

## Article

# Singing Nuns and Soft Power: British Diplomats as Music Tourists in Seicento Venice

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**Abstract:** Historians of early modern statecraft and confessional politics have traditionally treated the arts as peripheral to the more official bureaucratic concerns of government agents. Meanwhile, musicological scholarship rarely centers the experiences and exploits of politicians who participated in early modern musical events. This case study on British envoys to Venice in the early Stuart period illustrates how musical activity and political work were, in fact, thoroughly imbricated within the daily mechanics of cross-confessional ambassadorship. Drawing on seventeenth-century diplomatic sources, I detail how both English and Northern Italian politicians made strategic use of sacred music-making—particularly vocal performance in local nunneries—to influence their dealings with foreign states, as well as how English diplomats in the Italian peninsula surveilled Catholic musical devotions in their covert correspondences to communicate information about international affairs. In revealing these moments of interconnection between music, religion, and geopolitics, I seek to further recent efforts in the New Diplomatic History to highlight the contributions of women and artistic practice within histories of international relations.

**Keywords:** nunneries; convents; diplomacy; music; Venice; England; Claudia Sessa; Henry Wotton; Dudley Carleton; Isaac Wake



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## 1. Introduction: The Siren Song of Catholic Italy

In 1655, the itinerant English merchant and musician Robert Bargrave heard an unforgettable musical performance at the Conservatorio della Pietà in Venice. In his travel diary, Bargrave declared that Venetian music was

... generally excellent, whether privat or Publique: yet it surpasses in the two Nunneries of Beggars and of Bastards: the last whereof, for prevention of Murder, receives all newborne children, & provides for them ever after... and here in a famous Nunns way of singing, I observd her excellency above others...

Bargrave followed this recollection with an unusually detailed account of the singer's vocal ornamentation, describing complex embellishments such as trills, echo effects, *intonazioni*, *cascade*, and *portamenti di voce*. In particular, Bargrave noted how effectively she expressed her "words by singing according to theyr sence: as Morire dolefully, Sospiri sighingly, & Ridendo laughingly" (Brennan 1999, pp. 229–30). This skillful unnamed musician had clearly made quite an impression on him. Bargrave was not the only seventeenth-century traveler to be captivated by the musical stylings of a Venetian nun. Several talented singers in Northern Italian nunneries were international superstars and emblems of urban prestige, garnering attention from Catholic and Protestant visitors alike. Many an English spectator-auditor witnessed their musical virtuosity, such as Alethea Howard, Countess of Arundel, and the diplomat Henry Wotton, whose embassy chaplain in Venice had been Bargrave's own musically inclined father, Isaac Bargrave.

Italianate music, especially the declamatory style of monody that had taken Italy by storm in the early seventeenth century, had become a fashionable novelty in England, and it was also rare for British audiences to hear women sing in public prior to the Restoration.

Solo song composed in this new musical style, known as the *stile rappresentativo*, or *stile moderno*, featured a single recitatorial vocal line accompanied by a continuo bass line. As an expressive ideal, the *stile rappresentativo* did not merely represent the inner passions but rather stirred and exteriorized them in the performing body of the musician. Early moderns understood musical performance, particularly in this musical style, to instigate a process of sympathetic emotional response in audiences. Within this multi-sensory experience of affective transference, air expelled from a singer's throat had the power to permeate a listener's body and soul through the ears, altering the listening body's flow of spirits and humors and thus inducing the auditor to enter into the singer's own physio-psychological state (see [Gordon 2004](#); [Jeanneret 2013](#); [Varwig 2021](#)).

Venetian religious institutions boasted not only regular performances of these moving "new musics" (dubbed *le nuove musiche* by the Italian composer, singer, and multi-instrumentalist Giulio Caccini), but also lush polychoral music sung in resonant churches, large ensembles of cutting-edge musical instruments, and the awe-inspiring vocal gymnastics of women and castrati. To many foreign spectator-auditors, the excellence of Venetian sacred music was an astonishing and formidable demonstration of the Republic's wealth, cultural sophistication, and technological innovation ([Mailes 2021](#), chp. 4). Northern Italian state officials knew that musical offerings in local churches were sure to impress. They instrumentalized the storied magnificence of this music in the interest of their own political ambitions, escorting foreign sovereigns, emissaries, and aristocrats to experience firsthand the spellbinding power of the Catholic sonic world. This was certainly the case in early modern Venice, which asserted control over its maritime dominions in part by sustaining an elaborate annual schedule of civic ceremonial abounding with highly systematized sacred music-making (see [Mailes 2021](#)).

Religious services in post-Reformation England were far from silent, featuring everything from congregational metrical psalmody to Anglican verse anthems for choral and instrumental ensembles. Yet, a minimalist approach to sacred music did characterize much of the English Protestant polemic. Lutheran and Calvinist religious reformers objected to the unintelligibility of Latin text in the sung Roman rite, and many condemned the worldly overindulgences of florid polyphonic song and ornate instrumental music. Some Protestant clerics were opposed to the inclusion of any music in the liturgy whatsoever ([Willis 2010](#), chp. 2). Even within the Catholic church, anxieties over the precarious temptations provoked by women's singing bodies led the episcopacy to impose severe restrictions on public musical devotions in nunneries ([Evangelisti 2007](#), pp. 113–14).

