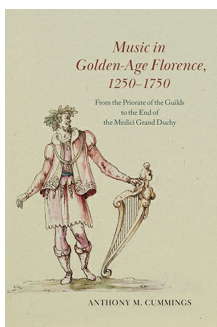


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Anthony M. Cummings

Music in Golden-Age Florence, 1250–1750

Review by: Robert L. Kendrick



Authors: Anthony M. Cummings

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As Anthony Cummings notes in the introduction to his book covering some seven centuries of Florentine music history, there is no single book, even in Italian, addressing this topic, although numerous specialized studies (including Cummings' own prolific works) focus on individual places or institutions. With an enormous amount of synthetic work, he has sought to remedy this lack and to fill in the transitions between political regimes (Republic and Grand-Duchy, or the always neglected later Seicento) by highlighting first individual composers and then the institutions that supported them.

The wide-ranging nineteen chapters start in the Duecento and continue until the end of Medici rule (not exactly coincident with the book's title, and leaving aside the issues in the transitions – not least the musical ones – to Habsburg rule). Its four large sections go over the late Middle Ages (as Cummings understands them), with two then devoted to the Renaissance as traditionally defined, and one to the Baroque. If at first the attention is given to individual composers (e.g. Francesco Landini), the later parts of the book take up his stated task of institutions, with a laudable balance between seemingly secular and sacred spheres.

One wishes there had been a bit more space for such issues as the origins of the madrigal in the early Cinquecento, or for Medici musical/sanctoral devotion to St. John the Baptist, but given the scale of the work, this was probably not possible; this latter cult flowed throughout Florentine life from the Middle Ages to the Baroque with important musical

reflections from the work of Francesco Corteccia [1504-1571] onwards. Similarly, Niall Atkinson's work on the power of sonic and musical phenomena in the Quattrocento city and beyond would be a helpful addition, highlighting as it does Florence as sounding object, of which many sounds were pitched and some were in chant or polyphony. Chapter 8 (pp. 109-121) provides a strong summary of the *canto carnascialesco* in the context of the city's institutions, certainly an urban genre in terms of production, distribution, and influence, if not necessarily in its specific ideology.

There also might be a missed opportunity in this text to have considered the sacred/secular overlap found in the retextings of Carnival songs as sacred *laude*, and possibly even the inverse (Cinquecento *laude* are treated on pp. 101-107; it is a measure of how much the overall discussion of the genre is based on those sources that have musical notation, i.e. the later ones, as opposed to the five pages devoted to the Trecento and Quattrocento examples). It can be hoped that the new ERC-funded "Laudare" project, led by Francesco Zimei and based at the University of Trent and the Gran Sasso Science Institute, will give us a fuller picture of the Florentine *lauda's* intertextuality, oral transmission (which overall figures more prominently in Cummings' earlier chapters than in his later ones), and the extra-urban connections of the genre.

In general, the intellectual background to the Quattrocento, with the academies and Neoplatonism receives better treatment than the early Cinquecento, and one might have wished for some recent work by Giuseppe Gerbino on this latter to have been mentioned here. The well-trod (to music historians, at any rate) paths around the later Cinquecento academies and their relationship to the two Camerate are, however, well-covered, with succinct explanations of Giovanni de' Bardi, Vincenzo Galilei, and the 1589 Medici festivities. There has been a good deal of now-established work by James Saslow, Suzanne Cusick, Nina Treadwell and others around issues of gender, power, masculine display, and slightly longer consideration of these issues might help bring the discussion up to date. Certainly early opera (pp. 225-262) gets a full and solid, if not notably innovative, treatment: it is a bit disappointing to finish with the upshot of this moment in the genre's history as only reflective of «[Baroque music's] energy» (p. 262).

One real strength of the book is its balanced treatment throughout, both in musical production across cultural divides (for instance, after 1630) and in its overall tone. Cummings should be given credit for trying to trace institutional and aesthetic continuity in sacred and secular music throughout the second half of the Seicento, chapters 16-18 (pp. 263-329), even if much of the emphasis is on those Florentine operas which have some kind of foothold in the specialist canon. His brief section on the important genre of the sacred oratorio (pp. 305-310) is quite insightful in terms of the form's Florentine public(s) and its strong relationship to confraternities such as that of the Arcangelo Raffaello, an institution well-known to historians via the work of Konrad Eisenbichler and others.

The fifty-odd musical examples – in additions to analyses of vocal texts – are well-placed throughout the chapters, and Cummings should be praised for his special care in drawing on the work of others when venturing into areas outside his own specialty (the early Cinquecento). The examples are not encumbered by heavy or technical musical analyses, although their number can slow down the book's readability for non-specialists. For pedagogical purposes, though, the lack of a CD with music examples – or even of recommended CD/You Tube recordings – will make the book harder to use for non-specialists. In a wider sense, this is particularly important in that one can no longer assume, whether among European or North American students, a basic knowledge of the musical or cultural landmarks of urban history. In that light, some of its general historical explanation will appear quite basic to historians, written as it seems to be with North American (music student) readers in mind, who will not be as familiar with concepts of the Florentine polity or of Seicento changes in overall aesthetics.

Cummings has put enormous amount of care into this large-scale survey, and the results are evident. The production design and music examples have been carried out with clear precision (there are even color plates reproducing some of the other illustrations), and Cummings has more than done justice to the task that he set out for himself.