

**‘SHE DREW FORTH ITS STRONGEST SOUNDS’:
TRACING THE HISTORICAL THROUGHLINE OF WOMEN HARPISTS**

by

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For Lucrezia

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ABSTRACT

The cultural value placed on the harp today, as the instrument hiding graceful young women in the back of orchestras, is uniquely gendered. While there have been studies done on the feminization of harps and harpists, the focus has been on instruments and performers in the late eighteenth century and beyond. This thesis examines the harp as a gendered instrument in the centuries before 1700, through a quantitative iconographical study, a review of harpists in medieval *romance* and conduct literature, and a case study of Lucrezia Urbana, a harpist active in Mantua 1603–1608, through archival documentation.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Harp has been considered a “woman’s instrument” for centuries. As a professional modern and historical harpist, I am personally invested in and endlessly curious about the history of my instrument. The exceptional gendering of harpists in direct relation to the organology of their instruments has both annoyed and intrigued me since age ten, when my first teacher told me that if I learned nothing else from her, that I should remember to marry a man who could move my harp. This oddly gendered advice, followed by years of conversations about being pigeonholed into a gendered stereotype with other harpists, has motivated my examination of women’s placement in the history of the harp. Once I began to study historical instruments and early music, the occasional harpist from the past would drift into my awareness: Dorette Spohr, when I studied single-action pedal techniques; Costanza de Ponte Rossi, when I looked for music by harpist composers; Bieris de Romans when I accompanied *chanson*. These names hinted that women may have always been professional harpists, although the lack of detailed information is consistent with most women in music history.

When I first encountered the name Lucrezia Urbana, I had just decided on the subject for my first Master’s thesis in historical harp performance: an analysis of the printed errors in four editions of Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*. Urbana has been described as the person who “probably,” “most likely,” and “presumably” played the harp solo and continuo in *L’Orfeo*, generally considered the world’s first opera. As a trained modern harpist, I was aware of the difficulties composers encounter when writing for the harp, and the accepted practice of harpists changing or rewriting parts to be playable.¹ As a historical harp student preparing to play *L’Orfeo* and deciding on a thesis subject, my professor suggested I look at the original 1609 and 1615 editions of the opera and compare Monteverdi’s harp solo with the 1998 edition the school supplied. The seventeenth-century editions were riddled with unplayable typos and errors, and I did not agree with the 1998 edition either. It became clear that this was an early example of a harp part that would have been adapted by the harpist who originally performed it. In order to play the most historically-informed adaptation possible, I would need to consider what that first harpist may have played, based on what their technical and musical level was.

¹ Very few people, for instance, play the Waltz of the Flowers solo in Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker* as printed, although it has never been reprinted to reflect what we actually play.

Thus, this current thesis was inspired by encountering this historical figure, a woman named Lucrezia Urbana, in an important historical moment. Her obvious talent, coupled with her employment at the Mantuan court, led to questions about who she actually was. These uncertainties included whether she really was the only female instrumentalist in Mantua, and if there were other women whose names in Mantua or elsewhere who had been forgotten and their legacies neglected. How unique was this person and this moment in time?

To explore these questions, I decided to contextualize the study of Urbana using several distinct approaches, from pictorial evidence of women harpists across several centuries to specific characters in literature, before using my lived experience as a historical harpist to consider Urbana as an individual performer. Until now, musicologists—not harpists—have written about Urbana in the context of her playing the harp solo.

Throughout this thesis, I use cisgendered definitions of “woman” and “man” as well as the terms “feminine” and “masculine.” Though the cisgender assumption is by far the most common in this type of historical research, it necessarily excludes people who identify as neither, both, or transgender. While I have been unable to avoid this tacit exclusion, I have chosen to avoid the term “female” when discussing the women in this study as much as I can, and continue to consider how to write about historical figures more inclusively.

As with most women-centric aspects of history, studying the women who played harp throughout time is challenging. Not only were women frequently excluded from contemporary narratives as they were being written and played, but women’s writing, of music as well as literature, was often not published or disseminated at the same rate as men’s. Therefore, while it is crucially important to (re)establish the music of women composers in the canon of Western Classical music, I believe a true feminist musicology must also include the majority of women involved in music making: the performers.

My background in the performance of historical harps is key to understanding how players of these early instruments must have informed and been involved in the evolution of the harp’s physical organology as well as the instrument’s position in society. The cultural value placed on the harp today – as the instrument hiding graceful young women in the back of orchestras – is uniquely gendered.

Research on the harp as a feminine instrument has already been undertaken by modern harpists such as Henry Spiller (2019) and Noël Wan (2021), as well as by musicologists such as

Susan Hallam, Lynn Rogers and Andrea Creech (2008) and Robert Adelson and Jacqueline Letzter (2009). These authors have focused, for good reason, on the hyperfemininity of harpists and their harps in the late 18th century. The late 1700s were a time of intense technological advancements on the harp: larger frames were designed to support metal hooks, pedals, rods, and plates; bass strings were wrapped in wire to strengthen the lowest octaves; soundboards were widened for amplification. Adelson, Letzter, and Wan have made compelling cases for this era as the starting point for the women-dominated harp profession of today, and Spiller has summarized the argument succinctly: “the drawing room harpist was the ideal woman: immobile, serene, and graceful.”² I would add that she was also quiet, hidden behind her own instrument, and continuing an unbroken tradition of women playing the harp while they were forbidden from countless other activities in a strongly patriarchal society. However, missing from current research is a gendered analysis of harps and harpists before 1780. I believe that my studies of early music performance and historical harps make me uniquely qualified to approach these earlier, previously-neglected harpists.

What I will be focusing on in this thesis are the ways in which women have used harp playing to claim autonomy and display agency as legitimate professional instrumentalists within a highly patriarchal society for centuries. Focusing on the harp and its many uses, from simple modal accompaniment to highly technical ensemble and musical literacy-dependent continuo, affords us an opportunity to look into the working conditions of the musical women who were not solo singers or keyboardists. My thesis work will offer an important insight into how women have always been able to navigate and demonstrate their own professional autonomy as instrumentalists, strategically using the historical memory of the harp as a women’s instrument to their advantage in regards to employment.

Performances before the age of recording and video technology are inherently difficult to study, simply due to a lack of consistent written descriptions and realistic artistic visual depictions. If descriptions of performances are lacking in detail, details about performers are even more uncertain. This effect is enhanced when considering women performers, who were written about even less. I have chosen to take three different approaches to my study of these women, utilizing separate methodologies in each chapter.

² Henry Spiller, “A Queer Organology of the Pedal Harp,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Vol. 23 (2019), 103.

In order to fully contextualize the lives of instrumentalists, it is necessary to understand the physical experience and requirements of their performances, and organological studies of historical instruments depend heavily on pictorial representations. My second chapter is an iconographic overview of harps and harpists, with a quantitative study of three iconographic databases. I have chosen to consider images instead of music because harp solos from the baroque and renaissance are few and far between, the instrument acting as continuo in ensembles or given a few highlights in Spanish tablature.³

However, iconography alone does not give the full picture of harpists. Therefore, my second chapter is an unorthodox literature review, in which I consider the treatment and representation of women harpists both by modern musicologists and researchers, and in several medieval *romances*. This is followed by an overview of conduct books in order to contextualize the world that Urbana, the main subject of the final chapter, navigated.

My third chapter is a case study of Urbana during her five-year employment at Mantua, situated within the first and only reconstructed timeline of her career. I include two other women harpists in Northern Italy who were active immediately before and following Urbana, in order to illustrate her singular achievements as a working-class, or at least non-aristocratic, female harpist who earned a living on her own merit.

While the harp as an instrument is identifiable, distinguishing between different styles of harps in historical records can lead to confusion, especially because there were many types of harps and some were used simultaneously in the same era. The organological distinction is important, however, because the size, range, and chromatic capabilities of different instruments determined which music could be played on each harp, thereby changing the professional opportunities available to the harpist. Figure 1.1, below, illustrates the size range of harps

³ “Medieval,” “Renaissance,” “Baroque,” and “Classical” are arbitrary delineations of time periods, especially when writing about music, because people did not stop playing renaissance music once the baroque era started. However, historical harpists often describe harps as “medieval” or “baroque” because of the distinct organology in each period.

discussed in the following chapters.

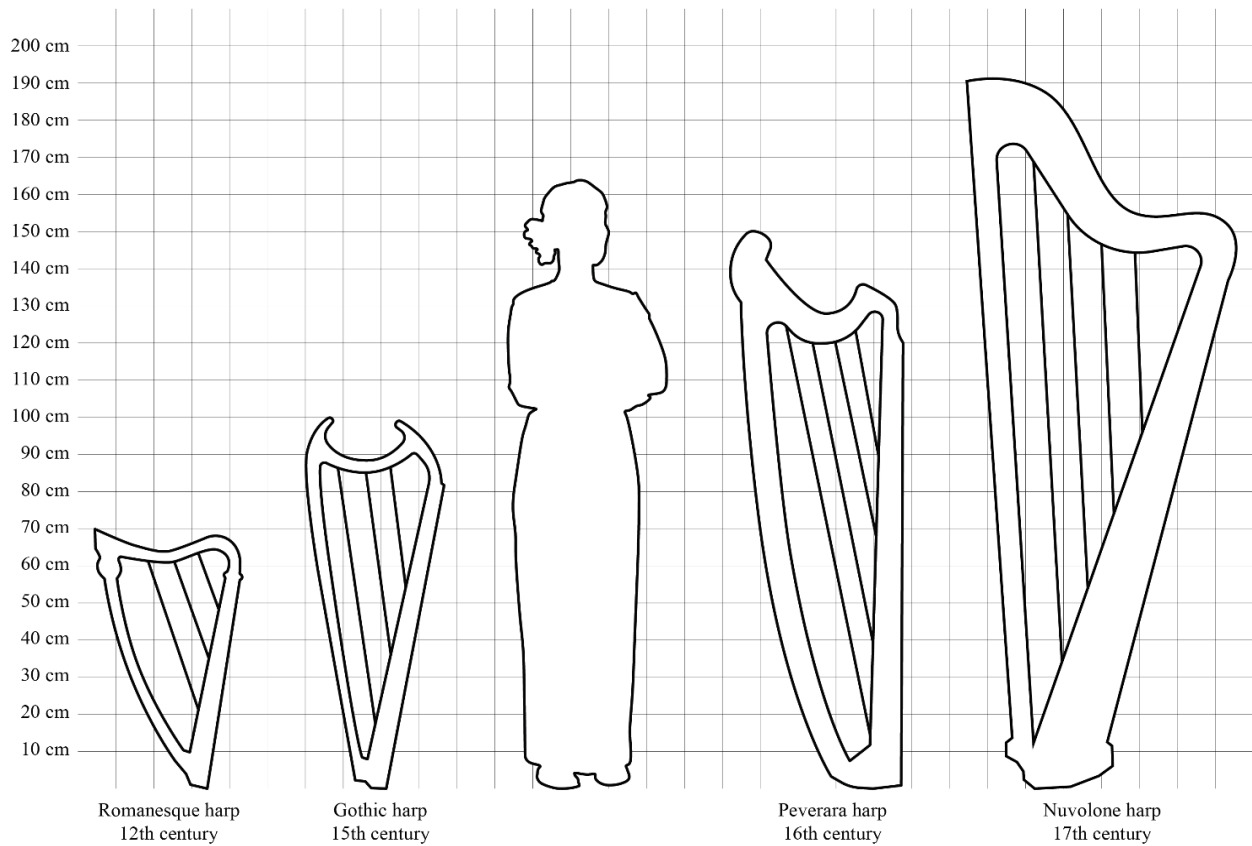


Fig 1.1: A size comparison of four styles of harp⁴

Of the four harps illustrated here, the twelfth-century Romanesque harp is most similar to the instruments played by the *trouveres* as well as by the musicians in the *romances*, discussed in Chapter 3. The fifteenth-century Gothic harp appears in Chapter 2, Figure 2.2, and is discussed in relation to the harpist's clothing. The outline of Laura Peverara's extant sixteenth-century instrument is shown here and referred to in Chapter 4, as well as the large seventeenth-century "Nuvolone harp" depicted here and in Figure 2.4. This Nuvolone *arpa doppia* is likely the most similar to what Lucrezia Urbana would have played, an assumption based on the tonal range required for the *L'Orfeo* harp solo, considered in Chapter 4.

⁴ My thanks to Andrew Gilmour for his help with both Figures 1.1 and 2.4.

CHAPTER 2: HARPISTS IN ICONOGRAPHY, 1000–1900

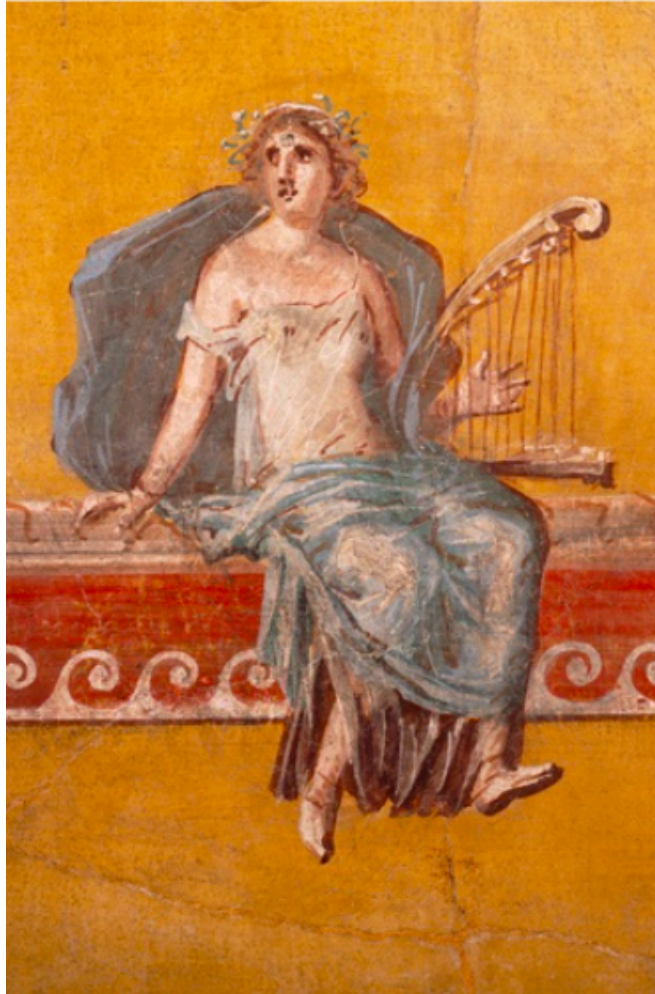


Fig. 2.1: Anon, *Roman Fresco of a Harpist*, 50 CE, fresco, 23cm, Landesmuseum, Stuttgart, https://www.landmuseum-stuttgart.de/sammlung/sammlung-online/dk-details/?dk_object_id=301.⁵

A harp, as an object, is distinctly recognizable and comes with a number of connotations. In Western society, a multitude of assumptions are also made about who plays harp: angels and cherubs play harp, typically a small, golden instrument that may also be a lyre; girls play harp, hidden behind a looming instrument in the back of an orchestra and rarely heard. A few men may have had harps in the past – King David, Harpo Marx – but it is not uncommon for a real life

⁵ All images are available through the holding institutions' Creative Commons licenses.

(women) harpist to be asked “are there any men who play harp?” Modern harps are imposing instruments, whether a six-foot-tall orchestral pedal harp or an intricately carved “Celtic” lever harp. The unique triangular structure of a frame harp makes it an easily recognizable symbol, which has been employed to denote King David and angels for centuries. Because the harp has existed in a relatively recognizable form for so long, it is also a prime candidate for a broad historical iconographical survey, especially when concerned with a group of people who have been routinely excluded from written historical records – women.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate a continuum of women harpists through a broad iconographical survey with a focus on gender and organology. I will first introduce the quantitative study of the three iconographic databases which were used to investigate the continual imagery of harpists. In the second section I will provide examples of iconographic representations of women harpists and discuss the organological changes in harps that required harpists to adapt different playing techniques as both music and styles of dress evolved. Finally, I will examine the gender imbalance found through the quantitative analysis, and address the male harpists seen in the iconography.

Quantitative Study of Harpist in Iconography

Before theorizing *why* and *how* the harp is considered feminine, a more quantitative study is needed to determine if in fact more women actually did play harp than men before the 19th century in what is now continental Europe.

While there is some overlap of instruments and musical practice between the mainland and the British Isles, the harpers of the British Isles are not included within my geographical scope; Celtic traditions of harping and music making have evolved into a separate culture from what is now known as Western European classical music and while the strong tradition of harping in the British Isles is, of course, relevant to the history of the harp, that is a subject for a much larger project.⁶ I have also omitted harps and players from Northern Africa or Central/Eastern Asia, though it is likely those instruments and some of the performers were known in Europe via the Silk Road.⁷

⁶ Harp players of the British Isles used and use the term “harper” rather than the Western classical “harpist.”

⁷ “The Exchange of Musical Instruments along the Silk Roads,” Silk Roads Programme, accessed February 19, 2021.

To investigate the gendering of the harp before 1800, I have analyzed 1,061 iconographical depictions of harpists found in three databases: the British Museum (BM) online collection, the Répertoire Internationale d'Iconographie Musicale (RIIdIM), and the Royal Koninklijke Bibliotheek Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) online collection.⁸ Within the BM collection I narrowed my search of “Harp,” including “visual representation” and “book-illustrations” as search terms to reduce the results list from 3,767 results – which includes over 1,000 Roman and Irish coins stamped with harps – to 315. Because RIIdIM and the RKD are image-only databases, the refined search terms were unnecessary. RIIdIM holds 331 images with the keyword “Harp,” and the RKD has 415.

I categorized each image of a harp according to one of twelve subject matters, including Women, Men, King David, Angels (including *putti*), Apollo, Muses, Orpheus, St. Cecilia, Allegory (of music, of hearing), Still Life, Illustrations (including musical scores and emblems/coats of arms), and From British Isles (such as bards or minstrels, including Merlin and Ossian), from 1000 CE to 1930 CE (Table 1a). I eliminated some depictions from the study (see Table 1b), including images that had “harp” in the metadata but were actually lyres; images that did not include stringed harps (e.g. mouth harps, “Jew’s” harps), were not of European subject; or were duplicates across the databases. Also not categorized chronologically were a few pre-1000 CE images on pottery and five images of animals playing harps. My final resulting dataset thus includes 768 usable images.

