 CHAPTER 14

Lost Voices: Women and Music at the Time of the Catholic Monarchs

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The ‘phenomenon of women’s invisibility’ or the systematic omission of women from historical accounts, making it seem ‘as though only men have participated in events thought worthy of preservation’ (Kleinberg 1988: ix), inevitably results in the search for scattered traces in documentary records of women’s position in history and their cultural status. This phenomenon of lost women’s voices is pertinent to the history of music at the time of the Catholic Monarchs. Most of the studies of music in the early modern Iberian world have focused on important institutions—such as the royal court, noble houses and cathedrals—as well as on composers, musical genres and written music. The application of categories such as ‘composer’ and ‘musical work’ to the study of early modern music would inevitably lead to women’s musical activities being overlooked; but, as Robert Darnton has suggested: ‘we constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock’ (Darnton 1984: 4). In the period in question, the teaching of music was based on oral and memorized practices, and the boundaries between performance and composition were far from clear. Given both the problem of women’s professional status in a period when women were usually classified according to their condition in relation to men as girls, maidens, wives, widows or nuns,¹ and the moral restrictions imposed on women, sources and methodologies other than those employed in a creation-centred musicology are required to study the role played by women in musical life during this period. Women do not remain completely invisible or ‘silent’ in written records, but rather are indirectly reflected (as ‘in a three-way mirror, when what one

¹ These were the five types of women established by Francesc Eiximenis in his Llibre de les dones (c. 1396): ‘La segona part tracta delles en special segons cinc maneres de dones: car algunes son infantes. Altres donzelles. Altres maridades. Altres vidues: el altres religioses’ (Eiximenis 1495: s.f., ‘tabula’). Juan Luis Vives’s treatise of 1524 is structured into three books on maidens, married women and widows (Vives 1528), while the whole of Luis de León’s La perfecta casada (1584) is dedicated to married women (León 1584). Juan de la Cerda’s late sixteenth-century treatise on the status of women is divided into four sections devoted to maidens, wives, widows and nuns (Cerda 1599).
sees is a reflection of a reflection of a reflection’), making it necessary to read between the lines (Erdmann 1999: xxi).

Women can become more visible in history when it is approached from the perspective of everyday life (Vigil 1994: 2). Thus the close analysis of written records that document oral traditions, such as literary texts and inquisitorial records, can afford a glimpse of women’s musical activities in the early modern period. Methodologies used to record popular culture, termed by Peter Burke ‘oblique approaches’, are very useful when writing women’s history, for women’s history, like popular culture, is ‘an elusive quarry’ (Burke 1978: 65). It might be thought that the absence of women from historical records is motivated by their confinement to the domestic milieu. The points of overlap between the private and the public—those semi-private spaces—as well as those between the written and the oral, not only help to make women’s musical practices more visible, as well as more audible, but can also offer a window onto the musical culture of the age. In other words, the musical life at the time of the Catholic Monarchs can be approached through the broadening of ‘the entire field of historical research’ involved in exploring the history of women (Kleinberg 1988: xi; Bueno Domínguez 1995: 296–97).

An important angle that is often overlooked is that of religious history. It has been argued that ‘Christianity was the most important source of ideas about women for sixteenth-century Europeans’, because ‘none of the major intellectual movements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries’ (humanism, Reform and Counter-Reformation) changed ‘the Christian ideal for women—silence, obedience, and chastity’ (Erdmann 1999: ix–xii; see also Marshall 1989: 2). James Amelang also draws attention to the relevance of studying religious history in order to approach the history of women, particularly in Spain, as ‘religion provided women with a rich and expressive vocabulary, and served as a system of social communication in which, for diverse reasons, women were distinguished as especially active participants’. Mysticism, as a religious phenomenon that emerged in the sixteenth century, gave women in Spain a greater protagonism than anywhere else in Europe (Haliczer 2002: 8; see also Knighton 2010). This broader ‘public’ picture involved a negotiation between real life and appearance at every level. Manuel Peña points out that the cultural history of daily life can be analysed as a ‘space of mediation between the individual and society, between being and having-to-be, between wearing and appearing,

—— Amelang 1990: 191: ‘la religión puso a disposición de las mujeres un vocabulario rico y expresivo, y sirvió como sistema de comunicación social, en el que, por diversas razones, las mujeres se distinguieron como participantes especialmente eficaces’. Translations into English in this essay are my own.