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Divas in the Convent: Nuns, Music, and Defiance in Seventeenth-Century Italy

Craig A. Monson

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Divas in the Convent: Nuns, Music, and Defiance in Seventeenth-Century Italy Craig A. Monson When eight-year-old Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana (1590–1662) entered one of the preeminent convents in Bologna in 1598, she had no idea what cloistered life had in store for her. Thanks to clandestine instruction from a local *maestro di cappella*—and despite the church hierarchy's vehement opposition to all convent music—Vizzana became the star of the convent, composing works so thoroughly modern and expressive that a recent critic described them as "historical treasures." But at the very moment when Vizzana's works appeared in 1623—she would be the only Bolognese nun ever to publish her music—extraordinary troubles beset her and her fellow nuns, as episcopal authorities arrived to investigate anonymous allegations of sisterly improprieties with male members of their order.

Craig A. Monson retells the story of Vizzana and the nuns of Santa Cristina to elucidate the role that music played in the lives of these cloistered women. Gifted singers, instrumentalists, and composers, these nuns used music not only to forge links with the community beyond convent walls, but also to challenge and circumvent ecclesiastical authority. Monson explains how the sisters of Santa Cristina—refusing to accept what the church hierarchy called God's will and what the nuns perceived as a besmirching of their honor—fought back with words and music, and when these proved futile, with bricks, roof tiles, and stones. These women defied one Bolognese archbishop after another, cardinals in Rome, and even the pope himself, until threats of excommunication and abandonment by their families brought them to their knees twenty-five years later. By then, Santa Cristina's imaginative but frail composer literally had been driven mad by the conflict.

Monson's fascinating narrative relies heavily on the words of its various protagonists, on both sides of the cloister wall, who emerge vividly as imaginative, independent-minded, and not always sympathetic figures. In restoring the musically gifted Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana to history, Monson introduces readers to the full range of captivating characters who played their parts in seventeenth-century convent life.

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