An analysis of the dataset provides some interesting results when considering gender. First, all of the harpists in the images labeled “Allegory” and “Muses” were women. Prior to the 1400s, only King David, Apollo, and angels appeared in the images. In the 15th century, however, images of non-deity women and non-deity/non-symbolic men playing the harp begin to appear. Between the years 1400 and 1930, female harpists outweigh male harpists at an almost 3:1 ratio (143 female to 50 male); only in the 15th century were there more images of male

<https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-selection-exchange-musical-instruments-along-silk-roads>

⁸ “Collection Online,” British Museum, accessed November 10, 2022,

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>.

Répertoire International d'Iconographie Musicale, accessed November 10, 2022,

<https://db.ridim.org/>.

“RKDIImages,” RKD Netherlands Institute for Art History, accessed November 10, 2022,

<https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images>.

harpists (4) than female (3). Angels and *putti* are the second-most prevalent, behind only King David, which complicates the dataset in terms of gender; angels are rarely depicted as conclusively gendered, and while *putti* are naked boys, they are also purely decorative and generally used to suggest secular passion.

Subject	Century	1000	1100	1200	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800	1900	Total
Angels/putti					8	44	33	25	10	50	2	172
Apollo				1		2	6	10	11	4		34
Muses						2	3	10	1	1		17
Allegory						2	2	2	6	3	1	16
St. Cecilia							1	2		1		4
King David		1	1	2	4	12	42	97	20	17	4	200
Orpheus								15	2			17
Still Life and Illustrations						2	6	13	13	33	2	69
From British Isles (Bards, Ossian)							1	4	8	33		46
Men						4	9	14	7	16		50
Women						3	16	25	29	63	7	143
Total		1	1	3	12	71	119	217	107	221	16	768

Table 1a: Images of harps by century and player depicted

Other Totals												
Lyres			86									
Animals playing harp			5									
In Antiquity/on pottery			5									
Duplicates			84									
Not harp/not European			113									
Total			293									

Table 1b: Images tagged as harps on the databases but either not harps, not European, duplicates, or non-human subjects

Depictions of King David are by far the most prevalent across databases, with 97 occurring in the 17th century alone. Because the images of harpists other than King David appeared in my databases only after 1400, I will begin my visual timeline then. This limit is set because of the

specific databases used; in a larger project, with more extensive study of digitized manuscripts and illuminations, the iconography of women harpists begins earlier.

Iconographic Representations of Women Harpists

Fifteenth Century



Fig. 2.2: Israel van Meckenem, “The Lute Player and the Harpist,” *Scenes from Daily Life*, 1495, print, 158x108mm, British Museum, London, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_E-1-147.

In the image above (Fig. 2.2), an unnamed female harpist plays a late medieval harp in a duet with a male lutenist. The harp is held between the woman's knees while she plays with her treble hand high on the strings by the neck of the harp and her bass hand low on the strings by the soundboard. These medieval harps were small instruments with one row of 21-26 strings that were tuned between, and potentially during, pieces to change keys. Small enough to be portable, the instruments could be played two-handed while seated, held between the knees, or one-handed while standing, with the second hand holding the column. Harpists needed to understand tuning systems as well as the musical rules of the time, and both women and men would have learned these either through the formal musical education of the aristocracy (likely the class of the harpist in Figure 2.2) or through a more personal relationship with someone who played harp, as will be discussed further in chapter two.

The upper-class harpist in Figure 2.2 would not have played harp to earn a living, which is fortunate for my purposes in that she was wealthy enough to have been sketched in detail in a large hall by a talented artist and there are intriguing details from which to glean information regarding the physicality of playing the harp. First, the harpist has tucked her skirts underneath her, rumpling them with apparently little regard for the inevitable creases. By tucking her skirts so far back, she has created a taut surface at the front of her skirt which allows her to hold the harp between her knees and minimize slippage. From the amount of skirt on the floor in front of her, we can see that she must be sitting on a fairly low stool with no back. It appears that the tightness of her sleeves at the shoulders necessitate keeping her upper arms and elbows close to her body, but allow her to move her forearms and wrists freely as she plays not in the middle of the strings, as a modern harpist does, but at the upper and lower ends on the strings. Sonically, playing at the two extremes gives a much cleaner acoustic attack, especially on harps with low tension and gut or horsehair strings. The physical act of playing the harp was different for women and for men because of the dress requirements and would have changed as the styles of sleeves and corsetry evolved.

Sixteenth Century

In the sixteenth century, renaissance (or “gothic”) harps began to be made larger than the small medieval harps to allow for a wider tonal range as well as accommodate the rising use of chromaticism. With access to more chromatic notes, harpists could more easily play counterpoint

to a sung or played melody, which implies a further level of familiarity with the harmonic and modal rules of the time. Gothic harps have one or two parallel rows of strings; the second row is arranged in sets of two and three, and tuned as sharps and flats. This chromatic row is on the right side of the diatonic row below middle C and on the left side of the diatonic row above middle C. The chromatic row switches sides to avoid being played accidentally, or brushed against. Because the harp rests on or is angled towards the right shoulder, the right hand plays the treble (closer to the shoulder) and the left hand plays the bass (farther away from the body), which means the chromatic row can always be avoided. If played while sitting, the bottom corners of the soundbox usually rest on the inside of the harpist's calves. This does not always work if the performer is wearing a material like silk which is slippery, especially in the form of a woman's skirt, and offers very little traction for the harp to rest on securely. There are also images of harpists from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries playing with two hands while standing (Fig. 2.3), which raise logistical questions regarding the potential straps or holsters needed to keep the harp suspended. In my performance degree, I experimented with a strap attached from the knee to the base of the column so the harp is slung across the body like a bandolier.⁹

Figure 2.3 shows a woman standing while playing her harp. She appears to be playing with both hands, which means the instrument must be held by something else; possibly a strap is connected to the knee and goes over her right shoulder which is not visible. The harpist is playing for two wealthy diners, and watched by less richly-dressed men in the background. Her gown is red and embroidered, with a train long enough to be inconvenient if she were a traveling *trouvere*. Additionally, she is not wearing a hat or a headcovering which implies she is not married. In contrast with the harpist in Figure 2.2, the one in Figure 2.3 is performing in public, possibly as an employed musician of a court. Images such as this, which show a woman performing in what was likely a semiprofessional setting, also raise further questions about the logistics of playing instruments and are crucial in research about musicians and organology, especially when considering a time period where written information is and was limited or inaccessible.

⁹ With this technique I have been able to very easily play while standing and dancing in both pants and a long skirt, but so far I have not found convincing iconographic evidence of a strap.



Fig. 2.3: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Rawl. liturg. e. 36:
<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/28b38abe-8cb5-4914-9838-061a272f6146/>.

Seventeenth Century

As composers experimented with chromaticism and European society turned to look back at Antiquity to reinterpret their world, harps also evolved. Marin Mersenne and other humanists wrote theoretical treatises in Latin, while musical theorists such as Andreas Werckmeister explored new tuning systems and the “theory of the Affects.”¹⁰ Claudio Monteverdi’s composition *L’Orfeo* in the early 1600s, drawing on the Orpheus tale from Greek mythology, used the harp as a key narrative tool and showcased the entire tonal range available on the instrument.¹¹ New compositional and theoretical approaches such as virtuosic secular solo pieces and harmonically complex basso continuo required several types of baroque harps, all of which were larger than earlier instruments and boasted full chromaticism and a much broader range. In Italy, the term *arpa doppia* (double harp) was widely used, though there is some debate around what type of harp this was. The common belief today is that the *arpa doppia* was a triple-strung harp, which has three parallel rows of strings and a range of over four octaves. The outside rows are diatonic (doubled; *doppia*) and the inside row is chromatic and slightly offset, and is played by reaching your fingers in between the outer strings. Medium-sized triple harps have 92 strings, including separate E \flat and D \sharp and B \flat and A \sharp strings to accommodate various tuning systems and temperaments, and the strings are wound on pegs on the right side of the instrument. The triple harps are played seated and the larger ones can be over two meters tall, which greatly reduced the mobility of baroque harpists and made the harp itself much more of a static object, as shown in the top middle and top right images in Figure 2.4, below. This new incarnation of the harp as a technologically advanced and harmonically flexible instrument allowed harpists, many of whom were women, to showcase their virtuosity, technical capabilities, and nuanced knowledge of harmony, voice leading rules, and collaborative improvisation as a continuo player or soloist. Apart from playing techniques, the height also significantly changes the physical act of tuning (Fig. 2.4, shown in the top left). Harpists must stand to tune the lower strings, either reaching over the top of the harp and leaning it back under their right arm or standing on the right side of the instrument. Similar-sized harps with two rows also existed, the second row

¹⁰ George Buelow, “Theory of the Affects,” Grove Music Online, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.00253>.

¹¹ For more extensive musical and rhetorical analysis of the harp solo in *L’Orfeo*, see Phoebe Durand-McDonnell, “An Illegible Lullaby: The Harp Solo in Four Editions of Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*,” *The American Harp Journal* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 44-53.

acting exactly as it had in the renaissance, and were probably also called *arpe doppie*. Because the strings are so long on both the two- and three-rowed *arpe doppie*, and are strung directly from the tuning pegs to the soundboard, there is no “harmonic curve” created by pegs or levers putting extra tension on the strings. This means in order to get a sound that is not thin or weak, baroque harpists played low on the strings, using the proximity to the soundboard as amplification (Fig. 2.4, bottom middle). Tight bodices across the shoulders would make this difficult, as in order to play the full range of the instrument, the harpist must be free to raise their right arm for the high notes (Fig. 2.4, bottom left) as well as lean forward and round their back to play the lowest strings by the soundboard (Fig. 2.4, bottom right). Considering the physical requirements of the baroque harps, it is no surprise that nearly all of the known women harpists of this time were active in Italy, where fashion dictated loose sleeves and corset stays made of rope or cording instead of the English reed or bone.¹²

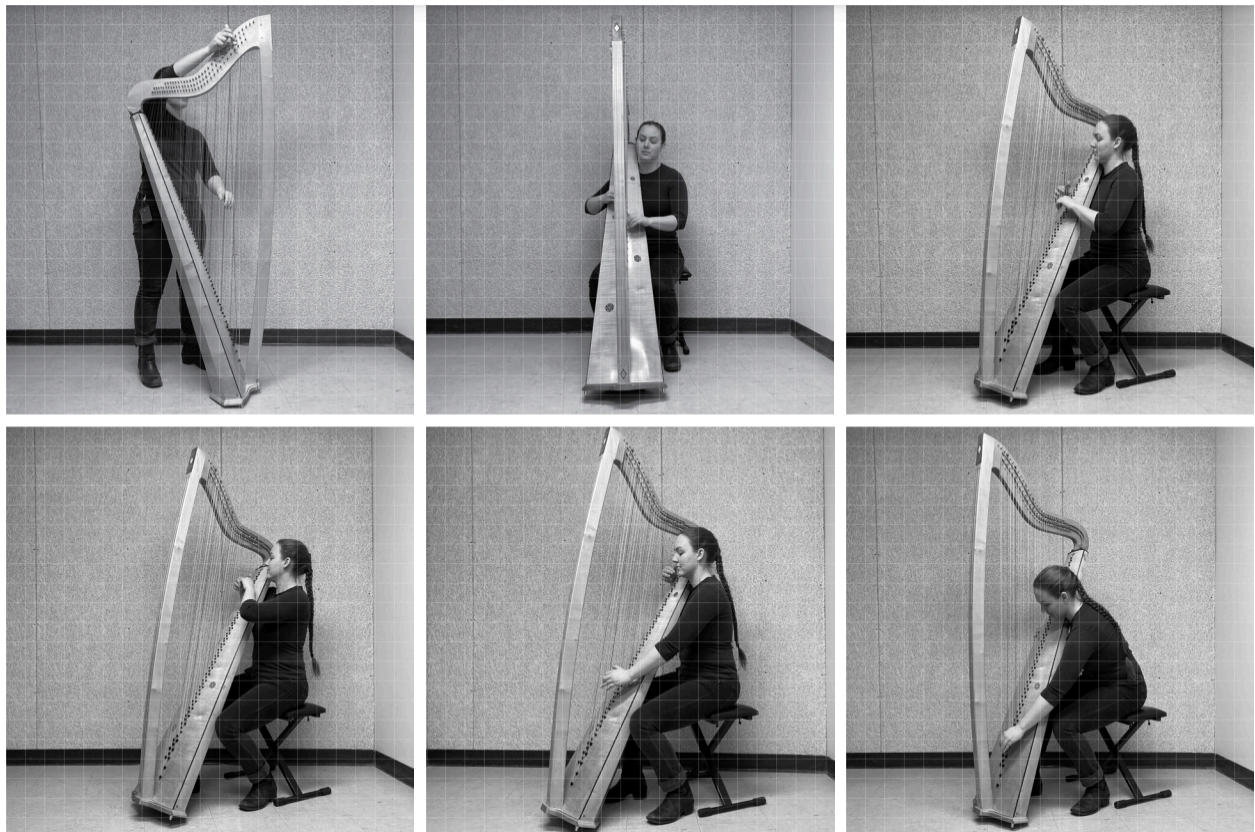


Fig. 2.4: Tuning and playing positions of the three-rowed *arpa doppia*

¹² The purpose of corsetry in Italy was less to emphasize a woman’s figure, and more about keeping bodice fabrics taut so they could be admired for their expense.

In this self portrait and scene of his family (Fig. 2.5, below), Giuseppe Nuvolone shows a family member playing a triple-strung harp. There are three rows of string pegs visible at the top of the harp, and the harpist's left hand is much closer to the soundboard than to the middle of the strings. This depiction of a harp is so convincingly accurate that modern-day harp builders have used this "Nuvolone" style harp as a model for some of their reconstructions.¹³



Fig. 2.5: Carlo Francesco Nuvolone and Giuseppe Nuvolone, *The Artist and His Family*, 1650, oil on canvas, 126x180cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images/292947>.

This harpist, almost certainly Nuvolone's daughter, is again playing low on the strings with her bass hand. Her skirt may also be tucked up on the stool behind her, or it may be tucked down in the front to allow room for the harp in between her legs. The shoulders and sleeves of her

¹³ "Nuvolone," Rainer M. Thureau, accessed October 22, 2023, <https://thureau-harps.com/harps/nuvolone/> and "Baroque Harps," Claus Henry Hüttel, accessed October 22, 2023, <https://www.historical-harps.de/en/harps/baroque-harps>.

dress are significantly looser than those of the harpists in the earlier images, and clearly this would allow her to raise her right arm to play the highest treble notes, or stretch her left arm forward to play the lowest strings as close to the soundboard as needed to produce a clean sound, as well as reach the tuning pegs. A second woman is singing from sheet music, and the men are playing a violin and lute.

The Spanish *arpa de dos ordenes*, or cross-strung harp, also had two rows of strings, one diatonic and one chromatic. These rows crossed in the middle, as if they were woven. The diatonic row began low on the left side and was wound on shortened tuning pegs below the pegs of the chromatic row, which began low on the right side. The left hand played low and the right hand played high on the diatonic row of strings. In order to play the sharps and flats, the harpist reaches their fingers up or down to reach the crossed chromatic row. The harp is played standing, leaning back so the knee is against the top of the shoulder, even as low as the collarbone, and has a very wide soundbox so the bass has a loud, booming sound regardless of where on the strings the harpist plays. None of the databases I used for this study contain images of the cross-strung harp, but we know women also played these harps and there are images in the Biblioteca Nacional d'España.

Eighteenth Century

As with architecture and art, harps were slimmed down and visually simplified through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with a shift to an emphasis on clean lines and visual elegance as well as clever technology. Early pedal harps, most prevalent in France and England, were the same height as the larger *arpe doppia*, but had only one row of strings. Chromatic notes were made using pedals that controlled hooks or levers at the tops of the strings, pressing into them to add tension and raise the note by a half step. The *harpe organisée*, or single- or simple-action pedal harp eventually had seven pedals, one for every note of the scale, so the F pedal raised or lowered tension on all the F strings on the harp at once. The D, C, and B pedals were controlled by the left foot and the E, F, G, and A pedals were controlled by the right. True chromaticism was nearly impossible, because each foot could only reach and control so many pedals at once. With the addition of heavy metal mechanisms and elaborate carvings, harps - and harpists, who now had to use every limb - were essentially immobilized. A few virtuosa harpists such as Dorette Spohr did tour, but they typically traveled and played with their

husbands who likely moved the harps, less encumbered than their corseted, tight-bodied wives. The cumbersome instrument could be used as a patriarchal tool to keep women entertained, on display, and safely in one spot. And as Henry Spiller points out, “The harp...reinforced ideals of upper-class femininity by constraining its female performers to a suitably modest seated position (with long dresses concealing their spread legs) and by requiring a technique that did not demand contortions of the face or body.”¹⁴

Most harpist paintings of the late eighteenth century are solo portraits of women standing, an arm draped gracefully over their instrument, in wigs and expensive, portrait-worthy clothing (Fig. 2.6). The pedals are always shown, likely in a subtle display of the wealth that could afford the technologically advanced instruments, though they are sometimes folded up as they would be when the harp was not being played.

¹⁴ Spiller, “A Queer Organology,” 103.



Fig. 2.6: Rose Adélaïde Ducreux, *Self-Portrait with a Harp*, 1791, oil on canvas, 123x128.9cm, The Met, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436222>.

Many of the images we have from this era are of young, slender girls with delicately displayed ankles playing the harp while men in tailcoats loom above or behind them (Fig. 2.7, below). Harpists in iconography also seem to have taken on a satirical tone, as if the hyperfeminine stereotype was too stereotypical *not* to make fun of, and several satirical sketches are labeled “Perfect Harmony,” “Harmony before Matrimony,” and even “The Dull Husband,” which depicts a harpist playing to a sleeping, bewigged man.



Fig. 2.7: Jean Michel Moreau the Younger, *Perfect Harmony*, 1776, pen and ink on paper, 26.7x21.6 cm, The Met, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337860>.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In the nineteenth century came the idea of the “angel in the house” as well as sketches in published books.¹⁵ The hovering suitor was still present, though in Hooper’s print below (Fig. 2.8), the harpist appears to be ignoring his interest, resting her harp on the wrong shoulder and physically distancing herself from him.



Fig. 2.8: William Harcourt Hooper, *Untitled*, 1849, wood block print, 6.9x6cm, The British Museum, London, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1912-1227-310.