As for the English embassy chapel in Venice, it seems, the quieter the better. Wotton's embassy chaplain prior to Isaac Bargrave, William Bedell, purportedly followed his own modest practice of reading the psalms aloud without a response of any kind ([Clogie 1675](#), p. 62). The Scottish philosopher and historian Gilbert Burnet recounted that Bedell did not

... love the pomp of a Quire, nor Instrumental Musick; which he thought filled the ear with too much pleasure, and carried away the mind from the serious attention to the matter. . . . And the sense he had of the excesses of superstition, from what he had observed during his long stay in *Italy*, made him judge it necessary to watch carefully against the beginnings of that disease, which is like a green Sickness in Religion ([Burnet 1685](#), p. 174).

The grandeur of Catholic music-making was considered a potent vector for the spiritual "infection" of impressionable Protestant audiences, exposing them to the threat of sin and even conversion to a false religion. Discussing Saint Augustine's Catholic conversion, the English Jesuit Thomas Wright, for instance, remarked that "musicke hath a certaine secret passage into mens soules, & worketh so divinely in the mind that it elevateth the heart miraculously. . ." ([Wright 1620](#), p. 164). Indeed, English travelogues describe a kind of spiritual hypnosis induced by hearing sensuous sacred music in Venice. The Protestant travel writer Fynes Moryson recalled that vocal, string, and wind consorts in Venetian churches had mesmerized the Republic's Catholic listeners, seeming "to rauish the hearers

spiritt from his body”, which intensified religious devotion. Moryson added, perhaps a bit too insistently,

For the nature of musick being not to provoke newe but to eleuate present affections, and the greatest or best sorte Comming to Church for deuotion, such Musick cannot but increase the same (Hughes 1903, pp. 423–24).

Another English Protestant travel writer, Thomas Coryat, famously attended multiple lavish vocal and instrumental performances at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in 1608. Coryat exclaimed that it was the best music he had ever heard. Contradicting Moryson’s implied division between entranced Catholics and unmoved Protestants, Coryat recounted that the music had both ravished and stupefied “all those strangers that never heard the like”, and that he himself had been “rapt up with Saint *Paul* into the third heaven” (Coryat 1611, pp. 250–53).

At the same time, British visitors to Venice were anything but passive receptacles for Italian culture. As often as they stood in awe of—or staunchly resisted—the Catholic musical splendor that they encountered on the European Continent, they also harnessed it to their own ends. Drawing on seventeenth-century diplomatic source materials typically left to political historians, this case study on British envoys to Venice in the early Stuart period details how both English and Northern Italian politicians made strategic use of sacred music-making—particularly vocal performance in local nunneries—to influence their dealings with foreign states, as well as how English diplomats in the Italian peninsula surveilled Catholic musical devotions in their covert correspondences to communicate information about international affairs. Historians of early modern statecraft and confessional politics have traditionally treated the arts as peripheral to the more official bureaucratic concerns of government agents. Meanwhile, musicological scholarship on this period almost never centers the experiences and exploits of politicians who participated in musical events. My musicological foray into British and Venetian state papers illustrates how musical activity and political work were, in fact, thoroughly imbricated within the daily mechanics of cross-confessional ambassadorship. In connecting the diplomatic dots between music, religion, and geopolitics, I seek to further recent efforts in the New Diplomatic History to highlight the contributions of women and artistic practice within broader histories of international relations.

Secondary literature on seventeenth-century Anglo-Venetian diplomatic exchange has, until now, relegated women to the margins of the historical narrative, and these studies almost never mention music. Diplomatic history, in its study of early modern diplomatic practice, has long prioritized the most formal communications and legalistic negotiations made among a small circle of elite men designated as official representatives of European polities. This strain of political history overlooks how cultures of diplomacy have historically shaped international relations. The New Diplomatic History has shifted scholarly attention onto how diplomacy was enacted through music-making and other forms of cultural expression such as literature and the visual arts (for an overview, see Sowerby and Hennings 2017; for music and diplomacy, see Ahrendt et al. 2014 and Ramel and Prévost-Thomas 2018). The greater part of this scholarship analyzes early modern musicking as a metaphor for political power and international relations. I move beyond these conceptions of music as a representational object by considering diplomatic engagement with music as a tangible practice of foreign policy. Diplomatic history’s cultural turn has also thrown light on the roles of early modern women as influential diplomatic agents (e.g., Matheson-Pollock et al. 2018; Sluga and James 2016; Sowerby and Hennings 2017). Research in this area focuses on the political activities of monarchs, aristocrats, ambassadors (or, wives of ambassadors), and other elite secular figures. To this diplomatic milieu, I here add musicians in nunneries.

