1570s , and its membership solidified in 1577 . Only later did professionals replace these original singers .

The Duke did not announce the creation of a professional , all @-@ female ensemble ; instead , the group infiltrated and gradually dominated the musica secreta , so that after the dismissal of Brancaccio for insubordination in 1583 , no more male members of the musica secreta were hired . Even when Brancaccio was performing with the consort it was referred to as a ladies ' ensemble , because women singing together was the most exciting aspect of the group . This new ensemble , the concerto delle donne , was created by Alfonso in part to amuse his young new wife , Margherita Gonzaga d 'Este (she was only fourteen when they wed in 1579) , and in part to help the Duke achieve his artistic goals for the court . According to Grana , a contemporary correspondent , " Signora Machiavella [Lucrezia] , Signora Isabella , and Signora Vittoria have abandoned the field , having lost the backing of Luzzaschi " . The first recorded performance by the professional ladies was on November 20 , 1580 ; by carnival season in 1581 , they were performing together regularly .

This new " consort of ladies " was viewed as an extraordinary and novel phenomenon ; most witnesses did not connect the second period of the concerto delle donne with the group of ladies who sang in the musica secreta . Today , however , the earlier group is viewed as a crucial part of the creation and development of the social and vocal genre of the concerto delle donne .

= = = Roster and duties = = =

The most prominent member of the new ensemble was Laura Peverara , followed by Livia d 'Arco

and Anna Guarini , daughter of the prolific poet Giovanni Battista Guarini . Giovanni wrote poems for many of the madrigals which were set for the ensemble , and choreographed scenes for the balletto delle donne . Judith Tick believes Tarquinia Molza sang with the group , but Anthony Newcomb says she was involved solely as an advisor and instructor . Whether Tarquinia Molza ever performed with them or not , she was ousted from any role in the group after her affair with the composer Giaches de Wert came to light in 1589 . Luzzasco Luzzaschi directed and composed music to showcase the ensemble , and accompanied them on the harpsichord . Ippolito Fiorini was the maestro di capella , in charge of the entire court 's musical activities . In addition to his duties to the overall court , he accompanied the concerto on the lute . Vittorio Baldini was brought to the court as ducal music printer in 1582 .

The singers of the second era of the concerto delle donne were officially ladies @-@ in @-@ waiting of Duchess Margherita Gonzaga d 'Este , but were hired primarily as singers . Peverara 's musical abilities prompted the Duke to specifically ask his wife Margherita to bring Peverara from Mantua as part of her retinue . The new singers played instruments , including the lute , harp , and viol , but focused their energies on developing vocal virtuosity . This skill became highly prized in the mid @-@ sixteenth century , beginning with basses like Brancaccio , but by the end of the century virtuosic bass singing went out of style , and higher voices came into vogue . The ladies ' musical duties included performing with the duchess ' balletto delle donne , a group of female dancers who frequently crossdressed . Despite their upper @-@ class background , the singers would not have been welcomed into the court 's inner circle had they not been such skilled performers . D 'Arco belonged to the nobility , but a minor family only . Peverara was the daughter of a wealthy merchant , and Molza came from a prominent family of artists .

The women performed up to six hours a day , either singing their own florid repertoire from memory , sight @-@ reading from partbooks , or participating in the balletti as singers and dancers . Thomasin LaMay posits that the women of the concerti delle donne provided sexual favors for members of the court , but there is no evidence for this , and the circumstances of their marriages and dowries argues against this interpretation . The women were paid salaries and received other benefits , such as dowries and apartments in the ducal palace . Peverara received 300 scudi a year and lodging in the ducal palace for herself , her husband , and her mother - as well as a dowry of 10 @, @ 000 scudi upon her marriage .

Despite having married three times in the hopes of producing an heir , Alfonso II died in 1597 without issue , legitimate or otherwise . His cousin Cesare inherited the Duchy , but the city of Ferrara , which was legally a Papal fief , was annexed to the Papal States in 1598 through a combination of " firm diplomacy and unscrupulous pressure " by Pope Clement VIII . The Este court had to abandon Ferrara in disarray and the concerto delle donne was disbanded .

= = Music = =

The greatest musical innovation of the concerto delle donne was the multiplication of the ornamented upper voices , from one voice singing diminutions above an instrumental accompaniment to two or three voices singing varying diminutions at once . This practice , which listeners found remarkable , was imitated by many composers , including Carlo Gesualdo , Luca Marenzio and Claudio Monteverdi .

