

Music and Visual Culture in Renaissance Italy

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Chapter 11

**The Convergence of Sacred and
Secular in Vittore Carpaccio's
British Museum *Concert***

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THE CONVERGENCE OF
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Chriscinda Henry

Vittore Carpaccio returned to the iconic humanist image of church fathers, monastic scholars, and philosophers in their studioli (private studies) surrounded by books, antiquities, and objects symbolic of the pursuit of knowledge and the liberal arts on multiple occasions during his career. The most spectacular, complex, and prodigiously detailed example of this practice is certainly *The Vision of Saint Augustine* he painted as part of a narrative cycle on Saint Jerome for the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni c.1502–03 (Fig. 11.1). Less well-known are the several variations on the theme that he produced in pen drawings, which may have been compositional sketches for unrealized paintings or independent exploratory compositions that take advantage of the informal and suggestive nature of the graphic medium. This small group of drawings includes one on the verso of a sheet in the British Museum depicting either St Jerome or a philosopher studiously working at his desk (Fig. 11.2). By contrast, the scene depicted on the recto of the same sheet proves more difficult to place within the iconographic tradition of saints and scholars in their studies adapted from manuscript miniatures into independent paintings by Jan van Eyck, Antonello da Messina, and other fifteenth-century European painters. In this unusual composition of c.1507–10, which the British Museum identifies by the description “a monk and three musicians in a room, with vessels on a shelf behind,” a tonsured religious figure with a long beard stands, arms folded at his waist, as an informal performance of *musica da camera* (chamber music) transpires within the small space of his well-appointed studiolo (Fig. 11.3).¹

Upon first viewing, the drawing appears to register a spatially unresolved attempt to combine disparate or discordant aspects of Renaissance intellectual and recreational culture—hermetic and contemplative on the one hand and sensual and convivial on the other—and to synthesize them within a precisely articulated if idealized simulacrum of a real



Figure 11.1 Vittore Carpaccio, *The Vision of Saint Augustine*, c.1502–03. Tempera and oil on canvas, 141 cm × 211 cm. Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice. Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, New York (Mauro Magliani, 1998).

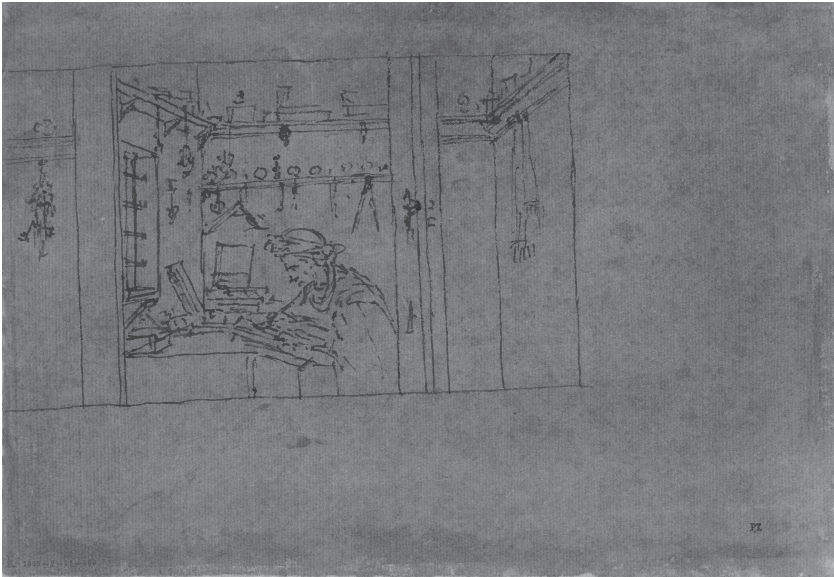


Figure 11.2 Vittore Carpaccio, *A Scholar in his Study* (verso), c.1507–10. Pen and brown ink, on paper rubbed with black chalk (?), 19.8 cm × 28.1 cm. British Museum, London. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



Figure 11.3 Vittore Carpaccio, *A Concert* (recto), c.1507–10. Pen and brown ink, with brown wash, on paper rubbed with black chalk (?), 19.8 cm × 28.1 cm. British Museum, London. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

domestic space.² Rather than pursue the apparent disparities or even conflicts between the sacred and the secular, this chapter instead posits that the religious scholar figured in Carpaccio's *Concert* drawing portrays an active participant in the humanist intellectual leisure culture of early sixteenth-century Venice, which cultivated classical study, antiquarianism, and the secular arts. As Maria Ruvoldt has argued, the study itself was “an important transitional site from sacred to secular space,” where humanist-minded collectors could display and interact with their precious possessions, to quote Leon Battista Alberti, “almost like sacred and religious things.”³ This chapter argues that as an ensemble, the religious scholar and mixed gender trio of young and beautiful secular musicians configure an ideal, reciprocal state of sociable *otium*, or productive leisure, located in the private area of the home expressly dedicated to its pursuit. Most ingeniously, through his spatial construction of the studiolo and illusionistic positioning of its accouterments, Carpaccio provides beholders with privileged, virtually interactive access to the intimate and informal moment of music making depicted, which is redolent with the spiritually penetrating and regenerative effects ascribed to music by both ancient and Renaissance philosophers.