In recent decades, music historians have, analogously, eschewed a traditional musicological emphasis on the works of well-known male composers by reconstructing the vibrant, multidimensional aural world of early modern nunneries. These studies have revealed convents to be major sites of cultural production and civic pride throughout

seventeenth-century Italy, where monastic women performed in their external churches, made music in more private devotions, played a variety of instruments, composed their own music, staged musical convent dramas, and taught and took music lessons (see, e.g., [Monson 1995](#); [Kendrick 1996](#); [Reardon 2002](#); [Glixon 2017](#)). So rich and magnetic were these activities that outside listeners clamored to hear musical performances in convents, and the Tridentine Church continuously worked to suppress this musicking. As we shall see, singing nuns still managed to make their voices heard. Musicological studies on early modern Italian nunneries typically investigate the influence of Italian convent musicians on local politics and on the soundscape of Counter-Reformation Italy. Venetian and Milanese nunneries were filled with women from all social strata, but many of them came from powerful patriciate families. Cloistered women in these cities exercised considerable political agency as both musical performers and patrons. They drove Italian musical innovation, shaped the ritualization of local religious culture, and brought prestige to their city-states by acting as symbols of public piety and musical divinity (see [Kendrick 1996](#); [Glixon 2017](#)). How their music-making was deployed in international and cross-confessional relations, however, remains all but unexplored.

## 2. The Stuart *Serenissima*

Upon the accession of King James I in 1603, the late Queen Elizabeth I's suspension of Anglo-Venetian diplomacy was lifted as the two polities exchanged resident ambassadors for the first time in forty-four years. For Venice, this new age of diplomatic accord presented a possibility that British merchants might abandon direct trade with the Levant and instead rely on Venice as their most easterly port, which never came to be. Reopening formal diplomacy offered the Stuarts a potential ally in resistance to Spanish Habsburg domination of Western Europe, as well as an opportunity to support British Levantine trade and disseminate Protestant propaganda throughout Northern Italy. The restoration of Anglo-Venetian diplomatic accord seemed auspicious to Italian Protestant refugees in Venice, renewing their long-held conviction that the Reformation could be introduced into Italy by way of the Republic ([Brown 1900](#), preface; [Pirillo 2018](#), chp. 7).

The first Jacobean resident ambassador in Venice, Henry Wotton, was eager to establish his embassy as a bastion of Protestantism in Italy and drive a wedge between Venice and Rome when the Papal Curia placed the Republic under an Interdict in 1606. This was a lofty ambition, given that Protestant ambassadors were forbidden from meeting with Venetian patricians or their employees outside of official audiences. Wotton's home was formally off-limits to much of Venetian society, but he did manage to circumvent this restriction in many ways. He cultivated close relationships with Italian religious dissidents such as Paolo Sarpi, and his embassy chapel operated for years as a clandestine Anglican church. Nevertheless, the embassy's evangelizing efforts were ultimately subdued, and by the time Wotton's first successor, Dudley Carleton, embarked on his mission in 1610, English foreign policy had been redirected toward Anglo-Spanish relations ([Brown 1904](#), preface; [Pirillo 2018](#), chp. 7).

As war raged throughout Europe during the Caroline period and Interregnum, England's diplomatic missions to Venice became more erratic. Resident ambassadors who were posted in the Republic tended to sojourn in Savoy for long intervals in the interest of supporting the Reformation elsewhere in Northern Italy, forming other alliances against the Habsburgs, and restoring Frederick V of the Palatinate to his throne. The 1625 marriage of King Charles I to Henrietta Maria of France indirectly merged the Stuart and Savoyard dynasties, shifting England's business in Italy more toward the monarchy's kinship with the court of Turin ([Osborne 2002](#), pp. 47–49). England's diplomats in Venice at this time included the resident ambassador Isaac Wake; the Scottish ambassador extraordinary James Hay, First Earl of Carlisle; and the ambassador extraordinary Basil Feilding, Second Earl of Denbigh ([Bell 1990](#), pp. 291–93). England's final ambassador to Venice before the Restoration was Thomas Killigrew, appointed in 1649 as a special envoy to seek support for Prince Charles Stuart's household in Paris ([Vander Motten 2008](#)).

Early Stuart diplomats ostensibly failed to achieve most of their primary objectives in Venice, but these embassies were more than a series of botched political campaigns and unwelcome attempts at Anglican proselytization abroad. British ambassadors to Venice contributed in many ways to the growth of England's emergent global empire, notably through their work as intelligencers and trade consuls. Venice was a major international trading post, a uniquely cosmopolitan metropolis, and the key to England's infiltration of Mediterranean commerce. England's ascendancy within global commercial hierarchies—such as within international markets for currants, grains, oil, fish, textiles, and glass—threatened the Republic's hegemony over Eastern Mediterranean trade relations in an age of European expansion and proto-globalization (Fusaro 2015).