In an etiquette book from the early 19th century, the anonymous author said, “the shape of the instrument is calculated, in every respect, to show a fine figure to advantage.”¹⁶ Perhaps this is true, or was of the ornately carved and swooping curved harps of the 1800s, in which case

¹⁵ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (New York: Dutton, 1876).

¹⁶ Spiller, “A Queer Organology,” 103.

more questions arise regarding who “calculated” the shape of the instrument, who the harpist was showing a fine figure to, and whether that applied to the men who played harp as well.

As harps increased in size yet again (Fig. 2.9, below) for a more modern orchestra, with an extended soundbox, higher string tension, and double action pedal mechanism which could raise or lower each note by two half steps rather than one, so too did women's professional prospects expand. The first woman allowed in a modern professional orchestra in the United States was a harpist,¹⁷ and in 1898, well into the orchestral life of the modern double-action harp, the harpist Clara Murray wrote: “The harp is preeminently the instrument for woman, as it not only offers the most pronounced opportunities for the display of personal graces, but really enforces the cultivation of pleasing movements and poses.”¹⁸ Today, the harp remains the most gendered instrument in orchestras overall, even compared with the male-dominated percussion and low brass sections.¹⁹

¹⁷ Edna Phillips was hired to the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1930. See Mary Sue Welsh, *One Woman in a Hundred: Edna Phillips and the Philadelphia Orchestra* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Clara Murray, quoted in Spiller, 115.

¹⁹ “Graphing Gender in America's Top Orchestras,” *Suby Raman*, 18 Nov. 2014, subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088/graphing-gender-in-americas-top-orchestras.

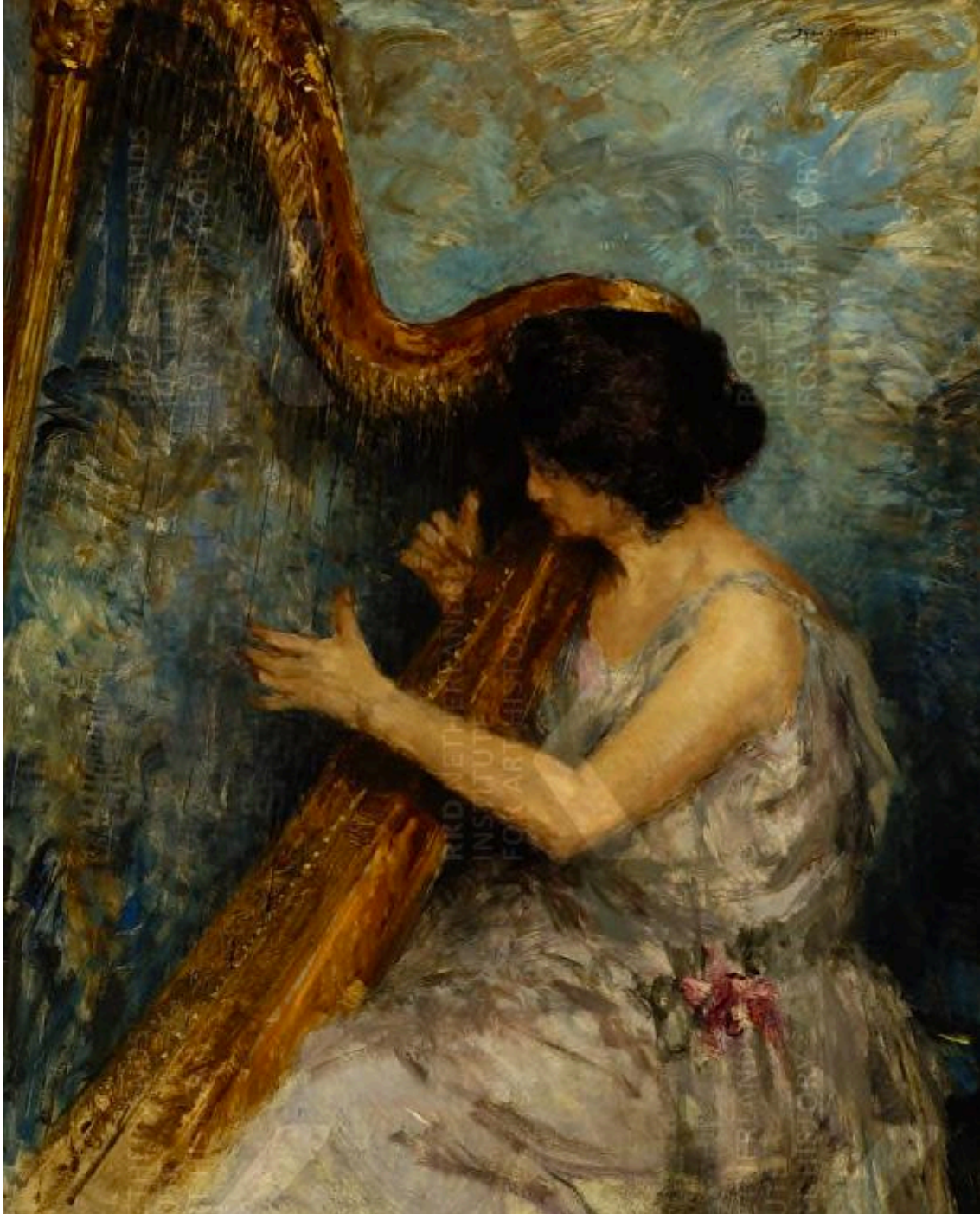


Fig. 2.9: Johan Hendrik van Mastenbroek, *Portrait of Rosa Spier (1891-1967)*, 1923, oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm, RKD, Amsterdam, <https://rkd.nl/explore/images/181419>.

Until the invention of cameras, portraits were expensive and time-consuming. In the late 18th and early 19th century, music was a hobby for the upper class, who could afford to have portraits made. Earlier royalty occasionally had paintings made of their employed or enslaved musicians,

but this was fairly infrequent.²⁰ Self-portraits of artists and/or their families, such as Rose Adélaïde Ducreux or the Nuvolone painting, are the best snapshots we have of harpists, because they are portrayed as they wanted to be – male gaze and public image be damned.²¹

Consideration and Dismissal of a Counterargument: Men Playing Harp

Male harpists, fictional and nonfictional, consistently used the harp as an active, conscious nonperformance of their gender. Orpheus – the son of Calliope, the Muse, and/or Apollo, the God of music – played the harp so beautifully, the myth contests, that wild animals would stop and stones would roll closer to listen. Even Charon, the boatman of the underworld, was lulled to sleep by Orpheus’s playing, and the queen of the Underworld, Persephone, was so moved that she convinced Hades to release the soul of Orpheus’s lover. Orpheus did not have to participate in the typical masculinity of Greek mythology, chasing nymphs and angering Gods. He was allowed to be a tragic hero, demonstrating the purest love, because he was given gendered ambiguity through the mythologically-assigned harp.

King David’s harp was used as a signifier when the majority of Christians were illiterate and depended on pictorial iconography to experience the stories of their religion. Sir Tristan was the only one of King Arthur’s knights who played harp, and he and Isolde (who also played harp) epitomized courtly love. The Roman Publius Clodius Pulcher and Emperor Nero played harp, Clodius while dressed as a woman to gain entry to a society of priestesses, and Nero while Rome burned.²² And oddly, when Harpo Marx (arguably the most famous male harpist of the 20th century) identified the difference between a character and a non-character role, it had to do with his comedically heteronormative character and his harp playing. In his autobiography “Harpo Speaks!” he summarized it as, “If you’ve ever seen a Marx Brothers picture, you know the difference between him and me. When he’s chasing a girl across the screen, it’s Him. When he sits down to play the harp, it’s Me. Whenever I touch the strings of the harp, I stop being an

²⁰ See Emily Wilbourne, *Little Black Giovanni’s Dream: Black Authorship and the ‘Turks, and Dwarves, the Bad Christians’ of the Medici Court* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021).

²¹ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, “Male Gaze,” in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

²² Mary Francis Gyles, “Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned,” *The Classical Journal* 42, no. 4 (1947): 211–17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3291751>.

actor.”²³ The use of harp as a gender-blurring tool perpetuated both the femininity and the non-masculinity of the instrument and its players.

To complicate matters, the terms “harp” and “lyre” have been used interchangeably in several key cases, all of which involve men playing the instrument. The confusion generally comes from translations and interpretations, the most obvious example of which is the passage of King David playing music for Saul in the King James version of the Bible, which is anglicized to “...And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.” (1 Samuel, 16:23, KJV). The instrument David was said to have played was described in the Hebrew as “kinnor,” which is a lyre similar to the earlier Greek instrument. Lyres and harps do not share an organology; harps always have a resonator or soundbox, and the strings are perpendicular to the resonator, whereas a lyre has strings that are taut against a bridge and parallel to the resonator.²⁴ This small difference vastly changes the playing technique and sound, and contrary to popular belief, harps did not “evolve” from lyres – the two instruments were designed and played independently. There are varying descriptions of David’s instrument in the Psalms as well, which describe the instrument as having anywhere from seven to ten strings. Mistranslated or not, I believe the organology of David’s actual instrument was only relevant in the mostly-illiterate Christian world as much as it could be identified as the instrument that David played. Iconography in church friezes and stained glass made Biblical stories and lessons accessible to the vast majority of churchgoers who could not read and therefore depended on the visual depictions, signifiers, and symbols that indicated specific characters to piece together and remember scenes from their religion. It would be one thing if this mistranslation occurred specifically in English because connections could be drawn between David and the culture of male harpers on the British Isles; what is interesting is that the translations and visual depictions across Europe maintained the “harp” narrative rather than the “lyre.” There is no reason to believe that a lyre would not have the same recognizable quality as a harp, unless the concern was of making David appear too Pagan, with all the implications of Greek mythology and antiquity of lyres. This argument still does not hold water for me, because of the obvious Orphic

²³ Harpo Marx, “Confessions of a Non-Lady Harpist,” in *Harpo Speaks!* (Naples: Albatross Publishers, 2019), 12.

²⁴ Ian Pittaway, “The Medieval Harp (1 / 3): Origins and Development,” *Early Music Muse*, September 21, 2022, <https://earlymusicmuse.com/medieval-harp-development/>.

display of David's playing "refreshing" Saul and causing the evil spirit to "depart[] from him." Therefore I maintain that the use of the harp specifically, with all its feminine and otherworldly implications, was a way to set David apart from other mortal men and demonstrate his emotionality and holiness through his prowess on a gender-blurring instrument.

The iconographic analysis shows that the harp, at least in visual depictions, has been played by women for centuries at a higher percentage than nonfictional men. Three specific men, meanwhile, King David, Orpheus, and Apollo, are the harpists who are remembered for their virtuosity, which was essential to the staying power of their names. If in Ancient Greece, and through the rise of early modern Christianity, the harp was considered feminine, questions arise about the mythology of these men and why they were assigned the instrument that they were, rather than a more classically manly instrument such as drums or trumpet. I posit that in a way, if women chose to play harp as a *feminist* act, these men chose (or were chosen) to play harp as a *feminizing* act. The subversion of masculinity through playing harp reinforces their super-humanity; in a way, they become *more than* mere mortal men. Perhaps the active, conscious perpetuation of the "feminine harp" created an easy narrative device to signify that the men who played harp were automatically special, not confined to the societal expectations of their gender.

Importance and Limitations of Iconography

Although visual representation does not give a full picture, iconography can be invaluable to research regarding musicians. The nuances of dress, organology of the instruments, and physicality of playing are equally as important to research as written sources, although the pictorial throughline does raise a significant question: Does the number of women harpists depicted reflect the reality of a gendered division among harpists? In other words, can we accurately chart the number of women harpists compared with men harpists using only the statistics reflected in the iconography? The centuries-long perseverance of the male gaze must give us pause when we consider this question. A woman playing the harp is, after all, an easy and immobilized subject to paint. Harp is a symbol that could be deployed to showcase both a family's wealth and class, merely by proving that they had the time and resources available to own and maintain the physical instrument and study the musical notation and performance practice. And of course, an artistic depiction of a marriageable daughter or venerable wife

reflected well on the patriarch of the house in and/or for which it was painted. The male gaze is also, therefore, related to considerations of who had access to the images, and in what context they were displayed. In some cases, such as the Nuvolone painting (Fig. 2.5, above), we can assume that the painting was intended to be displayed in the household of the Nuvolone family. “Venus Playing the Harp (Allegory of Music)” (Fig. 2.10) was a gift to Marco Marazzuoli, also known as Marco dell’Arpa, a harpist. This painting by Giovanni Lanfranco – whose daughter was a harpist – depicts an actual existing instrument known as the Barberini harp. Allegory (of music, of love, etc.) was a simple way to justify a risqué painting and get away with it, and although mythologically Venus did not play the harp, let alone a baroque triple strung harp, the instrument was used to prove her absolute femininity, as if the bare breasts and hint of pale ankle were not enough.



Fig. 2.10: Giovanni Lanfranco, “Venus Playing the Harp (Allegory of Music)”, 1630-1634, oil on canvas, 214x150cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome, https://www.wga.hu/html_m/l/lanfranc/1/allegory.html.

Both the Nuvolone and Lanfranco paintings do demonstrate a key element behind most of the images in and apart from the databases studied: the technical exactitude of the harps themselves in artistic depictions. From this accuracy, I believe we can take two important notes: the first is that harps were most likely played by the woman sitting for the portrait in actual life, or at least were common enough that the artists had a readily available model for the image. The second and more important takeaway is that purely by being most often depicted with a female player, the harp was continually re-established as a woman's instrument. The lifespan of a portrait was longer than its sitter, and I believe that regardless of the gender division of harpists in reality, the reiteration of women playing harp in images that were put on display in public and private venues perpetuated and solidified the idea that harp was, and crucially had always been, a feminine instrument.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by this chapter's quantitative study, iconography can be an invaluable resource when studying the history of an instrument. By examining pictorial representations of harps across several centuries, it is possible to follow the progression of the instrument's organology and musical purpose, from small single-rowed instruments intended for the self-accompaniment of sung *lais* to the larger multi-rowed continuo instruments and technologically-advanced orchestral pedal harps. The visible evolution of the instrument itself is reflected in the playing techniques required for each advancement, but it is not enough to see illustrations of only the harps. Therefore, in order to discern details of the capabilities and limitations of the instruments, it is also necessary to analyze the hand positions and clothing restrictions of the harpists in the depictions. As well, it is clear that the harp has been intrinsically linked to women for centuries. The gendering of the harp and of harpists is a self-perpetuating cycle, advanced by artists frequently showcasing a beautiful instrument at the same time as exaggerating the feminine allure of a young woman playing the harp and giving a provocative glimpse of a slim ankle or barely-covered breasts.

CHAPTER 3: HARPISTS IN LITERATURE AND LIFE

In the previous chapter, I established the harp as a traditionally feminine instrument through an iconographic timeline. Visual depictions, however, are not the only proof of this phenomenon; in this chapter, I will show that although women's participation in and contribution to musical culture has been intentionally and unintentionally erased, there is a traceable throughline of women playing harp in literary and historical records from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance Europe.

The introductory section of this chapter establishes some of the challenges in tracing musical medieval women. I will then briefly review a mention of harp in Hildegard's convent, before examining the music making of *trobairitz* and *trouveres* and the lengths to which early musicologists went to dismiss them. Following that, I will use the romances of *Tristan*, *Galeran de Bretagne*, and *Romance of Horn* to show women harpists in fiction, and finish with an overview of women making music in conduct literature.

Showing how harp has been a tool of autonomy for women in Medieval Europe is difficult because of the lack of accessible detailed historical records. What we do have to work with are materials such as a few guild records, pre-Arthurian *romances*, and conduct books, which often say more about what women should *not* do than what they *should* do. From these sources, we can see that harp was not the only instrument that women played, although it was potentially the most common. From the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, harps were played in a myriad of contexts by women as well as by men. Harp music accompanied secular *lais* by upperclass *trobairitz*, court *menestrelles*, and traveling *joglaresses*,²⁵ and playing the harp was a frequent pastime of the heroines and heroes in medieval romances as a way to make a living (as Fresne did, in *Galeran de Bretagne*), to entertain themselves (as Isolde and Tristan did in *Tristan*) and to demonstrate their femininity and education (as described in de Pizan's *City of Ladies*).

There is an unfortunate lack of definitive records related specifically to how contemporaneous audiences perceived harp playing as a skill; most of the scholarship that exists about the *trobairitz* and *trouveres* focuses on their poetry and politics rather than their musicianship, and there is precious little information about the physical harps that they played

²⁵ Maria V. Coldwell, "Jogleresses and *Trobairitz*: Secular Musicians in Medieval France," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, edited by Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

even when historians and musicologists agree that they were a common instrument of choice for medieval and renaissance women. In *Women Making Music*, Jane Bowers and Judith Tick cite romances and instructive treatises, as well as Genette Foster's survey of manuscript illuminations, *The Symbolism of Music and Musical Instruments*, to show that stringed instruments were the ones considered "appropriate" for women to play.²⁶ In Martin van Schaik's chapter, "The Social Function of the Harp in German Medieval Literature," he posits the dichotomy of the reality and symbolism of the instrument, saying the harp is "...usually described as a solo instrument, although instrumental combinations are also mentioned. However, these descriptions cannot always be regarded as evidence of actual ensemble practice since the authors often used the enumerations of instruments as a literary device" and "Harp playing at court served largely representational purposes."²⁷ Van Schaik uses Tristan of the *Tristan and Isolde* romances as an example of a harpist in literature – along with King David – and mentions offhandedly that Tristan taught Isolde to play the harp. Likewise, the *Tristan* story is used in *Songs of the Women Trouveres* as an historical record of the performance practice of *lais* accompanied on harp.²⁸

Today, a brief consultation of a music library's shelves will show that in the late twentieth century, the "modern invention of medieval music," as Daniel Leech-Wilkinson dubbed it, came to the fore of musicological research, simultaneous with a rise in feminist musicology and feminist theory. Feminist texts and works such as Peggy McIntosh's "Interactive Phases of Curricular Revision" (1983) and Jane Bower's and Judith Tick's collection *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (1987) suggested new ways of teaching and studying women throughout history. These resources are not, of course, without their flaws; Cynthia Cyrus and Olivia Carter Mather, in their 1998 article "Rereading Absence: Women in Medieval and Renaissance Music," point to subtle failures in Howard Mayer Brown's "Women Singers and Women's Songs in Fifteenth-Century Italy" in Bower's and Tick's collection, as well as Karin Pendle's *Women and Music: A History* (1991), to discuss women musicians as truly integrated in existing music history curriculum (women "as history," McIntosh's fourth phase),

²⁶ Coldwell, "Jouglerses and Trobairitz," 42.