These composers wrote music either inspired by the concerto delle donne or specifically for them . Such works are characterized by a high tessitura , a virtuosic and florid style , and a wide range . Lodovico Agostini 's third book of madrigals was perhaps the first publication fully dedicated to the new singing style . Agostini dedicated songs to Guarini , Peverara , and Luzzaschi . Gesualdo wrote music for the group in 1594 while visiting Ferrara to marry the Duke 's niece Leonora d 'Este . De Wert 's Seventh Book of Madrigals à 5 and Marenzio 's First Book à 6 were the first true musical monuments to the new concerto delle donne . Monteverdi 's Canzonette a tre voci was probably influenced by the " Ladies of Ferrara " . Although the only works clearly intended for or inspired by the concerto delle donne were works for multiple high voices executing written @-@ out diminutions , in practice concerts with the concerto delle donne included the older style of solo ornamented

madrigals with instrumental accompaniment . Peverara was singularly lauded for her skill in this genre . Works written for the concerto delle donne were not limited to music : Torquato Tasso and G.B. Guarini wrote poems dedicated to the ladies in the concerto , some of which were later set by composers . Tasso wrote over seventy @-@ five poems to Peverara alone .

Luzzaschi 's book of madrigals for one , two , and three sopranos with keyboard accompaniment , published in 1601 , comprises works written throughout the 1580s . This music may have been kept back from publication in order to maintain the secrecy of Alfonso 's musica secreta , and to maintain control over it . Newcomb considers this publication the exemplar of the ladies ' signature musical style . In 1584 , Alessandro Striggio , responding to requests from Francesco I de ' Medici , Grand Duke of Tuscany , described the ladies and composed pieces imitating their style so that Francesco could start his own concerto delle donne . Striggio mentioned an ornamented four voice madrigal for three sopranos and a dialogue with imitative diminutions for two sopranos . He added that he had forgotten the intabulation for the madrigal in Mantua , and noted that the skilled singer Giulio Caccini could play the bass part on either lute or harpsichord . This indicates both that male singers were probably not used after Brancaccio , and that instrumental accompaniments were a common and acceptable means of filling in the counterpoint .

The output of the ducal printer , Baldini , consisted largely of music written for the concerto delle donne , including the works of the foremost madrigalists : Luzzaschi , Gesualdo , and Alfonso Fontanelli . His first publication for the Duke was *Il lauro secco* (1582) , which was followed by *Il lauro verde* (1583) , both containing music by the leading composers of Rome and Northern Italy . Music in honor of the concerto was printed as far away as Venice , with Paolo Virchi 's *First Book à 5* , published by Giacomo Vincenti and Ricciardo Amadino containing the madrigal which begins *SeGU 'ARINAscer LAURA e prenda LARCO / Amor soave e dolce / Ch 'ogni cor duro MOLCE* . This capitalization is in the original , clearly spelling out the equivalent of the names Anna Guarini , Laura Peverara , Livia d 'Arco , and Tarquinia Molza .

With the obvious exception of Brancaccio , all the singers in the concerto were female sopranos . Although the music written for the concerto focused on high voices , there is no evidence that the ensemble used either castrati or falsettists . This fact is surprising , considering that castrati were shortly to become the biggest stars of a new art form , opera . In 1607 , Monteverdi 's *Orfeo* featured four castrato roles out of a cast of nine , showing the new dominance of this vocal type . It also contrasts with Margherita 's father 's court , where Guglielmo Gonzaga actively sought out eunuchs .

Polyphonic arrangements called for the women to sing diminutions (melodic divisions of longer notes) and other ornaments in consort . Diminutions were traditionally improvised in performance . However , to coordinate their voices , they transcribed and rehearsed the music in advance , transforming these improvisations into highly developed musical forms that composers would emulate . The singers may have used the more traditional practice in their solo repertoire , performing ornaments extemporaneously . Specific ornaments used by the concerto delle donne , mentioned in a source from 1581 , were such popular sixteenth @-@ century devices as *passaggi* (division of a long note into many shorter notes , usually stepwise) , *cadenze* (decoration of the penultimate note , sometimes quite elaborate) , and *tirate* (rapid scales) . *Accenti* (connection of two longer notes , using dotted rhythms) , a staple of early Baroque music , are absent from the list . In 1592 Caccini claimed that Alfonso II asked him to teach his ladies the new *accenti* and *passaggi* styles .