Stuart envoys to Venice persistently protected the interests of British merchants abroad, such as by securing advantageous trade concessions and resolving maritime conflicts provoked by British privateers. What is more, these diplomats were essentially state-sanctioned intelligence operatives. They were expected to keep an eye on their own compatriots abroad, collect large quantities of information about international affairs, and dispatch a constant stream of written reports to government officials worldwide. They procured this intel through their own daily social activities and also by managing multinational rings of informants. This accumulation of knowledge about the wider world, along with the more general development of British cosmopolitanism and proto-national identity, was crucial to England's imperial expansion (Fusaro 2015, chps. 5–6; Games 2008, chp. 5; Netzloff 2020, chp. 3).

These many endeavors hinged upon the sociality and cultural engagement of embassy personnel (Netzloff 2020, chp. 3). Music-making in Venice played an essential role within the Republic's socio-political infrastructure, and English travel writers repeatedly characterized Venetians as an exceptionally musical people, a view that probably pervaded the English diplomatic corps as well. It was highly convenient and perhaps no accident that several Stuart envoys to Venice had such a pronounced interest in music (see Mailes 2021). Wotton played the viola da gamba, and Feilding was a singer and guitarist. Both regularly went to hear sacred music throughout the lagoon. Killigrew was a playwright and theatre manager who worked to have Italian operas staged in England. His semi-autobiographical comedy *Thomaso, or the Wanderer* mentions English cavaliers going to hear "great Musick" at Vespers services on the Continent (Killigrew 1664, p. 351; Mailes 2021, chp. 3; Smith 1907, p. 218). These agents were skilled listeners and performers on many levels.

Of all British emissaries stationed in seventeenth-century Venice, Wotton looms largest in this case study for multiple reasons. First, sources on his missions have been more comprehensively compiled and analyzed in the large body of scholarship that has been produced on the ambassador's life (e.g., Netzloff 2020; O'Neil 1982; Pirillo 2018; Smith 1907). Second, surviving primary sources on Wotton repeatedly attest to his personal affinity for hearing and making music wherever he went, and his diplomatic dispatches are bursting with observations about music in many different social contexts. Finally, Wotton's case study provides the clearest evidence of an English diplomatic official who successfully incorporated music tourism into his political strategy.

### 3. Whispers at Vespers

Within mere months of his first mission to Venice, Wotton had already made a memorable public display of his keen interest in Catholic musical devotions. The French ambassador Philippe de La Canaye informed the French secretary of state in December 1604 that Wotton had "wanted to see the Christmas ceremonies; but he, too, was easy to see, having climbed up to the Organ loft to witness them from above" ("Il a voulu voir les ceremonies de Noel; mais il s'y est bien fait voir aussi, estant monté aux Orgues pour tout découvrir de là haut. . .") (de La Canaye 1644, p. 447). These were undoubtedly the Republic's fabled Christmas services at Saint Mark's Basilica, at which both ambassadors probably heard polychoral and instrumental music under the direction of the singer and composer Giovanni Croce (see Schiltz 2017, chps. 1 and 13). Wotton would develop a repu-

tation for frequenting musical church services throughout the peninsula. While seemingly at odds with his ardent commitment to the Protestant cause, the ambassador's sacred music tourism was anything but frivolous.

First, Wotton had an acute ability to read the political messaging keyed to different musical choices in the Catholic liturgy, and especially within Venetian ceremonial. In May 1607, for example, the ambassador reported that after negotiating a tense rapprochement between Venice and the pope at the conclusion of the Interdict, the French cardinal François de Joyeuse had received what amounted to a ceremonial silent treatment from the Republic. Wotton wrote in a dispatch to the English diplomat Thomas Edmondès that the cardinal had been denied the privilege of celebrating Mass at San Marco and did so instead at the Basilica of San Pietro di Castello,

... w<sup>th</sup> out musicke, w<sup>th</sup> out noyse of bells or of artigliery at the elevation, w<sup>th</sup> out any forme of benediction or absolution accept the ordinarie of the missal benedicat vobis Deus &c. . . nether I thinke in the memorie of man was there ever knowne so still a day at the conclusion of troubles, nor universally so composed sylence (Wotton 1607, ff. 41v-42r).

Church services were also a convenient setting for clandestine, cross-confessional conversations about sensitive topics such as religion, international politics, and economic policy. In one account by Wotton's friend Izaak Walton, the ambassador supposedly met a priest in Rome who invited Wotton to hear "Vesper Musick" in a Catholic church. Wotton attended at least two of these services, during which he and the priest engaged in a tacit theological debate by passing written notes to one another via the church's choirboys:

Having in Rome made acquaintance with a pleasant Priest, who invited him one Evening to hear their Vesper Musick at Church; the Priest seeing Sir Henry stand obscurely in a corner, sends to him by a Boy of the Quire this question, writ in a small piece of paper, *Where was your Religion to be found before Luther?* To which question Sir Henry presently under-writ, *My Religion was to be found then, where yours is not to be found now, in the written Word of God.* The next Vesper, Sir Henry went purposely to the same Church, and sent one of the Quire boyes with this Question, to his honest, pleasant friend, the Priest; *Do you believe all those many Thousands of poor Christians were damn'd, that were Excommunicated, because the Pope, and the Duke of Venice, could not agree about their temporal power?* Speak your Conscience. To which he under-writ in French, *Monsieur, excusay moy* (Walton 1670, pp. 52–53).