²⁷ Martin van Schaik, "Die Gesellschaftliche Funktion der Harfe in der Deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters," in *Historische Harfen*, edited by Heidrun Rosenzweig (Basel: Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, 1991), 9.

²⁸ Eglal Doss-Quincy, Joan Tasker Grimbirt, Wendy Pfeffer, and Elizabeth Aubrey, eds., *Songs of the Women Trouveres* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

instead opting for what McIntosh would describe as her first three phases: “Woman/less History,” “Women *in* History,” and “Women as a Problem, Anomaly, or Absence.”

Before discussing secular uses of harp such as *trouvere* song and *romance* literature, I will briefly touch on harp playing in convents. In 1178, in response to a ban of the Office of Hours in her convent, Hildegard von Bingen wrote a letter to the prelates of Mainz, “The prophetic spirit orders that God be praised with cymbals of jubilation and with the rest of the musical instruments which the wise and studious have created...” and:

The prophecy in the psalm... exhorts us to confess ourselves to God in the cithara as we sing psalms with the ten-string harp; let sound the cithara whose purpose on earth is to train the body, let sound the psalterium which gives back the sound from the heavenly realm above for expanding the spirit; let sound the ten-string harp for contemplation of the law.²⁹

Hildegard’s first letter was ignored, although a second letter and an appeal was successful and the ban was lifted. From the letter it seems likely that Hildegard was drawing on Cassiodorus’s sixth-century commentary on various Psalms (in which he also specified the cithara, psaltery, and harp) as well as Thomas Aquinas (“song provokes the soul to greater devotion, but instrumental music moves the soul rather to delight than to a good interior disposition”)³⁰ to prove her point about the necessity of music making in worship. It is of course possible that Hildegard chose the “ten-string harp” as an example of an instrument her nuns should be allowed to play simply because she could support her case with Cassiodorus’s writings and not because anyone at the convent actually played the harp. Regardless, we can take from Hildegard’s letter that at least one, but probably several, of her nuns played instrumental music as part of convent life, and women after the twelfth century continued to play and make music in convents as well as public and court spheres. The rhetorical and allegorical use of harp as an example of what could or should be allowed in devotional communities makes it difficult to determine when and where harps were actually played in religious contexts and by whom. This is a study outside the

²⁹ Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., “Hildegard of Bingen: Abbess and Composer,” in *Women in Music: an Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 19-20.

³⁰ Umberto Eco and Hugh Bredin, “The Medieval Aesthetic Sensibility,” in *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 9.

scope of this thesis, and I have chosen to focus on secular harp performances and performers, beginning with the troubadours.

Trouvères

The trobairitz, troubadours and trouveres of the Middle Ages – men and women – played small harps with which they accompanied their songs. These portable instruments are mentioned and depicted often in Medieval sources, from tax records to *romances*.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a variety of terms were used for women musicians as well as men. The terms I will use to describe the trobairitz and trouvères are not interchangeable. Trobairitz (women) and troubadours (men) wrote their poetry and songs in *langue d’oc*, or the language of Occitan in Provençal southern France. Some musicologists and historians use the term “women troubadours” rather than “trobairitz,” which I will generally avoid. Trouvères (women and men) wrote their poetry and songs in *langue d’oil*, or Old French, the language of what is now northern France. Troubadours and trouveres were almost entirely upper class and would have been well educated and probably musically literate. Frédéric Godefroy, writing his *Dictionnaire* in the late nineteenth century, used the term “troveresse” for women trouvères, but he is the only person so far to do this.

The lower class singers and poets were called *joglaresses* (women) and *joglars* (men), who spoke and sang *langue d’oc* and *jongleureses* (women) and *jongleurs* (men) who used *langue d’oil*. These lower class musicians were also able to perform juggling and acrobatics as well as music, and generally performed in public spaces. They would likely have been illiterate and followed an oral/aural tradition of music learning and lyric composition. Occasionally, they would be retained as court entertainers, which gave rise to the terms *ménestrelle* (women) and *ménestrel* (men), which eventually became “minstrel.” Provençal, Spanish, and Galician-Portuguese also used variations of *jougleresse*,³¹ Old French used *ménestrelles*, and Middle English used *gliewméden*. The male equivalences were *jongleur*, *menstreus*, and *gligmann*. That so many languages across Europe had gendered terms for musicians implies the prevalence of women playing music even if, as discussed below, their involvement in music was denied in later years.

³¹ Other spellings included *juglaresa*, *juglara*, *jograresa*, and regional variations.

Of the trobairitz, trouvères, jongleresses, and ménestrelles, most research has been done on the trobairitz and trouvères, the women of nobility. *Songs of the Women Trouveres* lists eight named trouveres; *Women Making Music* includes six (only four overlapping with the names in *Women Trouveres*), plus five “women troubadours;” *The Provençal Trobairitz* claims the existence of twenty identifiably female trobairitz but lists only five, one of whom is not included in *Women Making Music*.

In early fourteenth-century Paris, an agreement was made between the city and the musicians’ guild. The documents include “*menstreus* and *menestrelles*,” as well as “*jongleurs* and *jongleresses*.”³² More specific tax records describe some women such as Bietriz d’Arraz, “*jugleresse*,” who lived on the Street of Jougleurs in 1297, Eudeline who played psaltery also in 1297, and a Marie in 1313 who was a “*citolerresse*,” or citole player.³³ The *Statuets de la corporation des ménestrels de Paris*, from 1321, includes thirty-seven members, with eight *jongleresses*.³⁴

Along with confusion about the terminology used for various musicians from across Europe, it is important to recognize that previously, even highly regarded musicologists and historians have deliberately ignored the women involved in the genre of troubadour music. Alfred Jeanroy “[stated] that medieval sources mention French women trouveres only infrequently, [and] went on to express his conviction that none had actually existed.”³⁵ His argument included questioning why women would have “wished to step down from the pedestal to which the male courtly poets had raised her,” and actively worked to reinterpret manuscripts which attributed trouvere songs directly to women.³⁶ While this is disturbing – and ironically amusing – it is an example of why there is still confusion surrounding our sources for trouveres and trobairitz: for centuries, women were simply not as interesting as men in the patriarchal canon of Western European music. Even as recently as 2004, in a book rather optimistically called *Eight Centuries of Troubadours and Trouveres*, John Haines’s singular mention of the women involved in the genre and performance of troubadour and trouvère music is two hundred pages in and one sentence long: “While the *trobairitz* have been studied since the early twentieth century with several editions and important

³² Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music*, 6.

³³ Coldwell, “*Jongleresses and Trobairitz*,” 46.

³⁴ Doss-Quincy, Grimberty, Pfeffer, and Aubrey, *Songs*, 22.

³⁵ Doss-Quincy, Grimberty, Pfeffer, and Aubrey, *Songs*, 1-2.

³⁶ Doss-Quincy, Grimberty, Pfeffer, and Aubrey, *Songs*, 2.

studies devoted to them, the women trouvères received almost no attention, with the first study appearing only quite recently.”³⁷ Not only is this a non-mention followed by no discussion, but the very complaint is about how little research has been done on the women trouveres. His footnote here refers not to any of the “several editions and important studies” but to a translation note in *Songs of the Women Trouveres*, which in turn quotes Dronke (1996), who describes a fragment of an anonymous text with the succinct phrase, “I think it quite possible that the author was a woman.”³⁸

Harp in the Medieval Romances

The harps in medieval Europe by the Middle Ages were small and portable triangular instruments with a single row of ten to thirty gut or horsehair strings. It is difficult to give an overview of every style of harp that was made and played in medieval Europe, but I defer to the introduction of Droysen-Reber’s “Harfen” for an extensive overview of harps through history,³⁹ and Chapter I of Maria Christina Cleary’s doctoral thesis, “The ‘Harpe Organisee,’ 1720-1840,” for a succinct description of harps since circa 1500.⁴⁰ Single-rowed instruments were ostensibly designed to be diatonic, although “diatonic” is a complicated term when used to describe what would have been modal music. Small harps can be tuned to have as many as twelve notes per octave; current-day historical harpists generally tune an octave C-C with both B-natural and B-flat, so the number of strings per octave is nine, which allows modal playing in two or three mutating hexachords without retuning. For occasional accidentals, it is possible to press or pinch the top of one string towards the neck of the instrument directly below the string pegs to raise the pitch by one half step. This is only possible when the harpist holds the harp between their legs or on a strap, as it requires playing the string with one hand while reaching to the top of the harp to manipulate the pitch with the other hand.

³⁷ John Haines, “Recent Readings,” in *Eight Centuries of Troubadours and Trouveres: The Changing Identity of Medieval Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 210.

³⁸ Doss-Quincy, Grimbart, Pfeffer, and Aubrey, *Songs*, 147.

³⁹ Dagmar Droyen-Reber, *Harfen des Berliner Musikinstrumenten-Museums* (Berlin: Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung, 1999).

⁴⁰ Maria Christina Cleary, “European Harps Since 1500,” in *The ‘Harpe Organisée,’ 1720-1840: Rediscovering the Lost Pedal Techniques on Harps with a Single-Action Pedal Mechanism* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2016), 1–18.

Anyone who played these harps and accompanied themselves or others would have been taught some level of harmony, the rules of counterpoint, and the uses of different modes. While there are no literary examples of women teaching others harp playing that I have found, there are several references to women receiving musical training in *romances* as well as conduct literature.

Musicologists, historical harp builders, and people who study early music and historical harp playing often depend on the descriptions and depictions of harps and harpists in medieval *romances* to inform their research. Tuning, for instance, is one of several aspects of historically informed performance that can be learned from the literary harpists who tune between songs: they tuned the high pitches first, before adjusting the lower strings to match the upper octaves; instrument makers can see that the harpists of old used tools to turn tuning pegs, rather than hooks attached to the pegs themselves; and troubadour songs were in a variety of modes, which musicologists can learn from the retuning of “diatonic” harps for different pieces. Likely because the pitches of single-rowed harps had to be adjusted to the mode and hexachord of each lai before it was played, the authors of medieval romances frequently describe the harpists tuning their harps before they accompany their songs. The most commonly cited source is the romance of *Tristan*, every version of which includes harp playing and lai singing as an important aspect of Tristan’s and Isolde’s love story.

Tristan and Isolde

Although *Tristan and Isolde* is also a work of fiction, it is the most harp-centric tale from the thirteenth century with details about music and daily life that can be drawn on from an era when there is otherwise minimal written historical evidence about harpists. In every version of the *romance* from every country, we learn about women tuning, playing, and composing for the harp. In her article “Tristan’s Harp in the *Prose Tristan*,” Mary Beth Wynn collates the moments of harp and “harping” in several versions of the romance written in prose and provides both descriptions and pictorial examples of illustrations from several of the editions. Wynn details the organology of the harps in twenty versions. In a perfect example of the scarcity of sources and the tacit minimization of womens’ participation in musical culture, Wynn includes only briefly an unnamed “demoiselle” who brings the languishing Tristan a harp, tunes it and plays three

lais.⁴¹ This is accompanied by an illustration not of the *demoiselle* but of Tristan playing harp. There follows a one-sentence description of an illustration in Geneva of the *demoiselle*, her gown, her gold harp, and her playing technique, before an equally succinct narration of another painting of the *demoiselle* playing a “seven-string harp with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand” in the Nationalbibliothek in Austria. Both of these illustrations are easily accessible, and while iconography of Tristan and Isolde themselves is of course important, the inclusion of images of the *demoiselle* would supplement the author's information about harp organology and playing technique as well as provide broader context and contrast to the harps in an article specifically about the instrument, but neither image of the woman, the *demoiselle*, is included as a figure and both are made to share a single paragraph of description.

As well as playing and studying, Isolde and Tristan are also described tuning their harps in several versions of the *Tristan* story. Tristan “...took the pick in hand / adjusted the pegs and strings / some higher, some lower / just as he wanted them to be,” and Isolde, adjusting the string pegs, “nimble modulated them to the proper tone and volume.”⁴² “Picks” or “plectrum” are included in several versions of the story, and would have been tuning keys rather than a tool to strum the strings with. Thomas de Bretagne’s Isolde “...Takes the harp and concentrates on tuning it as best she can and begins composing a melody for her lai.” Two centuries later, Isolde tuning was the subject of a painting (Fig. 3.1).

⁴¹ Mary Beth Wynn, “Tristan’s Harp in the *Prose Tristan*,” *Early Music*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (May, 2017): 172.

⁴² Lee Stavenhagen, trans., “Musician,” *Tristan*, accessed October 20, 2023, <http://stavenhagen.net/GvS/Musician.html>. Stavenhagen uses logical divisions to organize “chapters” of the *romance*, therefore I have chosen to use this translation as my source for Gottfried von Strassburg’s version of *Tristan*.



Fig. 3.1: Bedford Master, *Tristan and Isolde*, 1410, illumination, 477x355mm, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, <https://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.

The *Tristan* story has included the harp as an integral part of Tristan and Isolde's relationship from early twelfth-century versions by Thomas of Britain and Marie de France, to later thirteenth-century adaptations by Gottfried von Strassburg and the fourteenth-century Middle English version in the Auchinleck manuscript.

In many versions it is unclear if Isolde has her own harp or if she plays Tristan's. The Auchinleck Manuscript's Tristrem (Tristan) accuses Ysonde (Isolde) before riding to the woods, saying, "...Wip þine harp þou wonne hir þat tide" (line 1913), (With your harp you have

wronged her that time). Regardless of who was offended by Isolde's playing, we do see that it was with *her* harp. The Auchinleck Manuscript, in Middle English, was compiled in the 1330s in the British Isles. That some version of the Tristan story made it from the continent to the Isles is not surprising, and it is helpful to see the direct translation at the time of the instrument as "harp." To harp, as a verb, was also a common phrase, as in: "Tristrem made a song / þat song Ysonde þe sleize / & harped euer among..." (lines 3026-3028) (Tristan made a song / That song Ysonde, she played well / and harped ever among...).⁴³ Here, for instance, Ysonde "harped" a song that Tristan wrote.

Later, printed versions of what became the *Prose Tristan* include the harp – rather than any other instrument – in illustrations as well as describe it as the instrument with which Tristan and other musicians accompany lais. Gottfried's Tristan studied "fiddle and hurdy-gurdy / ... the harp and the crowd, / that [he] learned from Galotten, / two Galoise masters. / Then, with the Britunoise, / who came from the town of Lut, / lyre and sambuca" (lines 3676-3682).⁴⁴ While Tristan does bring his rote to Ireland as well, the harp is the only instrument visually illustrated.⁴⁵ The "crowd" and "rote" by Gottfried's time were bowed related or identical string instruments, similar in construction to a lyre, and most commonly known as a Welsh *crwth*.⁴⁶

Isolde is also described as having actively learned harp playing. In Thomas's version, Isolde, in mourning for Tristan, tells her handmaid, "He composed for me a new lai from his grief and sorrow, and now I, for love of him, would like to compose one for him in the same form and manner, if only I can, as he made his Mortal Lai. For I have good reason to compose, just as he did, and so I wish to compose a lai with the same form as the lai he composed..." The story continues:

Brangien brings her the harp straightaway. And know that the queen was quite skilled, because *she had learned to play the harp from Tristan* when they lived in

⁴³ David Burnley and Alison Wiggins, eds., "Sir Tristrem," *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/mss/tristrem.html>.

⁴⁴ Stavenhagen, "Musician," *Tristan*.

⁴⁵ Wynn, "Tristan's Harp," 171.

⁴⁶ Bethan Miles and Robert Evans, "Crwth," *Grove Music Online*, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.52977> and Myrtle Bruce-Mitford, "Rotte," *Grove Music Online*, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.23943>

the Morrois...She composes the lyrics in a short time, but the melody is harder to compose than the words.⁴⁷ (Emphasis mine).

Gottfried von Strassburg's first mention of a harpist is not Tristan or Isolde, but King Mark's "harper...a Galois," or a Welsh harper, who plays his harp and sings a lai written by Marie de France, a trobairitz contemporary with Gottfried.⁴⁸ For Gottfried to be quoting a troubadour song written likely within only a few years of his *Tristan* implies that other details from the story can be presumed contemporary as well, such as court life, Isolde's social graces, and harp organology and playing techniques.

Gottfried writes that Isolde the elder, while tending to Tristan's wound, asks him to "let this young maiden Isolt / Be put under your instruction. / She's now working seriously at booklearning and also music. / She has accomplished quite a lot, / considering how short a time she has so far devoted to it" (lines 7844-7849).⁴⁹ But Isolde knew how to play the harp and lyre as well as viol before Tristan arrived:

This was the beauty who knew
Her native speech of Develin,
Could speak Franzois and Latin also,
Play the viol commendably
In the best foreign style.
Under her knowing fingers
The lyre spoke to her touch as soon as she picked it up.
From the harp she drew forth its fullest and strongest sounds,
And nimbly modulated them to the proper tone and volume.
This gifted girl could also sing,
Sweetly and with full voicing. (Lines 7983-7996).

He goes on to describe Isolde learning "the practice / That we call *morâliteit*"(line 8005) or, the practice of good manners that "Every lady in her youth / Should diligently attend to..." (lines

⁴⁷ Translation quoted in *Songs of the Women Trouveres*, 16.

⁴⁸ Stavenhagen, "Musician," <http://stavenhagen.net/GvS/Musician.html>.

⁴⁹ Stavenhagen, "Tantris," <http://stavenhagen.net/GvS/Tantris.html>.

8006-8008). That Gottfried refers to this practice not only elevates Isolde's social graces in the fictional world which she inhabited, but also shows that Gottfried's character of Isolde was indeed crafted after and designed to fit the mold of model contemporaneous upper class women. The Isolde in Gottfried's *romance* can be read as a considerably realistic woman, the descriptions of whom we can take as relatively historically accurate, especially when read in relation to the conduct books discussed later in this chapter.