= = = Styles = = =

There are two separate styles of madrigals written for and inspired by the concerto delle donne . The first is the " luxuriant " style of the 1580s . The second is music in the style of the *seconda pratica* , written in the 1590s . Luzzaschi wrote music in both of these styles . The style of the earlier period , as exemplified in the works of Luzzaschi , involves the use of madrigal texts written by poets within the Ferrarese sphere , such as Tasso and G.B. Guarini . These poems tend to be short and witty with single sections . Musically , Luzzaschi 's works are highly sectionalized and based on

melodic themes , rather than harmonic structures . Luzzaschi lessens the sectionalizing effect of his compositional techniques by weakening cadences . His tendency to reiterate melodies in different voices , including the bass voice , leads to tonal creations which are sometimes bewildering . These aspects make Luzzaschi 's music much more polyphonic than Monteverdi 's later compositions , and thus more conservative ; however , Luzzaschi 's use of jarring melodic leaps and harmonic dissonance are individualistic . These dissonances , which contrast sharply with the careful treatment of dissonance during most of the 16th century , is closely connected with the ornamented polyphonic madrigals of the concerto delle donne . In Giovanni Artusi 's socratic dialogue , the character defending Monteverdi connects haphazard treatment of dissonance with ornamental singing .

= = = Performance = = =

The concerto delle donne transformed the musica secreta . In the past , members of the audience would perform , and performers would become audience members . During the ascendancy of the concerto delle donne the roles within the musica secreta became fixed , as did the roster of those who performed for the Duke 's pleasure every night .

The elite , hand @-@ selected audience members favored with admission to performances by the concerto delle donne demanded diversions and entertainment beyond the pleasures of beautiful music alone . During the concerts , members of the concerto 's audience would sometimes play cards . Orazio Urbani , ambassador of the Grand Duke of Tuscany , having waited several years to see the concerto , complained that he was forced not only to play cards , distracting him from the performance , but also simultaneously admire and praise the women 's music to their patron Alfonso . After at least one concert , to continue the entertainment , a dwarf couple danced . Alfonso was not as interested in these peripheral entertainments , and in one instance excused himself from the party to go sit under a tree to listen to the ladies , and follow along with the madrigal texts and musical scores , including embellishments , which were made available to listeners .

= = Influence = =

The concerto delle donne was a revolutionary musical establishment that helped effect a shift in women 's role in music ; its success took women from obscurity to " the apex of the profession " . Women were openly brought to court to train as professional musicians , and by 1600 , a woman could have a viable career as a musician , independent of her husband or father . New women 's ensembles inspired by the concerto delle donne resulted in more positions for women as professional singers and more music for them to perform .

Despite the dissolution of the court in 1597 , the musical style which was inspired by the concerto delle donne spread throughout Europe , and remained prominent for almost fifty years . The concerto delle donne was so influential and often imitated that it became a cliché of northern Italian courts . The concerto brought Alfonso and his court international prestige , as the ladies ' reputation spread throughout Italy and southern Germany . It functioned as a powerful tool of propaganda , projecting an image of strength and affluence .

Having seen the concerto delle donne in Ferrara , Caccini created a rival group made up of his family and a pupil . This ensemble was sponsored by the Medici , and traveled as far abroad as Paris to perform for Marie de ' Medici . Francesca Caccini had much success composing and singing in the style of the concerto delle donne . Beginning in 1585 , rival groups were created in Florence by the Medici , Rome by the Orsini , and Mantua by the Gonzaga . There was even a rival group in Ferrara based in the Castello Estense , the very palace where the concerto delle donne performed . This group was formed by Alfonso 's sister Lucrezia d 'Este , Duchess of Urbino . She had lived at the Este court since 1576 , and shortly after Margherita 's marriage to Alfonso in 1579 , Alfonso and his henchmen killed Lucrezia 's lover . Lucrezia was unhappy about being replaced as the matron of the house by Margherita , and upset by the murder of her lover , leading to her desire to be separate from the rest of her family during her evening entertainments .

Barbara Strozzi was among the last composers and performers in this style , which by the mid
@-@ seventeenth century was considered archaic .