Cultivating a reputation as a music lover helped Wotton to facilitate covert exchanges with Catholic politicians who were legally prohibited from entering his home. Should anything go awry in such one-on-one meetings, Wotton could comfortably deny having made any incriminating statements, as there would be no other witnesses to counter his claims (O'Neil 1982, pp. 138–39). Venetian magistrates became particularly aware that Wotton was a devoted fan of singing nuns: he was a regular at musical services in the Venetian church of San Girolamo, which routinely resounded with the voices of its Augustinian sisters. In April 1606, Wotton went against diplomatic protocol and requested a private meeting there with the Venetian secretary Giovanni Carlo Scaramelli. Scaramelli urged Wotton to instead communicate directly with the Collegio, but the Council of Ten permitted Scaramelli to move forward with the meeting. Two days later, the Italian secretary recounted to the Collegio that Wotton had arranged to talk with him on a Sunday evening,

... after Vespers, and before Compline. . . in the church of San Girolamo, which is near the home of said Ambassador, and where he goes privately almost every time those nuns sing. Having arrived at his request I found his secretary who had been waiting for me and apologized that the Ambassador would be somewhat delayed by his visit with the French Ambassador. Thus, not long after the French Ambassador departed, that of England came into the church, where hardly anyone was present, as those nuns had not sung in there since Easter.

... dopo il Vespero, et avanti la Compieta. ... in Chiesa di San Hier<sup>mo</sup>. ch'è vicina alla casa del detto Amb<sup>r</sup> dove egli v'è privatamente quasi tutte le volte che quelle monache cantano. Conforme a quel'ordine essendomi i'ò andato trovai il secr<sup>o</sup> che mi aspettava per iscusar l'Amb<sup>r</sup> se fosse tardato alquanto perche era sopravvenuto à sua visitatione il S<sup>r</sup> Amb<sup>r</sup> di Francia. Così dòpo non molto l'Amb<sup>r</sup> di Francia parti, et quello d'Inghilterra viene in Chiesa nella quale non ci era quasi persona per non cantar quelle monache da Pasqua in qua (Scaramelli 1606, ff. 52r-v).

The conversation that followed allowed Wotton to plainly express his dissatisfaction that Venice would not lift its anchorage tax on English shipping, from which Flemish, French, and Spanish merchants were already exempt. Wotton had been silently protesting this stalemate by refusing to visit the doge's palace or accept callers in his residence. In addition to voicing his complaint about the tax, Wotton boasted about England's extensive network of spies embedded within the Papal court and gave Scaramelli a letter to read aloud to the Senate with important news about Sarpi and the pope, written by an intelligencer in Rome. Wotton also refuted the Papal nuncio's recent claim that the English embassy had already offered Venice full support in the king's name, as Wotton hoped to convey that securing goodwill from England would be to the Republic's advantage during the Interdict. Wotton obviously never succeeded in turning Venice toward the "reformed" religion, but in 1607, the Venetian Senate did release British ships from the anchorage tax, a considerable trade victory for England (Brown 1900, preface; Brown 1904, preface; O'Neil 1982, pp. 92–93, 138–39).

In November of that year, Wotton requested yet another meeting at San Girolamo between Vespers and Compline with the Venetian secretary Zaccaria Rosso, this time to implore the Republic to arrest the English soldier and spy William Turner for communicating with an agent of the Archduke of Austria. Turner was detained a few days later (Brown 1900, nos. 609–12; Chaney and Wilks 2014, pp. 155–56). Wotton's appreciation for the visual arts similarly served as a pretense for his private meetings with Catholic operatives. The following December, he organized a private meeting with the Jesuit scholar and Papal diplomat Antonio Possevino at the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo to discuss the state of England's relations with Rome. Wotton later justified the meeting to the Collegio by insisting that though he could not admit a Jesuit into his own house, he was already in the habit of studying certain paintings in that church and so would have been there to greet Possevino on that day anyway (Brown 1900, no. 641).

In most Venetian churches, it would have been rare to hear nuns sing anything beyond chant or simple polyphony, as local authorities tightly restricted public musical performance by cloistered women. Wotton probably heard the nuns of San Girolamo chanting the Divine Office, possibly with *falsobordone* and organ accompaniment. On feast days, Wotton might have heard polyphonic works sung by professional male vocal soloists or a priestly choir, accompanied by instruments such as the organ, spinet, viol, and theorbo. Some reports from the early seventeenth century suggest that the sisters there sang more complex polyphony despite governmental restrictions, which the English ambassador might have heard as well (see Glixon 2017, chps. 2–3 and 5). The nuns of San Girolamo were also presenting convent plays around the time of Wotton's embassies (Glixon 2017, p. 252). Whether or not Wotton genuinely enjoyed what he heard at San Girolamo, his habit of lingering there on the pretext of musical tourism enabled him to exchange important information across confessional lines.