Gottfried returns to Isolde's musicianship several times in detail; "In playing both the lyre and harp / She struck the strings from either side / With her snow-white hands to much approbation. / Not in Lut nor in Thamise / Did ladies' hands strum the strings / More pleasingly than hers did here..." (lines 8064-8071). Here Gottfried makes the assumption that his readers would have known the apparent talent of harpists from "Lut" and "Thamise" to make such a direct comparison between them and Isolde. Tristan and Isolde play music for each other, but Isolde also uses her solo instrumental music making as an alibi when Mark questions her faithfulness; "Sire, I was much occupied / With a quite unnecessary nuisance. / But I did take some diversion with the harp and the lyre." (Lines 14949-14951).⁵⁰ And later, when Tristan and Isolde are eventually banished from Mark's kingdom Tristan sends all his men home "...Except for Curvenal, / Whom he kept with him for the trip, / Giving into his charge the harp." (Lines 16654-16656).⁵¹ As the trio travels to safety, Curvenal carries the harp rather than any hunting supplies. The importance of having the harp in their exile is made clear in a later scene, describing life in the Lovers' Cave once Curvenal has delivered the harp and returned to King Mark.

But when between themselves
They wanted to forget them,
The slipped away into their cloister
And took into their hands their favorite instruments,
Which afforded them much pleasure,
And let harp and song ring out
In all the sweetness of yearning.
They alternated busying their hands and their voices—

⁵⁰ Stavenhagen, "Footprints," <http://stavenhagen.net/GvS/Footprints.html>.

⁵¹ Stavenhagen, "Eden," <http://stavenhagen.net/GvS/Eden.html>.

They fingered and they sang
Lays and tunes of love.
As their fancy took them,
They exchanged their performance.
Whichever of them held the harp,
The other, by their custom,
Sang with sweet yearning
The accompanying melody.
Each of these contributions,
From the harp and the voice,
When they were produced together,
Harmonized with such sweetness
As well befitted that Love
For whom the cloister had been named
La fossiure a la gent amant.” (Lines 17200-17222).

Tristan is only one of several romances that discusses women playing – and tuning – harps, both as accompaniment for *lais* and as solo instruments. In *The Romance of Horn*, an adventure-romance by Thomas from the 1170s, the heroine Lenburc “first tunes her harp, raising its pitch, and then begins her song.”⁵² Her songs are self-accompanied *lais*. Fresne in the early-thirteenth-century romance *Galeran de Bretagne* also accompanies her *lais*, as evidenced repeatedly in the story but beginning with “En sur jour entent a ouvrer; / Mais au main et a la vesprée / A sa herpe bien atrempée / Ou elle note laiz et chantes.” (During her journey, she works, but in the morning and the evening she tunes her harp well, she plays and sings *lais*.)⁵³ Even in iconography, tuning was an unavoidable element of harp playing, as seen in a 12th century image of a woman tuning her harp (Fig. 3.2, below).

⁵² Coldwell, “*Jouglersesses and Trobairitz*,” 42.

⁵³ Jean Dufournet, trans., *Galeran de Bretagne, édition bilingue* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2009), 302-303. I am grateful to Anicet Castel for his help in translating the Breton French.



Fig. 3.2: Anonymous, 1120-1150, *De Institutione Musica*, manuscript, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, <https://natlib.govt.nz/blog/posts/parchment-paper-and-pixels-medieval-and-renaissance-manuscripts-in-the-turnbull-library>.

In *Galeran de Bretagne*, the heroine Fresne uses her harp as the way to make a living once she has left the nunnery in which she was raised. On her travels, “Souvent la fait gesir a aise / La bonne herpe qu’elle porte, / Dont souvent ses hostes deportte, / Qu’a pou ou a neent excoute” (She often obtains a comfortable lodging thanks to the harp she carries, and with which she regales her host, so that she has little to pay, or even nothing.)⁵⁴

Once in a new town, Fresne (under the alias Mahaut) explains her situation to a bourgeois townswoman, “Brete sui, s’ay a non Mahaut, / Si suis une pucelle estrange / Qui n’ay terre, maison ne grange, / Ne rente dont je puisse vivre. / Je ne sçay fors tenir mon livre / Et en ma harpe laiz chanter; / Et des tables qu’assés en sçay” (I am Breton and my name is Mahaut. I am a young stranger who has no land, no house, no farm, no income on which I can live. I only know how to hold my book and sing lais with my harp; I know chess and backgammon well...)⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Dufournet, *Galeran*, 292-293.

⁵⁵ Dufournet, *Galeran*, 294-295.

Galeran also contains an interesting line of information about the technicalities of traveling with a harp; “Si trova l’en cest oreiller / Que vous me veez cy baillier / Contre mon pix, quant harper vueil,” she carries a pillow which she puts against her chest when she plays the harp, presumably to cushion her body from the sharp kneeblock of the medieval instrument.⁵⁶ From the romances it is easy to see that women playing the harp was, if not commonplace, at least unexceptional. The three women discussed above – Isolde, Lenbure, and Fresne – were not denounced for their music making; their harp playing helped to demonstrate their education, gentility, and self-reliance.

Gender and Conduct Literature

The concept of “*moraliteit*” that Gottfried introduces to show Isolde’s social and moral accomplishments and lauds as the practice that “every lady in her youth should diligently attend to” is directly in line with the rising genre of “conduct books” that he would have been familiar with. Conduct books, or courtesy books, were in essence handbooks with instructions and advice regarding how to conduct oneself appropriately in social, political, and private situations. Many books were written with separate sections for men and women, and several addressed a variety of social scenarios with specific instructions for bourgeois, merchant class, and lower class citizens. Much of the focus for men centers on “moral virtues of chivalry,” table manners, and political and interpersonal negotiations.⁵⁷

Among the few conduct books that mention music, the main instruction is about how women should sing and respond to being asked to sing “with a touch of shyness”⁵⁸ or sing “beautifully, / In a low voice.”⁵⁹ Instruments are notably absent from instruction, especially considering how many visual depictions we have of women performing. By comparing Isolde’s non-musical education with written instructions for conduct at the time, however, we can presume that her musical prowess was similarly in line with expected or appreciated instrumental abilities for young women, even when it is not a primary concern in the conduct books.

⁵⁶ Dufournet, *Galeran*, 462-463.

⁵⁷ Mark D. Johnston and Kathleen M. Ashley, “Introduction,” in *Medieval Conduct Literature: an Anthology of Vernacular Guides to Behaviour for Youths, with English Translations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), xi.

⁵⁸ Count Baldassarre Castiglione, “The Third Book,” in *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (United Kingdom: Duckworth & Co., 1901), 179.

⁵⁹ Johnston and Ashley, *Medieval Conduct Literature*, 134-135.

J. Michele Edwards, in her chapter on “Women in Music to c. 1450” gives a helpful overview of some of the conduct books that describe women making music, and points out that “French treatises do not generally condemn public performance by women, but one early fourteenth-century Italian treatise by Francesco da Barberino, *Del reggimento e costumi di donna*, seeks to limit women’s musical activity to the private sphere.”⁶⁰

In his *Reggimento*, Barberino describes what he calls “chamber song” as “low,” although whether that is in pitch or volume (or both) is unclear, and he refers only to women making music through singing rather than instrumental playing; “When she must / Sing at the request of her lord, / mother, / or friends, / She should do so beautifully, / In a low voice, / Remaining steady, courteous, and / With her eyes lowered / Turned towards the most important / Person at the table. / This low singing / Called chamber song, is most / Pleasing and goes to the heart; / A poet of Provence / Says this about it: / ‘Every song is performed / More sweetly with a delicate voice / And most quickly strikes the heart.’”⁶¹

Unfortunately for the purposes of this thesis, when he mentions a psaltery in the next section, he only describes the woman dancing to the music and not the musician. “[Her mother] and other guests / Made / Her dance to the sound of a psaltery; / It / Happened that, while trying to dance / And / Leap, she fell, revealing her leg...” Of high class women, “It seems...that it suits her status / At this time to learn / To read and write properly / So that, if she happens / To be in charge of land or men / She will be more ready to rule.”

Barberino obviously puts stricter limitations on the uppermost echelon of women, with a focus on a pursuit of the education necessary to assist her on the off chance she is “in charge of land or men,” and the ruling woman in question would have little or no use for music making – likely because she would need to relinquish all frivolity in order to be taken as seriously as a man in charge. Alternatively, for a woman who is the daughter of a “knight of the shield / A noble judge / ...A noble doctor / ...Or of another nobleman,” he allows that “she can be much freer to laugh / Play / And to go out honorably / As well as to entertain herself / With dancing and singing.”⁶² Again, he does not mention instrumental music playing, but the implication remains that women would have some sort of musical education. Where it is implied that they would *not*

⁶⁰ J. Michele Edwards, “Women in Music to c. 1450,” in *Women & Music: A History*, ed. Karin Pendle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 16.

⁶¹ All translations of Barberino from Johnston and Ashley, 134-135.

⁶² Johnston and Ashley, *Medieval Conduct Literature*, 141-142.

have any education – in fact, where he advises against it specifically – is in the case of the “daughters of lesser men,”⁶³ who “...can laugh, play / And cry and sing / More freely / Than those mentioned above / And need show no cares in the world.”⁶⁴

A 1405 work speaks more explicitly about the music and instruments of women. Christine de Pizan wrote “The Book of the City of Ladies” in what could be seen as a pushback against the male-authored conduct books of her era. The “City of Ladies” is in essence a defense of women, drawing on historical and mythological figures such as Minerva, Mary Magdalene, and the Amazons to prove women’s competency through analogy, allegory, and anecdotes. Because of the obvious objective goals of the book, the historical truth of the anecdotes should be understood for what they are – intentional messages in descriptive language, with details likely drawn from the extant written histories and mythology known in fifteenth century Italy and France.

The allegorical and mythological women who play music include “Proba, a Christian lady of Rome...[who] had such a fine mind and so dedicated herself to learning that she excelled in the seven liberal arts and became a remarkable poet.”⁶⁵ The seven liberal arts were grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and of course music. The next example used is Sappho, who “took up a plectrum and played lovely tunes on the harp...that is to say, she learnt the art of musical chords as well as the rules of harmonics.”⁶⁶ She “invented many new forms of song...including lays.”

It is interesting that in an example about Minerva’s inventions, de Pizan leans into the masculinization of the goddess; one of Minerva’s inventions, “which was all the more marvelous for being such an unlikely thing for a woman to think of” was forging iron and steel armor and weapons.⁶⁷ Directly following the “unlikely” inventions for warmongering, de Pizan writes, “Likewise, she invented flutes, pipes, trumpets, and other wind instruments.”⁶⁸ What de Pizan implies is that it is as unlikely for a woman to invent (and presumably, play) wind instruments as it is for her to invent metal weaponry. Directly in comparison with Minerva, Sempronia of Rome

⁶³ Johnston and Ashley, *Medieval Conduct Literature*, 148.

⁶⁴ Johnston and Ashley, *Medieval Conduct Literature*, 149.

⁶⁵ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 59.

⁶⁶ Pizan, *City of Ladies*, 61.

⁶⁷ Pizan, *City of Ladies*, 67.

⁶⁸ Pizan, *City of Ladies*, 67.

plays stringed instruments and is incredibly well versed in codes of conduct: “She spoke in such sweet tones and conducted herself in such a courtly manner that those around her never tire of looking at her or listening to her. She had an exquisite singing voice and could play any *stringed instrument* perfectly, winning all competitions” (emphasis mine).⁶⁹ This is also an example of a casual description of women playing music in public and at competitions, which we can see as well in historical sources. The *Puy d’Arras*, a type of musical organization based in Paris, for instance, held several competitions yearly for chanson compositions, and by 1224 women were involved in the *Puy*.⁷⁰

One of the most famous conduct books by a man was “The Courtier,” by Baldesar Castiglione. Published in 1528 (written between 1508-1516), “The Courtier” was a set of four conduct books intended for upper class audiences in dialogue format. After the first publication in Italian, between 1534 and 1566 the book was translated and published in Spanish, French, English, Latin, and German. Before the end of the fifteenth century, there were no fewer than 100 editions published, followed by 14 in the 1600s, 11 in the 1700s, and 15 in the 1800s. Castiglione includes discussions of everything from the physical and moral qualities of a good courtier to dancing appropriate for elderly men, French and Spanish manners, practical jokes, and monarchy versus the commonwealth. The Third Book focuses on “the Court Lady;” after bemoaning women in antiquity wrestling naked with men, and hearing the character of Cesare Gonzaga describe that seeing women “play tennis, handle weapons, go hunting, and perform nearly all the exercises that a cavalier can,” the narrator describes his ideal woman:

Since I may fashion this Lady as I wish, not only am I unwilling to have her practise such vigorous and rugged manly exercises, but I would have her practise even those that are becoming to women, circumspectly and with that gentle daintiness which we have said befits her; and thus in dancing I would not see her use too active and violent movements, nor in singing or playing those abrupt and oft-repeated diminutions which show more skill than sweetness; likewise the musical instruments that she uses ought, in my opinion, to be appropriate to this intent.⁷¹

The last two sentences in this passage are the most intriguing; Castiglione believes playing diminutions “shows more skill than sweetness,” which, in his eyes, is a bad thing. To play a

⁶⁹ Pizan, *City of Ladies*, 77-78.

⁷⁰ Doss-Quincy, Grimbert, Pfeffer, and Aubrey, *Songs*, 22-23.

⁷¹ Castiglione, *Courtier*, 179.

diminution was to ornament a melodic line, usually improvising at a highly virtuosic level that required a deep understanding of technique, harmony, and rhetoric. Some compositions included written-out diminutions, but often musicians would improvise over a ground bass or simple existing melody using formulae set out in ornamentation or embellishment tables in performance treatises. What “shows more skill” not only shows technical accomplishment at an instrument, but also a familiarity with the contemporary literature and treatises. The playing techniques and organological capabilities of different instruments require different approaches to diminutions as well, showing further competency on the part of the musicians.

The last sentence continues, “Imagine how unlovely it would be to see a woman play drums, fifes or trumpets, or other like instruments; and this because their harshness hides and destroys that mild gentleness which so much adorns every act a woman does.”⁷² Castiglione does not list the instruments he deems appropriate for a woman to play, but as the commonality with “drums, fifes, and trumpets” is volume and a harsh acoustic attack, we can assume instruments with “gentle daintiness” and “mild gentleness” are ones which are quiet with a “gentle” acoustic attack. In a return to a more typical tone for a conduct book, Castiglione then describes how a woman should act when asked to perform music or dance:

Therefore when she starts to dance or make music of any kind, she ought to bring herself to it by letting herself be urged a little, and with a touch of shyness which shall show that noble shame [i.e. modesty] which is the opposite of effrontery.⁷³

Conclusion

Stringed instruments were clearly the instruments considered acceptable for women to play, from ancient mythology through the medieval romances. These included most frequently harps, but also citharas, lyres, lute, citol, psalterium, and occasionally the vielle or rebec in the *romances*. Of these instruments, only the last two are bowed and the rest are plucked with the fingers or a plectrum. As citharas, lyres, citols, psalteriums, and lutes fell out of style and use in later centuries and corseting and tight sleeves limited womens’ mobility for bowing, the harp maintained its position as a woman’s instrument. I posit that the longstanding belief that harp was an instrument played by women, backed up by iconography as well as literature, actually

⁷² Castiglione, *Courtier*, 179.

⁷³ Castiglione, *Courtier*, 179.

created further opportunities for professional women harpists, who used the self-perpetuating cycle to their advantage by knowingly and actively continuing it.

CHAPTER 4: LUCREZIA URBANA CASE STUDY

The *romances*, conduct literature, and non-fictional harpists discussed in the previous chapter exemplify a continuous throughline of women playing the harp for leisure, work, and social gentility from the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century. In the late sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth century, the organology of harps expanded yet again, accommodating the requirements of continuo playing and newly-acceptable chromaticism. The players of these sizable *arpe doppie* improvised melodies and counterpoint over existing ground basses, but also adapted their chordal accompaniment to the increasingly complex figured bass continuo. One of these harpists was Lucrezia Urbana.

This final chapter is a case study of Lucrezia Urbana, a professional harpist, during her five-year employment at the Mantuan court, 1603-1608. During her time in Mantua, Urbana would have performed as an ensemble member in both small chamber ensembles and large-scale spectacles such as the premiere of Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, as well as given solo performances for court members. In this chapter I will argue that although there were many women harpists in the Italian city-states around the turn of the seventeenth century, only one was treated as a fully professional instrumentalist, who was even more highly regarded than her male counterparts. Urbana was a soloist and ensemble player, and the only woman harpist I have found without an aristocratic upbringing or familial musical connections to her employment, or an existing primary career as a singer. As well, unlike the women who sang in *concerti delle donne* across Italy at the time, Urbana was not officially a part of the Duchess's – or any lady's – household; instead, she was employed in the same way as the other instrumentalists, on the payroll of the court as a musician. In this chapter, I will situate Urbana as a working court musician in the early seventeenth century in relation to two other women, Laura Peverara and Adriana Basile, also active as harpists in Northern Italy at the time.

While Urbana did not have the moniker “prima donna della monde” that Adriana Basile did, and her name is not associated with the legendary *musica secreta*, as Laura Peverara's is, she did lead a remarkable life as a musician from Naples to Mantua to Rome, collaborating with musicians such as Monteverdi, Francesco Rasi, Girolamo Frescobaldi, and Alessandro Piccinini. Of a lower class than Basile or Peverara, Urbana appears to have financially supported her widowed mother and many siblings, all of whom traveled along to her various musical

commitments. She eventually chose a husband for a marriage that was professionally – not financially – strategic, a man who became known as one “who is married to that very good harpist.” Lucrezia Urbana’s unlikely life story is one of a woman who navigated a world in which she was an outsider, negotiated her own employment conditions, and was paid more than any other instrumentalist at the court.

Laura Peverara and Adriana Basile

In late renaissance and early baroque Northern Italy, there were several ways in which women played harp professionally; as ensemble members, self-accompanied singers, and court musicians. In the following section, I will illustrate this using the examples of two aristocratic women – Laura Peverara and Adriana Basile – before discussing a lower class harpist, Lucrezia Urbana. Peverara and Basile, both from an upper class that was not quite nobility, had access to a high level of education and ingrained knowledge of social mores as well as familial wealth. Both were, of course, paid as employees of the courts and households that they were parts of, but neither would have needed to perform for income.

Laura Peverara

Of the three women discussed in this chapter, Laura Peverara is the earliest. Peverara (sometimes Peperara) was born in Mantua in 1563, and “brought up in Mantuan courtly circles, the daughter of a respected Mantuan intellectual, and educated with the princes of that court,” where she grew into her musical talents.⁷⁴ We know that she was not allowed to join the Accademia Filharmonia in Verona as an instrumentalist, and that in 1580 she moved to Ferrara. Several anthologies of madrigals are dedicated to her, likely by composer members of the Accademia, and possibly as a parting gift. These dedications confirm that she was highly regarded, even if she was denied entry to the ensemble as a performer. (According to the musicologist at the Filharmonia today, Marco Materassi, their reasoning for this exclusion was that the association had no chairs that were appropriate for a woman.)⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Anthony Newcomb, “Peverara [Peperara], Laura,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed March, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.21514>.