Wotton's eagerness to reach across the confessional divide by way of his musical interests never made him seriously vulnerable to the "green sickness" of Catholicism, though his embassy guests were certainly aware of the risks. One report from around February 1609 gives an unflattering portrait of another traveler in Italy, Francis Mitchell, who had "rendered himself suspicious in all places where he came." This shifty character had encountered the ambassador in Venice:

At Lyons I asked him [Mitchell] whether he had seen Sir Harry Wotton, his Majesty's Ambassador, at his passing by that place; he answered that he had

and that the Ambassador had entertained him very scurvily, adding further that the Ambassador had been lately sick; and Mr Winston asking him what his Lordship ailed, he [Mitchell] answered nothing but that he lodged too near the nuns (Owen 1970, p. 24).

The intoxicating musical power of Italian religious women is a running theme in the English correspondence, even when they were not actively making that music themselves. One anonymous account from 1612—almost certainly written by one of Carleton’s staffers—tells of a musically entrancing *pizzochera*, or lay religious woman, based at San Girolamo by the name of “Archangela”. She was a follower of Saint Catherine of Siena and had allegedly begun to generate miracles, such as stigmata and sweating blood on her palms and forehead. This author reported

... That she doth every day more or lesse fall into extasies wherin she continueth sometymes five dayes or more together; That during these trances ther is smelt about her a most fragrant smel of odors, & y<sup>e</sup> most exquisite musick vocall & instrumentall that can be heard; That she reporteth, after comming to her self that she hath been in Spirit at Jerusalem & other holy places, where she hath conferred with many holy saints... (Anonymous February 1612, f. 116v).

Carleton wrote about this “miraculous maide” as well, mainly because the local hype surrounding her divine gifts became a source of tension between the Republic’s civic and religious leadership. In January 1612, Carleton informed the secretary of state, Robert Cecil, First Earl of Salisbury, that Archangela had become famous for her trances, during which “there was smelt about her sweet savors, and sometimes heard a harmonie of sounds and songs...” In an effort to convince skeptics, particularly within the Venetian government, that she was indeed exhibiting these peculiarities, the Patriarch of Venice, Francesco Vendramin, had invited the French ambassador and other spectators to see the woman for themselves in a local church. The event, Carleton reported to Cecil, had been underwhelming, and the doge and Collegio had dismissed it as superstitious, sensationalist nonsense. Whether Carleton saw the demonstration in person is unclear, though his extensive description of it indicates that he likely numbered among Vendramin’s invited guests (Carleton January 1612, ff. 24r-v).

For the most part, Carleton’s correspondence portrays musicking in local convents as nothing more than an irksome extension of an already chaotic and idolatrous Catholic soundscape surrounding his own pious Protestant embassy. He complained to his friend and political advisor John Chamberlain about “singing Nuns, and preaching friars who beat downe the pulpits after the old manner” (Carleton March 1612, f. 142r). He nicknamed Catholic friars “pulpit hornets” and in Lent 1612 declared that the embassy’s own chapel services had “ended w<sup>th</sup> as little noyse as they began” (Carleton April 1612, f. 218v; Carleton 1614, f. 127v). Carleton almost certainly lived next door to the Cappuccine di Cannaregio convent, about which hardly anything is known. In June 1612, he informed the English politician John Finet that his household in Venice was “in daunger to be rung out of the parish by certaine Capuchine Nuns who have planted themselves at the... house over the way, and waste not to tingle their poore bell, day nor night” (Carleton June 1612, f. 64r). The ambassador sent Chamberlain yet another disgruntled update that July, writing that he and his household were hoping to move to another part of town, “being weary of the Jangling of the Nuns bell, and of having so many masses sayde every morning under ovr noses” (Carleton July 1612, f. 125v). Carleton’s language in these letters reiterates multiple tropes of Catholic “noise pollution” that had been fundamental to English Reformationist rhetoric. Much like Bedell’s earlier crusade against Italian musical excess, Carleton’s defensive against what he heard as a continuous onslaught of Catholic cacophony draws proto-national boundaries along confessional lines. Carleton’s readers at home were invited to imagine a clear distinction between the ambassador’s righteously quiet English space and his sonically and therefore spiritually pestilent Italian diplomatic outpost.