⁷⁵ Marco Materassi, consultant musicologist at the Accademia Filarmonica di Verona and professor of music history and aesthetics at the Verona conservatory, personal conversation, July 8, 2023.

Peverara's exclusion from the *Filharmonia* and move to Ferrara was a good thing in the end, as in the winter of 1580-1581, the now-famous *concerto di donne* was formed in Ferrara, with Peverara as the focal soprano. The *concerto* in the 1580s in Ferrara had a core of three women singers, each of whom also played an instrument; Livia d'Arco, as her name implies, played the viol, Anna Guarini the lute, and Peverara the harp.

Peverara's harp is, incredibly, still in playable condition and the decoration and later painting and gilding has been well documented.⁷⁶ Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, commissioned the instrument for her from the Roman luthier, G.B. Jakometti. The harp, although richly decorated, is fairly small with a range of about four-and-a-half treble octaves. The relatively small size of the instrument confirms what the written sources tell us: that Laura would have primarily accompanied herself and other treble voices, either with chords or counterpoint in a small room and so would not have needed a lower range or more volume for her *musica secreta* performances, best described by Newcomb as "intimate gatherings attended only by the most favored members of the court or by important visitors," and held in the private chambers of the Duke or Duchess.⁷⁷

Music at the Ferrarese court was not only for private performance, however; large-scale *balletti* and Carnival productions were also an important element of the musical culture. As Newcomb points out, there were no fewer than ten composers at the Ferrarese court paid for their music in the 1580s through 1590s, but "none was given as high a salary as the most famous of the virtuoso singers and instrumentalists within the regular cappella, to say nothing of the musicians of the *musica secreta*."⁷⁸ There were performances of the *balletto delle donne* and the *concerto delle donne*, which were "a showcase for the beautiful and talented ladies of [the Duchess's] court."⁷⁹ In several letters and diary entries, courtiers and ambassadors recount the ladies retiring to the Duchess's chambers for music or dancing, including hours-long vocal chamber concerts whilst members of the court played cards or backgammon.⁸⁰ Peverara was

⁷⁶ In the late 1580s, Peverara's harp was painted and gilded with gold by a G. Mariscotti, and in 1591, a luthier in Ferrara, Rosselli, attached a gilded floral and foliage decoration to the top of the column and along the neck.

⁷⁷ Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara 1579-1597*, Volume 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 4.

⁷⁸ Newcomb, "The Madrigal at Ferrara," 30.

⁷⁹ Newcomb, "The Madrigal at Ferrara," 41.

⁸⁰ Newcomb, "The Madrigal at Ferrara," 35, 26.

involved in all of these events, and her upbringing would have allowed her to easily navigate courtly life as a member of the Duchess's household, even if she was originally recruited for her singing and harp playing.

There are several letters that illustrate how highly Peverara was thought of as a member of the court, separate from her musical prowess, including details of her accommodations at the palace. A letter sent in March of 1582 outlining the post-wedding plans for Peverara and her husband says, "...la Signora Peppera will marry Count Annibale Turco, whom Duke Alfonso will accept as a gentleman of the court and to whom he will give the provision that he gives the other barons of the realm," and in February of 1583, "the couple [Laura Peverara and Count Annibale Turco] was to have the palace apartments of the late Madama Leonora d'Este...plus all the rooms on the floor below once held for Count Ottavio Landi."⁸¹ Peverara's marriage to a count, Annibale Turco, was likely a marriage of love as he was above her in class. In the late sixteenth century, it was "crucial for the...bride and groom to come from the same social rank,"⁸² Peverara's father would not have been able to afford the dowry for her to marry a count, and therefore Turco would have had to accept what he was offered instead of what he was owed according to his rank. Interestingly, this is the first example of three in this thesis where we see the husband of a female musician earning employment or a position at court secondary to the position their wives held.

Adriana Basile

Like Peverara, our second harpist of note, Adriana Basile, was also more widely known as a singer. Born in Posillipo around 1590, her life is well documented. A collection of poetry dedicated to her provides a biography up to the point of its publication in 1623. As well, a full biography, drawn from historical records, was published in 1888 and titled "La Bell'Adriana."⁸³ As such, more information is available about Basile than the other harpists described here, although most of the research undertaken focuses on her vocal talent rather than her harp playing.

⁸¹ Newcomb, "The Madrigal at Ferrara," 188.

⁸² Mary Rogers and Paolo Tinagli, "Betrothals and Weddings," in *Women in Italy, 1350-1630: Ideals and Realities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 115.

⁸³ Alessandro Ademollo, *La Bell'Adriana ed Altre Virtuose del suo Tempo* (Castello: S. Lapi Tipografo, 1888).

Basile was recruited from the household of Isabella Gonzaga, wife of the Duke of Traetto, to Mantua by Vincenzo, then the Duke of Mantua, in 1610 when she was about 20 years old.⁸⁴ She traveled with a sister and two brothers, as well as her husband (a doctor) and children.⁸⁵ Basile stayed at Mantua through Vincenzo's death and the ascension of his brother Francesco to the dukedom, but returned to Naples in 1624. Unlike Urbana's family, we have detailed documentation of Basile's siblings; her sisters Vittoria and Margherita (who joined the family in Mantua later) were both singers, and her brother Lelio was a composer. The career of a second brother, Francesco, is unclear, but a third, Giambattista, was "nominated Cavaliere and Conte Palatino" and published several volumes of poetry.⁸⁶ Basile's daughters, Leonora and Caterina, later became singers as well.

While Basile was recruited for her vocal skills, the first letter regarding that recruitment also highlights her harp playing: "My brother tells me that he knows an excellent singer of Naples..." a 1609 letter to the Duke of Mantua from Giuseppe Faccone begins, and "...she plays the harp most excellently and sings well." He goes on to describe her self-accompaniment on the Spanish guitar, her memorization of "more than three hundred works," and that "she would have been snapped up by some important Cardinals...but she was judged too beautiful."⁸⁷

Basile's harp playing is documented in other sources as well. Bosi's translation of a 1611 letter describing Basile's performance reads: "She sang above all playing a harp, whose large size produced a marvel of sound of sweet music, and the strings obeyed that magisterial hand so harmoniously, that their delightful vibration did not go beyond moderation, so as to respect the pre-eminence of the voice."⁸⁸ Her writer-brother Giambattista, mentioned her harp twice in letters in 1613 and 1628, which describe "[Adriana's] arpa a due registri" (harp with two registers i.e. two rows of strings) and "arpa doppia," (double harp) respectively. From these descriptions, it is apparent that Basile's harp was one of the confusing *arpe doppie* with only two

⁸⁴ The spelling "Adriana" is a Mantuan dialect; in the Archivio Gonzaga, she signed her name "Andriana." Because my focus is on the Mantuan court, I will use the Mantuan spelling.

⁸⁵ Kathryn Bosi, "Adriana's Harp: Paintings, Poetic Imagery, and Musical Tributes for the *Sirena di Posilippo*," in *Imago Musicae*, No. 30 (2018), 77.

⁸⁶ Bosi, "Adriana's Harp," 77, n1.

⁸⁷ Kathryn Bosi, "*La Sirena, il Cardinale e il Duca*: The Fame and Fortune of Adriana Basile, *napolitana*," Ensemble Vivante program note (Boston: Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2015), 26.

⁸⁸ Bosi, "Adriana's Harp," 79 n14.

rows of strings rather than three. It is possible that Basile's harp came from a *commedia dell'arte* actress called Flavia, as Katherine Bosi has uncovered.⁸⁹

Basile's recruitment to the Mantuan court took longer than Vincenzo anticipated, largely because of her own stipulations, which stemmed from her concern for propriety. This concern was likely influenced by her previous position in the house of Isabella Gonzaga. In her introduction to Basile's negotiations, Bosi writes:

From the beginning of the negotiations Adriana had requested a specific invitation from the Duchess of Mantua, Eleanora Gonzaga, to enter her service...we note with which particular insistence Adriana asks to be housed near her Excellency the Duchess, ostensibly to escape the unhealthy air of Mantua.⁹⁰

While Bosi points to the "unhealthy air" of the city as a reason Basile may have wanted her rooms to be close to the Duchess, it is also clear that Basile was concerned about her reputation and wanted it to be widely known that she was in the employ of the Duchess rather than the Duke. This is evidenced in a 1609 letter to Vincenzo regarding Basile's imminent employment, from Paolo Faccone, possibly best described as a recruitment officer or talent scout:

Adreana replies on behalf of herself, her husband and her relatives that she will be particularly pleased to enter the service of their Highnesses. But she desires to specify the following conditions: Firstly, that she does not deem it so seemly to depart for the said service without the particular request of their Highnesses the Duchess and the hereditary Princess [Margherita of Savoy]; so that they recognize and understand that her aim is to serve them as a lowly servant amongst their own, and nothing else, and that their Highnesses will deign to write to the Vice Regina of Naples, to attest that the same ladies call and command her, so that she can serve them preserving her reputation and respecting her relatives, and that it be known that her departure is on the particular request of Their Highnesses, so that she is greatly honoured. Secondly, it is requested that His Highness the Duke will employ Signor Muzio Baroni, her husband, along with Giovanni Battista her brother, who are able persons...⁹¹

As illustrated in this letter, Adriana was very much aware of her position as a talented musician, and used her sway as a virtuosa to state her own recruitment requirements. She was concerned with both "preserving her reputation" and employing her husband, a doctor from

⁸⁹ Translated in Bosi, "Adriana's Harp," 86. Flavia's full name was Margherita Luciani.

⁹⁰ Kathryn Bosi, "Recruiting a Virtuoso Singer in Early Seventeenth-Century Italy: Adriana Basile, 'La Sirena di Posillipo'," in *ActaLauris*, No. 4 (2018), 80-81.

⁹¹ Bosi, "Recruiting," 81-82.

Calabrian nobility.⁹² Basile maintained that she did not want to leave Naples unless Eleanora asked her to (the recruiter described her as “stubborn as a Spanish mule”⁹³) and there followed, in 1609 and 1610, fairly hostile exchanges between Duke Vincenzo, Adriana, another recruiter Ottavio Gentili, and Muzio Baroni, until the Duchess Eleanora eventually did write to Basile, at which point negotiations were almost instantly concluded and the Baroni-Basile clan moved to Mantua, where Adriana sang for the court for less than a year before she (not her husband) was given the baronetcy of Monferrato and a 70 *scudi* annual income from the fiefdom.⁹⁴

Nina Treadwell points out that “in a number of contemporary accounts of the *concerto delle donne* physical beauty was an attribute given as much, if not more importance, than musical talent.”⁹⁵ It appears that both Dukes Vincenzo in Mantua and Alfonso in Ferrara were invested in the recruitment of beautiful young women to their services; Peverara was first noticed by Alfonso when “...he saw a young lady who was rather beautiful and, *in addition*, had the virtue of singing and playing excellently” (emphasis mine).⁹⁶ Adriana, by all accounts, was not only talented but physically attractive as well if the countless poems about her many virtues are to be believed, and both dukes Vincenzo and Francesco commissioned paintings of her.

While Peverara was known by her admirers as “beata Sirena” and Basile as “la bella Adriana.” Urbana was fondly called “la Goba,” or “the hunchback,” and whether she had an actual physical difference or whether the nickname was based on a necessity for learning forward to play continuo on harp, she was apparently not considered beautiful – a letter from her time at the Bentivoglios cheekily says “The Neapolitan harp player has decided...to take a husband as good-looking as she is.”⁹⁷ A critical disability analysis would say that Lucrezia was reduced to

⁹² Susan Parisi, "Basile [Baroni], Adriana," *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed 20 Feb. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.90000380504>.

⁹³ Bosi, “*La Sirena*,” 28.

⁹⁴ Paola Besutti, “Monteverdi’s ‘Daily Bread’,” *Early Music* vol. 45, no. 3 (August, 2017): 359 and 363, endnote 40.

⁹⁵ Nina Treadwell, “Restaging the Siren: Musical Women in the Performance of Sixteenth-Century Italian Theater,” PhD diss. (University of Southern California, 2000), 175.

⁹⁶ Newcomb translation of a 1580 letter, in “The Madrigal at Ferrara,” 11.

⁹⁷ Frederick Hammond, “Rome, 1608-1615: Casa Bentivoglio,” Girolamo Frescobaldi: an Extended Biography, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://girolamofrescobaldi.com/6-rome-1608-1615-casa-bentivoglio/>. Hammond wrote the definitive biography on Frescobaldi, “Girolamo Frescobaldi,” published in 1983. The 1983 publication does not include the letters or information about Urbana, so I am consulting Hammond’s updated online resource, the *Extended Biography*. The website contains hyperlinks

being known for her physical difference, deformity, or disability, which somehow outweighed her technical skill and incredible virtuosity on her instrument. While this is one conclusion, a more radical interpretation could be that she was treated equitably as a professional instrumentalist rather than objectified for her feminine virtues by the male gaze – she was neither an elite “beautiful and talented” singer in a Duchess’s household, nor a superstar solo vocalist with “serene ivory eyebrows.”⁹⁸

Non-aristocratic women who worked as instrumentalists in the early seventeenth century, whether harpists or not, have almost always been discussed in connection with their male, musician relatives; the Pelizzari sisters played wind instruments at court with their father and brother; Francesca Caccini, who played lute and harp, is almost always described as the daughter of the famous composer Giulio Caccini; even the subset of women who are most frequently written about as guitarists and lutenists were the late renaissance courtesans, who, while not always described in relation to specific men, are categorized according to their sex work profession, with an implicit relation to men. Laura Peverara avoided this male association through her chamber ensemble of and for women, and Adriana Basile through her pre-employment marriage and insistence on joining the Duchess’s household. Lucrezia Urbana was also not known for her relation to men, except as a member of an otherwise entirely male ensemble, but rather for her individual and exceptional talent. As I argue below, however, Urbana did not have the aristocratic upbringing of Peverara, nor the marital connection to nobility that Basile did. As well, her self-advocacy in and navigation through the court spheres that she was unfamiliar with makes her an intriguing study, and the primary focus of the rest of this chapter.

Lucrezia Urbana

Lucrezia Urbana’s life and career as a harpist is full of fascinating twists and turns, as she navigated Northern Italy with a harp and a motley crew of brothers, a tagalong sister, an unemployed husband, and eventually children. While tracing her full biography would be a much larger project, involving more archival research and piecing together disparate fragments of information than is possible in this current thesis, I have summarized what is known below.

to original language sources and detailed archive citations. All translations in the *Extended Biography* are by Frederick Hammond.

⁹⁸ From *Teatro delle glorie* 1623, as translated in Bosi, “Adriana’s Harp,” 89, n50.

Urbana was born in Naples, probably in the early 1580s.⁹⁹ In 1603 she moved with her sister, three brothers, and widowed mother to Mantua for the express purpose of playing harp at the court. She was employed there for five years, during which time she was paid more than any other musician and given a glowing recommendation when she left in 1608 that lauds her “virtuous and honored qualities”¹⁰⁰ as well as her harp playing.¹⁰¹

In June of 1608, Urbana had apparently planned to move back to Naples, and it is possible she did so briefly for the summer. Francesca Fantappie writes that she then traveled to Florence in December with her mother and a “great number of brothers,” (*nutrita schiera di fratelli*) to play harp at the wedding of Cosimo II and Maria Magdalena of Austria.¹⁰² Fantappie’s timeline is slightly off; the wedding was actually in October of 1608, but she does provide the incredibly detailed death certificate of Lucia Urbana, the Urbana matriarch, dated December 2, 1608.

By February of 1609, Urbana was in Rome in the house of Enzo Bentivoglio, hired for six *scudi* per month, equal to the *maestro di casa* and the highest salary in the household,¹⁰³ in addition to her monetary compensation, she was assigned two ladies-in-waiting, and two of her brothers were hired as pages as well. There are records indicating that her sister Camilla was also with her in Rome, but it is unclear where the third brother was.¹⁰⁴

During her time in Enzo’s employ, Urbana ostensibly studied at least counterpoint and possibly singing with Girolamo Frescobaldi, while she also performed on her own merit in a trio

⁹⁹ While there are no extant records of Urbana’s birth or age, we can presume that she would not have been much older than 20 by the time she arrived at the Mantuan court.

¹⁰⁰ Sergio Durante and Dinko Fabris, eds., “Frescobaldi e la musica in casa Bentivoglio,” in *Girolamo Frescobaldi Nel IV Centenario Dalla Nascita* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1986), 78, n53. All Durante and Fabris translations are mine.

¹⁰¹ Francesca Fantappie, “Dalla Tradizione Civica dei ‘Sonatori d’Arpe,’” in *Dalla tradizione civica dei “sonatori d’arpe” all’ “harpa Irlandese doppia”*: Nuovi documenti per uno studio della pratica e diffusione di questo strumento a Firenze tra cinque e seicento, extract from Studi Secenteschi Vol. LVIII (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2017). Full employment records will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁰² Fantappie, “Dalla tradizione civica,” 151.

¹⁰³ Individual city-states across Italy used differing monetary systems in the 17th century. *Scudi* and *lire* in Roma and in Mantua were worth different amounts, and it is extremely difficult to identify a consistent conversion rate.

¹⁰⁴ Anthony Newcomb, “Girolamo Frescobaldi, 1608-1615: A Documentary Study in Which Information Also Appears Concerning Giulio and Settimio Caccini, the Brothers Piccinini, Stefano Landi, and Ippolita Recupita” in *Annales musicologiques: Moyen-age et Renaissance*, Vol. 7 (1977), 120. This source also includes a detailed account of the scandal mentioned below, and full translations plus original text of all letters.

with Frescobaldi and Alessandro Piccinini, the lutenist, both of whom wrote music for her to play. Unfortunately, by July of 1609, Frescobaldi was embroiled in – and likely framed for – an indelicate scandal involving (broken) promises of engagements to various daughters of Giulio Caccini, and an unintended pregnancy, which culminated in Frescobaldi’s eventual request to leave the service of the Bentivoglios. While Urbana does not appear to have been personally involved in the scandal that was unfolding through accidentally-sent letters and misunderstandings, by September of 1609 Enzo asked her to remain in a monastery in Rome and essentially to keep her head down. It appears that at this time, Urbana’s status as an unmarried woman began to be a problem, but she did have a contract for five years of service to the Bentivoglios. In September she wrote from the monastery to Enzo asking for a job for her sister, and continued to perform for Enzo, ostensibly only sleeping at the monastery away from the other working members of the court.

After what must have been a simultaneously stressful and musically frustrating year following the scandal, Urbana was described in a letter from the Marchesa to Giovanni Bentivoglio in June of 1610, as “resolved to take a husband,” concluding that “*acio sia lui quello che la serve*” (he will be the one who serves her).¹⁰⁵ The Marchesa describes Urbana’s pick, a man named Domenico Visconti, as a “young fellow who...has not a cent,” and it appears that once they did marry, Urbana convinced Enzo to take Visconti on as a servant for little more than room and board. That same year, Caterina Bentivoglio wrote to Enzo, her husband, that “...Our Neapolitan has married that young man who plays the harpsichord...as soon as she is married she will go to her husband’s house with her whole family; God be praised that we will be delivered from this expense.”¹⁰⁶ And in 1612, Vincenzo Landinelli (Enzo’s steward) explained to Flemish visitors that “...maintaining this Napolitana with her brothers and sisters¹⁰⁷ cost [the Duke] more than a thousand *scudi* a year, and [he] spend[s] as much again in maintaining other similar virtuosi who sing...”¹⁰⁸ Urbana’s sudden desire for a husband may well have stemmed from the looming reality that it was financially unfeasible for courts to continue hiring her entire

¹⁰⁵ Newcomb, “Girolamo Frescobaldi,” 136.

¹⁰⁶ Hammond, “Rome, 1608-1615.”

¹⁰⁷ This is almost certainly a spelling or translation error; I have found no other reference to a second sister.

¹⁰⁸ Hammond, “Rome, 1608-1615.”

family, and socially unacceptable for her to travel or be employed alone, as an unmarried woman in her late twenties.

In 1611 while she was still a member of the Bentivoglios' *casa*, Urbana received a letter from Cosimo II asking her to recommend a harp teacher for Magli, the castrato who had sung the roles of Musica and Euridice in *L'Orfeo*, and who also sang at Cosimo's wedding. Urbana likely ended up teaching Magli herself the next year, when she and Visconti moved to Florence. In February of 1612, a letter from Landinelli to Enzo hints at a frustratingly unclear second scandal, this time involving Urbana or her sister:

As to the Neapolitan I have already written with the previous letters what is happening[,] how she is constrained to leave her sister[;] one cannot avoid everything being discovered, and charity urges that this affair be kept concealed for the love of God if not for any other reason, and Your Most Illustrious Lordship must consider [if] she is not to have an unhappy life...

By June 13 of 1612, Urbana wrote to Enzo that "Signor Landinelli has let me know that you no longer want the services of me or my husband, so if you send word he will settle our accounts..." and a week later, she sent another letter to say that she and her husband had been accepted into the service of Antonio Medici in Florence.¹⁰⁹ It seems that the expense of keeping the Urbanas, potentially combined with a desire to start afresh after the various scandals, contributed to the dismissal of the Urbanas en masse.

The next few years have not yet been documented, and filling in the gaps goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Three 1615 letters are of note, however, because they demonstrate Urbana's continued sway and name recognition. The first is from Urbana recommending her brother to the position of *maestro di casa* for the Bentivoglios, to which he was elevated. The second is from October 22, written by Ferdinando Saracinelli, a poet, on behalf of Domenico Visconti, "who has as a wife that young woman who plays the harp so well." A third letter, from Saracinelli to Andrea Cioli, the secretary of state, describes "...il marito di quella donna che suona l'arpa chiamato, pare a me, Gio. Domenico." ("The husband of that woman who plays the harp, [he is] called, I think, Giovanni Domenico.")¹¹⁰ Amusingly, and wonderfully for feminist and gender

¹⁰⁹ Durante and Fabris, "Frescobaldi e la musica," 81, n68.

¹¹⁰ Both letters quoted in Fantappie, 153.

scholars, the secretary of state clearly did not know or care who Domenico Visconti was outside of his relation to Urbana.¹¹¹

In late sixteenth-century Italy music was a skill cultivated in women across classes, and as Laurie Stras writes, “By the end of the 1580s, well- developed musical skills, above and beyond the basic level once described by Castiglione, were increasingly seen as cultural currency, helping young women to secure their futures.”¹¹² Stras continues, “Musical ability could ease a girl’s passage into the convent of her choice, dowry or no dowry, but it could be just as important in engineering a coveted position at court.” While this social strategy is well documented, Urbana still defies the narrative of using her music to earn “a coveted position at court” because she was never offered a place or accepted as a member of a Lady’s household, but rather as a working musician.

Lucrezia’s payments at the Mantuan Court

As is typical in researching women in music history, the most information we have about Urbana comes from unlikely sources – in this case, studies on Girolamo Frescobaldi. In Dinko Fabris and Sergio Durante’s collection of conference proceedings for the four hundredth anniversary of Frescobaldi’s birth, Fabris introduced Urbana’s employment by citing both his own and another musicologist’s (Pietro Canal’s) studies at the *Archivio di Stato Mantova*: “The first indications of Urbani’s Gonzaga service can be found in the precious wealth of notes left by Davari at the State Archives of Mantua.” He continues, “From [these same notes] Pietro Canal drew indications, who mistakenly considered her a singer, and Ademollo¹¹³ who for the first time reported the payment document cited by Davari.”¹¹⁴ He goes on to discuss the possibility of Urbana playing the harp solo in *L’Orfeo*, her payments, and her planned return to Naples following the conclusion of her service to the Gonzagas.

This may seem like the most convincing archival source we have regarding Lucrezia’s employment at the Mantuan court – indeed, it was based on these cited Davari boxes of archives that I applied for and received my 2023 summer research grant to visit Mantua – but there are

¹¹¹ Fantappie, “Dalla tradizione civica,” 153. Translation mine.

¹¹² Laurie Stras, “Ferrara’s Final Chapter: Courts and Convents in the 1590s,” *Women and Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 290.

¹¹³ The same Ademollo who wrote Adriana Basile’s biography.

¹¹⁴ Durante and Fabris, “Frescobaldi e la musica,” 78, n.53.

significant and troubling issues that arise when the archival sources cited are consulted; the “wealth of notes left by Davari” are, in fact, Davari’s attempt at consolidating and reorganizing the court records in the early twentieth century. Davari’s rewriting of the archives was, to his credit, well translated to modern Italian, but he made significant changes that render the files nearly useless, including arbitrarily added dates, consolidation of information found across multiple different court records into single pages, and a complete lack of a citation system so it is impossible to distinguish from which folders and archival sets he pulled individual records. Only in consultation with original records, for instance, is it possible to see that the payment to “Lucrezia di Urbani” made in “1607” was actually undated and made to “Lucrezia di Orbani.” While the spelling of Urbana/Urbani/Orbani may not be significant, the exclusion of the actual month and day from Davari’s payment record creates confusion and complicates re-creation of a timeline. Davari also edited the source grammatically, rearranging and rephrasing the early Italian to fit the contemporary nineteenth-century language as well as cutting entirely the opening lines for both payment records: “Commissione Ducale,” which confirms who approved the payment – it was by ducal commission, not just payroll – and who oversaw the finances of the court. Using primary source archives and not the Davari manuscripts, I will now discuss Urbana’s employment in Mantua.

As shown by the payment records, other women were employed at Mantua as musicians, but Urbana seems to have been the only one employed specifically as an instrumentalist. Duke Vincenzo was enthralled by the *concerto delle donne* that he had heard at the court in Ferrara, and it seems in the first few years of the seventeenth century he tried to imitate that court in Mantua, as evidenced by the recruitment of such singers as Caterina Martinelli in 1603. The attempted creation of a *concerto delle donne* in Mantua did eventually come to fruition, but not until later, with the arrival of Adriana Basile in 1610.

The payment records list a few women, but Lucrezia Urbana is the only one not related to a man in the same career. Lucia and Isabetta Pelizzari, who primarily sang but also played trombone and cornetto, were part of a musical family headed by Antonio Pelizzari, and their brother Annibale was on the 1603 payment record as a musician (who probably also played a wind instrument). Caterina Martinelli (Catterina Romana in the 1603 payments) was the thirteen-year-old singer who was entrusted into the tutelage, household, and care of Monteverdi

and his wife Claudia Catteneo.¹¹⁵ The Pelizzaris, Lucrezia, and Caterina were all listed as “*Cantori*” or singers, along with six men including Francesco Rasi. While Caterina and the Pelizzari sisters did sing, the label of “*cantori*” was used as a catchall for instrumentalists like Lucrezia as well. Monteverdi was listed elsewhere, as he was *maestro di cappella*, a conductor-composer role that fell outside of the regularly employed musicians.

The first payment from the court to Lucrezia was in 1603, of 120 *lire*, along with dry goods such as candles, salt, and bread.¹¹⁶ By 1605, she had apparently been given the nickname “Signora Napoletana,” and was later referred to as “our Neapolitan lady” by the royal family. A 12 October, 1607 *commissione ducale* describes her stipend as “Scudi 100...e questi per i vestiti di due anni e mezzo,” or 100 *scudi* plus two-and-a-half years’ worth of clothing,¹¹⁷ and a 20 June, 1608 *ducale commissione* orders “Scudi 200 alle Sig[nor]e Napoletane Musiche...altre le loro paghe che riscuotono dalla camera, se ne avanzano...” or 200 *scudi* to the Neapolitan ladies [the] musicians, in addition to payments obtained from the room, if there are any left.¹¹⁸ In this record, it appears that there were at least two “Signore Napolitane,” probably Lucrezia and her sister Camilla. As this was written in the same month the Urbanas were leaving Mantua, the 200 *scudi* appears to have either been an unsuccessful attempt at keeping the family in Mantua or – more likely – a gift at the end of their service. There is no record of Camilla Urbana’s musicality, but if Lucrezia’s salary had been supporting both of the women (and their mother, possibly one or more brothers) the gift could easily have been made to the two unmarried women with the modifier “musiche” simply to identify the recipients as, or as related to, their Neapolitan harpist. The second specification, of the “other payments obtained from the room if there are any left” ensured that Urbana received what salary she was owed in full before leaving; in this case, the “room” meant the treasury or similar. In the early seventeenth century, every duchy in Italy used individual monetary systems; as such it is difficult to estimate the general costs of living or the price of clothing or livestock, which is the usual way of contextualizing payment records for services. Still, I believe there is nothing that demonstrates Urbana’s talent and value as a musician more than when we compare her income to the next-highest paid musicians. Francesco

¹¹⁵ The court musicians were shared with the Cathedral Santa Barbara, and would have performed for religious services as well as court entertainment.

¹¹⁶ AG 395, 8v-9r.

¹¹⁷ Bb IV 1513-1680, document 155.

¹¹⁸ Bb IV 1513-1680, document 162.

Rasi, the tenor who sang Orfeo among other star roles, was given 84 *lire* per month in 1603,¹¹⁹ only 70% of Urbana’s salary. In Table 2, below, I have translated the 1603 payment document that lists Urbana and arranged it by monetary salary, including the additional compensation of various foodstuffs.¹²⁰ The document reconstructed lists all the musicians as “cantori” or singers, and I have added the known voice types. Urbana is the only instrumentalist listed here; elsewhere in the same ledger there are more singers and many instrumentalists including eleven string players and two cembalists, as well as several guitarists and tuners. It is likely that Urbana was listed with the *cantori* because of her gender; the only woman musician not in this document was Claudia Cattaneo, the wife of Monteverdi, listed with him, who died in 1607. Of all the musicians employed between 1603-1608, only Monteverdi was paid more monthly (150 *lire*) than Urbana.¹²¹

Name	Instrument/Voice Type	Annual Salary in <i>lire-soldi-piccoli</i>	Additional Compensation
Lucretia Urbana	[Double harp]	120	Bread, flatbread, food, fish, salt, oil, candles, table cheese
Francesco Rasi	[Tenor]	84	Bread, flatbread, food, beef, fish, salt, oil, candles, table cheese
Bassano Casuola (Casola)	[Singer]	52-4	Bread
Eleuterio Buosio (Buzio)	[Singer]	50	Bread, flatbread
Pandolfo del Grande	[Tenor]	50	Bread, flatbread
Henrico Vilardi Romano	[Tenor]	50	Bread, flatbread, food, fish, salt, oil, candles, table cheese
Lucia Pelizzari	[Soprano]	35-17-2	Bread, food, fish
Isabetta Pelizzari	[Soprano]	35-17-2	Bread, food, fish
Annibale Pelizzari	[Singer]	35-17	Bread, food, fish
Giovann Battista Marinoni	[Bass?]	13-19	Bread, flatbread, food, fish, salt, candles
Catt[er]ina Rom[an]ja	[Soprano]	–	Bread, flatbread, food, fish, salt, oil, candles, table cheese

Table 2: Summary of 1603 compensation to *cantori*, drawn from Bb IV 1513-1680.¹²²

¹¹⁹ AG 395, 8v-9r.

¹²⁰ My sincerest gratitude to Licia Mari in Mantua for her help with the translation and interpretation of all documents, but especially this payment chart.

¹²¹ For an incredibly detailed summary of the salaries in full during this time period, see Susan Parisi’s dissertation, “Ducal Patronage of Music in Mantua, 1587-1627: An Archival Study,” PhD diss. (University of Illinois, 1989), 30-32.

¹²² Catterina Romana has an additional specification after her table cheese allotment: “La settimana ove è butirro per giorni da magro,” i.e. on “lean days” during some weeks she was to receive butter instead of cheese.

Of note in the payments to Lucrezia are the additional specifications, such as the clothing and whatever left-over bonus the 1608 *commissione* describes. Women employed at the court through the household of the Duchess (or acting lady of the house) would have expected to receive clothing as gifts, as well as her cast offs. The Pelizzari sisters would have been provided clothing by their father as long as they were in his household, and Caterina would have been provided clothing by her family, who had moved to Mantua with her, or by Monteverdi, her host and singing tutor. Lucrezia did not have a father, was not married, and was not part of the Duchess's household. Her brothers could have provided her clothing, but they would not have been expected to, and the family seems to have been relying on Lucrezia for income. Examining every page for "extras" on top of the monetary salary of all 49 of the *commissioni* from October 1513 through May 1609, I found that nobody else was given clothing as part of their salary.¹²³ There are two possible explanations for the additional payment in clothing: First, is possible that Lucrezia would have been given second-hand dresses even if she was not part of the Duchess's household, but if she did indeed have kyphosis,¹²⁴ as the later nickname "la goba" suggests, they may have needed alterations extensive enough to make it more economical to simply provide new clothing instead. The second potential explanation is that this was a reimbursement for costumes, potentially for whatever Urbana had worn onstage for the productions of *L'Orfeo* and an advance for what she would wear to perform in *Arianna*, premiered in May of 1608, the month before she left the court.

Ensemble Playing and Orfeo Performance

In addition to the salary details that confirm Urbana's value to the Duke, there are other records that provide more specific information about her musical prowess as both a soloist and an ensemble member. The primary reason we know the name of Lucrezia Urbana is due to her involvement in the first production of *L'Orfeo*. Had this opera not gained the moniker of the "world's first opera," Urbana's name may have been completely buried after her death in the mid-seventeenth century. Drawing on my archival work in Italy and building on my earlier MM thesis

¹²³ Bb IV 1513-1680.

¹²⁴ A hunched back.

on the harp solo in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, I will position Urbana's 1607 performance in *L'Orfeo* in the broader context of her employment at Mantua.

Despite *L'Orfeo*'s status as the "world's first opera," frustratingly little is known about the first performance. Musicologists and historians have pieced together enough information that we can broadly set the scene for the premiere. The myth of Orpheus, whose musical performances made wild animals tame and rocks roll closer to hear him, seems an obvious choice for a dramatic representation in music. Regardless of the details of the story of Orpheus, one thing remains the same in every version: his virtuosity as a musician. That his musical talent, on whatever plucked string instrument he played, allows him to enter the Underworld as a living human is the crux of the story. In the opera, this is a key musical moment and in all likelihood it was performed by Urbana.

At some point in December 1606 or January 1607, rehearsals would have started for a *favola in musica*, a staged music-drama retelling the story of Orpheus, titled *L'Orfeo*. The five-act libretto was prepared by Alessandro Striggio and the music by Claudio Monteverdi, to be performed by the instrumental ensemble members and several vocalists in employment at the Mantuan court, during this very period that Lucrezia Urbana was working there. Francesco Rasi, a lauded tenor, was given the role of Orfeo but there was a problem; although the court did employ at least four female singers, the Duke had not allowed women to sing in large-scale productions (such as the *intermedii* at Carnival), and there was a need for one more treble voice, which was solved only with the loan of a castrato from Pisa.¹²⁵

The audience for the premiere performance was composed of members of the Accademia degli Invaghiti, a male aristocratic group interested in typical humanist subjects as well as "theater and the traditional arts of versification and oratory."¹²⁶ On the night of the premiere, Accademia members arrived at the Ducal Palazzo and joined the Prince and the Grand Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in a gallery, or hall, the specific location of which has since been lost but was described in a letter as "the apartments which the Most Serene Lady of Ferrara used to occupy."¹²⁷ Members of the Accademia sat or stood facing one end of the room, where the

¹²⁵ Translation of all letters can be found in Tim Carter, "Singing Orfeo: on the Performers of Monteverdi's First Opera," *Recercare*, vol. 11 (1999), 105.

¹²⁶ Iain Fenlon, "Monteverdi's Mantuan 'Orfeo': Some New Documentation," *Early Music*, vol. 12, no. 2 (May, 1984), 164.

¹²⁷ Carlo Magno letter, quoted in Fenlon "Monteverdi's Mantuan 'Orfeo,'" 170.

performance took place. Because we do know that the room was not a theater, it is likely that the musicians were arranged against the wall at one end of the hall, with the singers between them and the audience. The harp, at least one and a half meters tall, would have cast a shadow on or obstructed the view of anything behind it in such a small room and been noticeably imposing. The first performance was decidedly male-dominated – the audience was entirely men whose fur-draped shadows would have loomed as they stood near the candles, the cast was entirely male, the performance venue and audience space was cramped, dark, and likely fairly cold, and the final scene was raucous and violent, as the show ended with the implication that Orfeo was about to be ripped limb from limb by a frenzy of angry maenads. Here we can imagine Urbana, perhaps performing in clothing tailored to accommodate her physique, the only woman in the room behind the largest, most narratively important instrument in the opera. Monteverdi probably directed, although the recitative accompaniment was continuo and highly improvised, and because it was an evening performance in February, the hall was probably lit by candles or torches. A week later, on 1 March, the production was reperformed, this time “in the presence of all the ladies resident in the city,” and while a third performance was planned for that spring, it was canceled.