#### 4. Diplomats and Virtuose

Carleton's contentions aside, the musical brilliance of some exceptional monastic singers brought great delight and wonder to international audiences throughout Northern Italy. Venetian and Savoyard government officials recognized the political value of these star performers and utilized their talents as an instrument of diplomacy. This was certainly the case in 1612, when Wotton ventured into Savoy to renew amicable relations with the court of Turin after England had refused a dual marriage treaty proposed between the houses of Stuart and Savoy. He also hoped to build a defensive coalition with Savoy, an ultimately unsuccessful enterprise (see Bianchi and Wolfe 2017, chps. 1–2; Loomie 2004). One Papal news item from Venice reveals that the Savoyard government concluded the affair that June by escorting Wotton and his entourage to hear the renowned composer, singer, instrumentalist, and Lateran Canoness Claudia Sessa at the Patrician convent of Santa Maria Annunciata in Milan:

From Milan they write that the English ambassador, having arrived there from Turin, has now been visited with his most noble retinue by the Ambassador of Savoy, who brought him and his whole party to the Church of the Annunciata to have them hear *Donna* Claudia Sessa sing, who is such an exceptional singer.

Di Milano scrivono, che li Ambre Inglese arrivato ivi da Torino ora stato visitato con nobiliss.<sup>o</sup> Corteggio dall' Ambre di Savoia, che lo condusse con tutta la sua Comitativa alla Chiesa dell' Annuntiatia per farli sentir cantare Donna Claudia Sessa, che è così rara Cantatrice (Anonymous June 1612, f. 479v).

It is entirely possible that word had spread about Wotton's frequent visits to San Girolamo in Venice and so Savoyard diplomatic agents contrived to stun or at least charm the English ambassador with Sessa's dazzling music. At the very least, records of Wotton's missions to Turin certainly confirm that he had been treated to many musical entertainments during his stay there (Morales 2014, chp. 5). Judging from Sessa's few surviving compositions, Wotton probably heard her performing virtuosic monodic works for soprano and basso continuo in the *stile moderno*. She was lauded for her intricate vocal ornamentation, specifically her *trilli* and *accenti* (Kendrick 1996, pp. 139–40, 233–406).

Just as the songstress in Robert Bargrave's account expressed a wide range of emotion through her impassioned, highly ornamented style of declamation, vocal ornamentation in Sessa's monodic compositions serves as an expressive vehicle for the transference of poetic affect from singer to audience. In Sessa's *Occhi io vissi di voi* (poetic text by Angelo Grillo), for example, Mary's musical meditation on the body and death of Christ deploys a variety of ornamental gestures to create a dramatic contrast between ecstasy and despair. When the Blessed Virgin exclaims that the Crucifixion sustains her "to the point of torment but not to that of rejoicing" ("che mi nutre al tormento e mi manca al gioire"), extensive *accenti* and vocal divisions lend temporary buoyancy to the word "gioire" (Figure 1). In performance, this might have evoked the sound of laughter. The singer's fleeting joy, however, quickly plunges into a more dissonant descending series of *trilli* over a bass pedal point, as she continues, "in order to bring living death to my martyrdom" ("per far vivace morte al mio martire"). Sessa could have also used the bleating effect of the *trillo* to imitate the sound of breathless, anguished sobbing (see Elliott 2006, p. 25). This affective shift would have abruptly activated for both singer and auditors—to quote Wotton—a "change of y.<sup>e</sup> Moode as Musicians speake. . ." (Wotton 1638, f. 284v). Sessa's foreign audiences, therefore, might have felt corporeally tethered to the peaks and valleys of her biblical character's deep emotional journey. This could have inspired in her listeners a heightened sympathy with Catholic Marian devotion and, by extension, with the Italian polities where such devotions had become inextricable from public life.

Di D. Claudia Sessa. 13 Sopra gli Occhi.

Cchi io vissi di voi i mentre voi fosti voi ma  
 spenti poi viuo di vostra morte In felice alimen to che mi  
 natre al tormen to e mi manca al gioi re al gioi-  
 re per far viuace morte al mio martire al mio  
 marti re.

**Figure 1.** Claudia Sessa, *Occhi io vissi di voi* (Magni 1613, p. 13), by permission of the Museo internazionale e biblioteca della musica di Bologna.

One of Wake's dispatches from the late 1620s further reveals how performances by virtuosic cloistered musicians were instrumentalized to impress foreign dignitaries in Italy. In an April 1628 account for the English secretary of state, Edward Conway, Wake described the Republic's extravagant musical reception of Ferdinando II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Wake recounted that, among other musical entertainments, the duke was escorted to Murano to "heare two Nunnes sing, who are accounted excellent." The duke then compensated both women with 100 pistoles (Wake April 1628, ff. 183r–184v).

These singers may have been the famous Benedictine "Suor Gratiola" and "Suor Regina" at the church of Santi Marco e Andrea di Murano. Despite strict government regulations on their musicking, the nuns of this church sometimes sang and played polyphony with special license. The sisters there were widely known for their musical excellence, espe-

cially in vocal performance. The duke most likely heard them singing organ-accompanied *concertato* motets, or, motets sung in the *stile moderno*. Alethea Howard and two of her gentlewomen had illegally entered the Muranese church to hear these two singers in September 1622. The countess had requested to hear the two nuns sing privately, assuring the abbess that the Bishop of Torcello had granted licensed approval for this. Days later, the abbess was distressed to discover that she had been tricked: the countess had procured no license of any kind (Glixon 2017, pp. 218–33).