The printed music for this first performance is not extant. The Accademia members did not write diary entries about what they saw. No members of the public, gossipy ambassadors, or letter-writing court ladies were in attendance. In 1609, the score was reprinted with a dedication page addressed to His Highness the Prince, that mentions the first performance for the Accademia. Some time between 1607 and 1609, the ending was rewritten; instead of Orfeo’s death-by-maenad, Apollo descends on a cloud to comfort Orfeo, and invites him to the heavens, where the myth contends he was made into a constellation. That Apollo, mythologically, was also a harp or lyre player would not have been lost on the audience, especially considering the innumerable visual depictions of Apollo playing harps and lyres throughout the Palazzo and this connection furthered the importance of the harp as part of the instrumentation. I have not found convincing evidence for where the performance for “the ladies” took place, and although it has been suggested that the final scene was in fact changed that week to better suit the delicate sensibilities of the feminine audience,¹²⁸ there are two reasons why the performance would have

¹²⁸ See Tim Carter “Some Notes on the First Edition of Monteverdi’s ‘Orfeo’ (1609),” *Music & Letters*, vol. 91, no. 4 (November 2010), 501.

remained staged in the same gallery: Firstly, the later dedication in the score implies that the 1609 performance was the first to take place in the theater – the “*gran Teatro dell’universo*”¹²⁹ – although Tim Carter points out that this was a “conventional metaphor for publication.”¹³⁰ And second, while it is of course not impossible to move instruments such as the regale, the harp, and the contrabassi to a detached theater, the change in venue would have been challenging both logistically, in late February, and musically, with unvarnished gut strings that responded unpredictably to temperature and humidity changes. There are no records that describe who moved instruments between the theater, palace, and cathedral, which suggests that musicians would have been responsible for their own instruments. The *arpa doppia*, with far less metal than later harps, was fairly light and easy to move, even in voluminous skirts. There is no proof of dollies or other tools designed for moving harps until the mid-1700s, so whether Urbana would have moved her harp through the Palazzo and Mantua for rehearsals and shows or whether one of her brothers or a male instrumentalist with unconfined legs would have moved her harp for her is up to speculation.

Although Urbana was the resident harpist, one musicologist has suggested that she was not playing the harp in the first performance. In *La Drammaturgia Musicale*, Lorenzo Bianconi concluded that Rasi, not Lucrezia, would have played the harp solo in *L’Orfeo*. He says “We know that the singer of Mantua’s *Orfeo*, Francesco Rasi, was able to accompany himself with the double harp on stage,” and he concludes from there that Rasi would have done so in *L’Orfeo*.¹³¹ This idea stems from the description of a 1611 performance for the Prince of Mantua in which they saw “Neptune on his chariot pulled by sea horses, playing a double harp, and singing...and this was the wonderful Signor Rasi.”¹³² While others such as Fantappie have concurred, I cannot agree. Firstly, there was no reason for Lucrezia *not* to play the part; she was paid handsomely to play the harp at the court, she performed in other large-scale productions such as the *Carnivale intermedii*, and she appears to have been treated not as a lady in waiting who happened to play

¹²⁹ Claudio Monteverdi, “*Serenissimo Signore mio Signore et patrone colendissimo*” dedication in *L’Orfeo: favola in musica* (Venice: Amadino, 1609).

¹³⁰ Tim Carter, “Orfeo,” in *Monteverdi’s Musical Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 120.

¹³¹ Lorenzo Bianconi, ed., “Introduzione,” in *La Drammaturgia Musicale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986) 38, n42.

¹³² *Breve descrizione delle feste fatte dal Serenissimo Sig. Principe di Mantova* (In Casale: Per Pantaleone Goffi stampator ducale, 1611) 11r. Translation mine.

an instrument, but as a legitimate professional. Secondly, although we have seen with the examples of both Peverara and Basile that small “double harps” were the perfect instrument for self-accompaniment as a singer, the musical range encompassed in the harp solo in *L’Orfeo* is vastly larger than what is available on these smaller *arpe doppie*. The range of the harp solo extends from G1 to A5 (over four octaves), utilizing almost the full G1-E5 range of the large, triple-strung *arpa doppia*. While the smaller *arpe doppie* intended for self-accompaniment can have a range of four octaves, the lowest note on Peverara’s harp, for instance, is a C3. This range rhetorically illustrates the power Orfeo has as a musician, stretching from the heavens to the Underworld, as the renaissance listeners would have understood it, and was only possible on the larger, three-rowed *arpe doppie* which needed to be played from a seated stationary position.

Solo Playing

As a soloist, Urbana was apparently a phenomenal virtuosa although it is extremely difficult to identify the exact pieces she would have played. Typically, baroque scores for more than one instrument will specify which instruments were intended, but there are a few complications: many chamber works are for flute, recorder, violin, or gamba and unspecified “continuo,” which could include any number of chordal instruments, from lute to organ to harp. It is therefore impossible to tell from the manuscript scores alone what instruments a given piece was originally played on, and instrumentation was entirely flexible in a musical culture of improvisation and adaptation. Solo pieces with two (or more) staves are even harder to identify, as music by composers such as Luigi Rossi are often assumed to be intended for, and indeed were likely played on, keyboard.¹³³ But Rossi was a harpist as well as a keyboardist, and his wife, Costanze de Ponte, was also widely regarded as a virtuosa on the *arpa doppia*, in fact, so his keyboard pieces might also have been performed on the harp.¹³⁴

Any piece written for keyboard may also have been played on harp, and it is likely that harpists could read and play from guitar, lute, and keyboard as well as harp tablatures. This is evidenced by Urbana’s collaboration with Piccinini, described in a letter from Martinengo Bentivoglio which explained that the family was: “...working vigorously on music [in the household as a whole]. Even now Signor Alessandro [Piccinini] has given a [set of variations on

¹³³ A third stave was and is often used to indicate pedal notes for organ.

¹³⁴ Robert Holzer, “Rossi, Luigi,” Grove Music Online, accessed March, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.23893>.

the] Ruggiero and a stupendous toccata to the Neapolitan woman...”¹³⁵ None of Piccinini’s music was published “for harp,” but Piccinini’s 1623 *Intavolatura di Liuto et di Chitarrone* includes a “Toccatà Cromatica” which would showcase the chromatic capabilities of an *arpa doppia* more effectively than those of a lute or chitarrone. Variations on passacaglias, ciacconas, or other renaissance dances were almost always labeled “passacaglia” or “ciaccona” and so on, as it was unnecessary to rename composed variations on the extremely recognizable ground basses or to specify instrumentation, as they could be and were played on any instrument. Pieces were commonly (re)published as parts of collections, sometimes for a variety of instruments such as the Spanish compilations “para tecla, harpa, y vihuela” (“for keyboard, harp, and vihuela”).¹³⁶

Whatever solo music Urbana played, several eyewitnesses reveal her brilliance as a performer. The letter of recommendation Duke Vincenzo supplied Urbana with when she left Mantua was flattering:

After her arrival from Naples to Mantua, Madame Lucrezia served us for approximately five years continuously in her practice of playing the harp with much mastery and excellence, and having received from her in this and in everything else the satisfaction that we could not desire greater, now that she has decided to return to her homeland of Naples, we did not want to fail to accompany her with this present of ours as a testimony to anyone of the good service received from her and the esteem we have for her virtuous and honored qualities.¹³⁷

A few months after her arrival in Florence in 1609, a letter bragged that, “The Cardinal [Montalto] said that he would fast for days in order to hear our Neapolitan lady play the harp,” and she was still performing there to great acclaim in 1612 when Landinelli “...Brought the Ambassador of Flanders with three or four other of the principal Flemish gentlemen to hear the Napolitana play, and it pleased him greatly, and he wished to know her name and the name of her husband, and wrote it down in a book.”¹³⁸ Letters describing Urbana’s music at the Bentivoglio house in Florence show that she was admired not only for her performances, but also for being a quick study. Fabris confirms that she began her studies with Frescobaldi “at levels well above those offered to [the other singer]” and Piccinini related to Enzo that “Sig[no]ra Lucretia [plays]

¹³⁵ Newcomb, “Girolamo Frescobaldi,” 120-121.

¹³⁶ There are several collections with this description, but Luis Venegas de Henestrosa is probably the most widely-played.

¹³⁷ Durante and Fabris, “Frescobaldi e la musica,” 78, n53.

¹³⁸ Newcomb, “Girolamo Frescobaldi,” 135.

toccatas and *sinfonie* and after assuring you how she has finished a *tocata* [sic] that I am teaching her I will give her a *corente*.”¹³⁹

Conclusion

Women making music across Italy were not uncommon in the late Renaissance, and the majority of women in singing ensembles like the *concerti delle donne* were upper class. Laura Peverara, Adriana Basile, and Lucrezia Urbana were three women who were musically active between the 1580s and the 1630s in Northern Italy, and although their backgrounds and social statuses were different, there were a few personal elements they all had in common. First, each woman was musically incredibly talented and well trained: Peverara and Basile were known more for their singing, and Urbana for her harp playing. Next, their husbands were given positions and lodging at the courts because of and secondary to the womens’ employment. As well, each woman was admired not only for her musicality but also for her performed virtuous and honorable qualities, regardless of social rank.

Urbana’s career appears to be an isolated case of a non-noblewoman making a living as an instrumentalist, and I have shown that we know her name through a series of fortunate events – *L’Orfeo*’s glorification in music history, Frescobaldi’s well-documented scandal, and existing payment records. Moving beyond this thesis, it seems entirely likely that there were other women, some or most of whom also played harp, whose names have yet to be rediscovered, but who had similar careers to Urbana. A broad survey of personnel records from other large-scale theatrical productions at courts across Italy will undoubtedly reveal more names in this ever-growing tapestry of a woman-filled music history.

¹³⁹ Hammond, “Rome, 1608-1615.”

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In my introduction, I posited the idea of approaching a woman-centric music history through the lens of performers, rather than composers. While there are paintings of women composers such as Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, and Isabella Leonarda, my first chapter focused on the iconography of mostly unidentified women playing the harp. Through the quantitative study of three iconographical databases in my first chapter, I demonstrated both the evolution of the harp through organology and the requisite playing techniques, and that women continued to play harp despite these changes.

My embodied knowledge of the organology and physical requirements for playing historical harps has allowed me to discuss the pictorial representations, as well as compare the accuracy and historical realism of some images with the illogical artistic interpretations of others. This process can be demonstrated in examining the unique challenges of playing an instrument in the elaborate, constrictive clothing of the era.

While long and voluminous skirts were in consistent fashion over the centuries discussed here, sleeves and bodices were ever changing. It appears from the iconography that both sleeves and bodices actually evolved in tandem with the playing techniques of the evolving harps. Tight sleeves and conical hennins, as seen in Figure 2.2, did not negatively affect the playing style of a small gothic harp, which was held between the harpist's knees, but would have been difficult to wear while playing a baroque *arpa doppia*. The tall, pointed hat would have hit against the tuning pegs, the veil would have caught on the fraying string ends. Taut fabric constricting the elbows would have rendered playing the top two octaves impossible, and the harpist would have been unable to raise her arm far enough to tune the bass string pegs. By the time harps were constructed to include those octaves, women's clothing in Italy, where the *arpa doppia* was available, had also evolved to include loose and even detachable sleeves and soft-roped corsets. These advancements were flexible and allowed harpists to lean forward to play the bass strings near the soundboard where the resonance was best. Although not the focus of this thesis, another simultaneous evolution occurred between pedal harps and women's fashion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. With the Industrial Revolution-inspired addition of metal pedal mechanisms and front plates, it was no longer necessary to play close to the soundboard. The

stiffer corsets in France and England, where the pedal harps were being manufactured, may have actually been beneficial for a harpist to keep a ladylike posture behind a large instrument.

Following my iconographical survey, I moved from visual depictions of women harpists to descriptions of documented *trobairitz* and *trouveres* and fictional harpists in *romance* literature. I was able to establish that although women did play a variety of instruments pre-seventeenth century, and continued to do so in later centuries, the harp emerged as the primary instrument of choice for women in the late renaissance. This phenomenon was aided by the historical memory of women as plucked string instrumentalists, established in part with the *romances*, and sustained with the rising genre of conduct literature, which disseminated advice for socially acceptable and expected behavior and reinforced class divides. Instrumental performance was not the main focus of these books, but by extrapolating from what was said about singing and general comportment, it is clear that quieter, plucked instruments such as harp and lute would have been preferable for ladies to study rather than louder wind or bowed instruments such as sackbut or viols.

Fictional harpists in the *romances* used harp both to support themselves and as entertainment, shown in both the stories of *Galeran* and the *Romance of Horn*, but most notably in *Tristan*. Different versions of the *Tristan* story implement Isolde's harp playing in different ways, and I believe the most compelling version is Thomas's twelfth-century retelling in which Isolde composes her "Mortal Lai" in remembrance of Tristan. This moment shows Isolde writing both the lyrics "in a short time" and also the melody, which was "harder to compose than the words," and using her harp to do so.

Building on both the iconographic and literary throughline of women playing the harp, I introduced my third chapter as a case study of one woman—Lucrezia Urbana—during a specific moment in her early-seventeenth century career as a professional harpist. I have focused on the five-year period between 1603-1608, to consider a manageable portion of Urbana's career within the scope of a Master's thesis. It is unlikely that much more information is available about Urbana's education, family life, and career as a harpist before her arrival at the Mantuan court, but her career was so well established in Mantua that, with further archival research, it should be possible to find records of her life following this period. A deeper analysis of late-Renaissance conduct literature would be necessary in this expanded study, especially from Italian sources. Torquato Tasso, writing on "virtue" of both men and women posited that "Genuine

modesty... would favour a retiring life and private and solitary places, and shun theatres, parties, and public performances.”¹⁴⁰ Although it is unclear if Tasso would prefer women not to be the ones on stage at theaters, parties, and public performances, or whether he believed they should simply not attend those events at all, the concern for preserving a womanly and ladylike virtue would seem to contradict Urbana’s career. This may be the reason she received, possibly requested, the letter of recommendation from the Duke in Mantua when she left his service, in which he specifically cites her “virtuous and honored qualities.”¹⁴¹

This brief but intensive case study of one woman harpist in the early seventeenth century also raises a final significant question: if Urbana’s name is known because of her involvement in the performance of a critical canonical work, what other women instrumentalists might have existed that we do not yet know of? There are extensive archives at every court in Italy, and there may well be names of women who have not yet been uncovered or given their deserved place in history. Through my archival work, literature review, and quantitative analysis in this thesis, I have established a successful methodology that can be applied to a broader study. During the course of this project I have identified ten additional city-states and courts where I could investigate payment records and personnel lists to achieve a thorough understanding of women instrumentalists – harpists and non-harpists – in Italy from the mid-sixteenth through mid-seventeenth century.

Focusing on Urbana throughout Chapter Four of my thesis allowed me to recontextualize the place of women performers in the complex history of music. Her professional autonomy and artistic achievements can be traced through official payments, numerous accolades, and high-level personal negotiations. Urbana’s undeniably consequential career illustrates that the lens of music’s history does not have to be centered on composers, but can shift, aided by embodied experiences such as my own, to the long-neglected harpists and performers.

¹⁴⁰ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy, 1350-1650*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Durante and Fabris, ““Frescobaldi e la musica,” 78, n53.

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APPENDIX: Archival Sources

All archival documents consulted in this thesis are from the Archivio di Stato Mantova in Mantua, Italy. There were two main sources consulted for use in this study: the Archivio Gonzaga (AG), with salary charts, and the Magistrato Ducale, with detailed *commissione*.

- 1 Archivio Gonzaga (AG) 395, folio 8v-9r.
As detailed in Chapter 3, this is the clearest primary source regarding Urbana's salary. This document is a payment chart to *cantori* of 1603, transcribed and arranged in Table 2. Details include a monthly salary of money in *lire-soldi-piccoli* as well as dry goods.
- 2 Archivio Gonzaga (AG) Mandati 47, libro 97, folio 166r-166v.
Within the *mandati*, I looked at a copied letter of recommendation from Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga "per Mad^a Lucretia Urbana" from 1608.
- 3 Magistrato Ducale, Bb. IV 1513-1697, Varie Sulla Corte Ducale.
Pages 63-182, the *commissione ducale* during the time period during which Urbana was employed, were consulted in depth, and transcribed below (Document 1 and Document 2) Also considered were folios 1-30 (1573-1618), detailing the Gonzaga family's personal finances.

DOCUMENT 1: Bb. IV 1513-1697, folio 155.

1607. 12. Ottobre

Commissione Ducale siano dati scudi 100 alla Sig^a Lucrezia di Orbani Musica di S.A. e questi per i vestiti di due anni e mezzo de quali S.A va debitore v. in lib. delle commiss...Fol.28

DOCUMENT 1 TRANSLATION

1607. 12. October

Ducal commission of 100 scudi for Sig[nor]a Lucrezia di Orbani [for her] music for the Duke, and for two and a half years' of clothing, for which the Duke is responsible.

APPENDIX: Archival Sources Continued

DOCUMENT 2: Bb. IV 1513-1697, folio 162.

1608. 20. Giugno

Commissione Ducale che siano dati scudi 200 alle Sig^e Napolitane Musiche di S.A. altre le loro paghe che riscuotono dalla camera se ne avanzano. v. in lib. delle commiss...Fol.54

DOCUMENT 2 TRANSLATION

1608. 20. June

Ducal commission for 200 scudi to be given to the Neapolitan Ladies [for their] music for the Duke, in addition to payments obtained from the room, if there are any left.

- 4 Schede Davari, “Maestri di musica, cantori e suonatori, aa. 1509-100. Notizie di fabbricanti d’organi ed alto istrumenti, aa. 1381-1685.” Box 15, nos. 17 and 159; Box 16, no. 588.

Each “section” of Davari’s boxes are numbered, but the pages are not numbered.

The Davari boxes contain information about musicians employed at the court, compiled by Stefano Davari in the late 1800s. This information is not in an order corresponding to the original documents, and I have not cited any of this information.