Wake's 1628 letter to Conway does not mention that during one banquet in the Arsenale, the Florentine duke was also treated to a musical setting of Giulio Strozzi's sonnet cycle *I cinque fratelli* by none other than Claudio Monteverdi (Carter and Chew 2001). The piece's absence from Wake's report is a striking reminder that celebrated performers—and specifically women vocalists—often figured more prominently in early modern musical events than did the works of now-famous male composers, and that composer-centric musicological scholarship often fails to consider the full socio-political significance of the historical contexts in which certain compositions were originally heard.

Sacred musical attractions were standard fare whenever the Republic welcomed distinguished foreign guests, and the musical continuities were not lost on Wake. Notably, Wake remarked that Hay was received much like Ferdinando II de' Medici when the Scottish ambassador visited a few months later in August 1628. Hay's mission had been somewhat unexpected for the Venetian government, which had brought the Scottish earl some annoyance as they scrambled to prepare for his arrival, but Venetian politicians more than made up for their hasty preparations with a grandiose musical reception (Schreiber 1984, pp. 111–12). Wake informed Conway that Hay had been greeted with a hundred-gun military salute and then

... conducted w<sup>th</sup> greate pompe and infinite concourse of people to the Ducall pallace, adorned w<sup>th</sup> magnificence fit to receave an Emp:<sup>r</sup>, where drummes, trumpets, & all sorte of Musique did drowne much compliment. . . (Wake November 1628, f. 81v)

The Scotsman was later "entertayned w<sup>th</sup> the Musique of S<sup>t</sup>. Marco" (Wake November 1628, f. 85v). In this instance, Hay might have heard the Cappella Marciana performing something composed or directed by Monteverdi, the basilica's *maestro di cappella* between 1613 and 1644. Monteverdi's Venetian liturgical music cannot conclusively be connected to many specific venues or events, but his vocal and instrumental compositions associated with this period display a wide range of musical styles, from pieces for *cori spezzati* to few-voice *concertato* repertoires. Giovanni Rovetta served as Monteverdi's assistant choirmaster at this time and composed a great deal of sacred music as well (see Whenham and Wistreich 2007, chps. 9 and 11).

## 5. Conclusions

Travel writers and other audiences in Venice might have tasted divine transcendence thanks to the astounding abilities of local church musicians, but politicians, it seems, always kept one foot firmly on the ground. Italian and English emissarial correspondences demonstrate that government agents on both sides of the English Channel shared a shrewd, calculating orientation toward devotional musicking throughout Northern Italy. For English ambassadors in Venice, attending to and participating in Italian modalities of sacred musicking was an important component of their diplomatic missions, and Italian politicians tapped into the richness of their own local sacred music traditions in order to impress, if not move or intimidate, eminent visitors from foreign governments. In multiple instances, it was the captivating talents of singing nuns that did the trick.

If following the exploits of just one diplomatic community based in Venice has taken me on a veritable "grand tour" of so many unexpected musical sites, one can only imagine the vivid musical itineraries that might be reconstructed by consulting a more substantial and varied collection of early modern state papers. This case study joins a growing body of scholarship on the musical life of seventeenth-century nunneries that has begun to

redraw the soundscape of early modern Italy, expanding outward from the domains of the most celebrated canonical composers, such as Monteverdi's San Marco, to also bring alive dynamic musicking in convents and other formerly overlooked hubs of musical creativity. Furthermore, this article introduces music-filled nunneries into the New Diplomatic History as a critical setting for and instrument of international diplomacy.

Of course, British diplomats in Venice heard many other forms of music-making in the lagoon as well. They wrote home about everything from musical military spectacle at sea to the bewitchingly seductive singing and lute-playing of Italian courtesans, whom Englishmen regarded as Catholic musical sirens of a different but not entirely unrelated variety (see Mailes 2021). The present study examines British diplomatic interaction with just one sector of sacred musicking in Northern Italy. However, the composers, performers, and artistic practices associated with such musical devotions were also deeply intertwined with the world of secular music. British travelers could also, for example, expect to hear virtuosic vocal music in the *stile rappresentativo* at the theatre and at social gatherings in Venetian *ridotti* (or, private salons). It will be well worth exploring the cross-confessional, international politics of musical activity in these spaces as well.

For all the time that both British and Italian statesmen spent listening to the musical stylings of cloistered women, seventeenth-century diplomatic sources reveal almost nothing about the perspectives of the performers themselves. Women hardly ever make an appearance in the English diplomatic correspondence unless they somehow became the focus of notable political controversy. How much awareness or agency did Venetian, Milanese, and other monastic women musicians have when their singing voices entered the international political dialogue? How did these interactions shape the political, religious, and artistic roles that early modern Italian nunneries played in the civic life of their surrounding city-states? Did these singing nuns have their own diplomatic agenda to push through their musicking? With any luck, further archival research might one day tell us their side of the story.

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