The elderly figure in Carpaccio's pen and ink wash *Concert* identified as a monk is in fact non-specific and could be a cleric, monk, mendicant friar, or other religious individual. He seems to listen and watch attentively from his unassuming position against the wall as the three musicians in elegant courtly classicizing dress—two women in the right foreground and a man seated behind and across from them—fill his small studiolo with sound. The old man wears the long, full beard associated in Renaissance history painting with depictions of church fathers, hermit saints, pilgrims, and penitents, while contemporary clerics, monks, and friars were typically tonsured and clean shaven. It may in part have been this aspect of his appearance, together with the hooded *mozzetta* (the circular cape that falls close to his elbows), that led art historian Giuseppe Fiocco to tentatively identify him as St Jerome listening to a concert of angels. In turn, Fiocco's identification of the musicians as an angelic consort may in part be attributed to their idealized, somewhat otherworldly physical mien, voluminous, flowing clothes, appropriate selection of instruments, and absorbed, even inspired, mode of playing.⁴ Michelangelo Muraro, who acknowledged the foreground figures as both human and female, revised Fiocco's reading of the subject matter as St Jerome reflecting on the sensual delights he had indulged in as a wayward urban youth prior to his conversion to Christianity. To Muraro, this moralizing interpretation must have seemed the most tenable way to explain the incongruous confluence of beautiful young lay women with an elderly male religious figure. The perceived dissonance of the configuration in part stems from the common association in the Renaissance between secular music, the incitement of the passions, and the ambivalent moral status of female musical practice.⁵ However, sacred music was also adapted for domestic solo and ensemble performance, which complicates Muraro's implicit assumption about the nature of the scene depicted.⁶

As Paolo Cortesi summarized this prevalent moralizing view in his conduct treatise for the Renaissance cardinal, *De cardinalatu* of 1510, "many, estranged from the natural disposition of the normal sense, not only reject it [music] because of some sad perversion of their nature, but even think it to be hurtful for the reason that it is somehow an invitation to idle pleasure, and above all, that its merriment usually arouses the evil of lust."⁷ A further Renaissance commonplace held that women, "whose tender and delicate spirits are readily penetrated with harmony and filled with sweetness," were particularly susceptible to the dangerous, seductive effects of music.⁸ In Muraro's interpretation, the young women, with the double allurements of their physical beauty and sweet music, appear in Jerome's studiolo as tempting visions—vivid reminders of his misspent student days—there to distract him from the spiritual and intellectual work proper to scholastic retreat. While scenes of the temptation of St Jerome and St Anthony were relatively common in

European visual culture of the period, none of this imagery shows the saints without attribute or engaged in contemplation of the past that registers as serene and reflective rather than tormented and repentant. In fact, nothing in Carpaccio's British Museum *Concert*, beyond perhaps the religious figure's long beard and hooded *mozzetta*, supports his identification as Jerome or signals the diabolical temptation, spiritual and bodily vexation, and penitential prayer that are typical of such imagery.

Of course, it must be stressed that any interpretation of the drawing's subject matter is complicated by its informal quality and unfinished state as a compositional sketch that furnishes far less detailed and precise visual information than Carpaccio, long recognized as an exemplary practitioner of "the eyewitness style," included in his completed paintings.⁹ Comparison of the preparatory drawing for *The Vision of Saint Augustine* with the completed painting clearly demonstrates such abbreviation as typical of his efficient practice (Figs. 11.1 and 11.4). To point out just two instances from this comparison, in the drawing, a simple circular outline indicates the future placement of the armillary sphere hanging by the window, and the covers and pages of the books positioned on and around the base of the saint's desk, whose legible musical notation assumes visual prominence in the painting, remain blank.

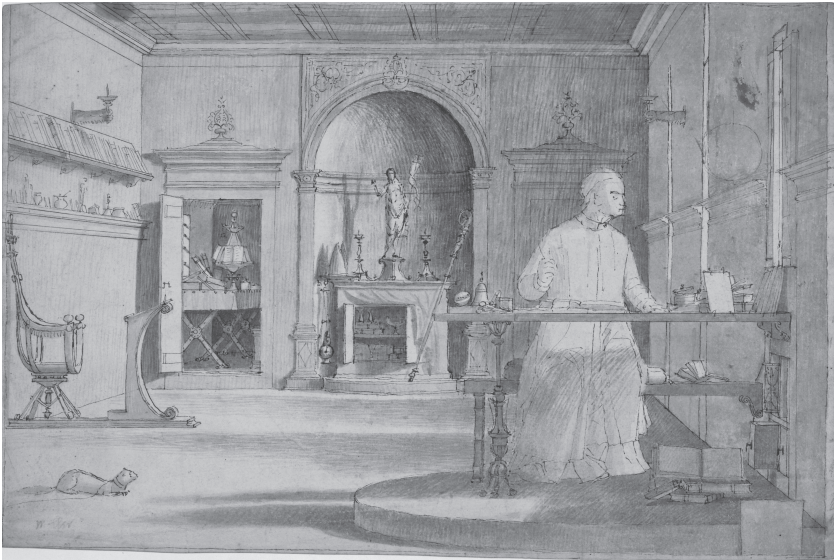


Figure 11.4 Vittore Carpaccio, Preparatory Sketch for *The Vision of Saint Augustine*, c.1502–03. Pen and brown ink, with grey wash, over lead-point, 27.8 cm × 42.6 cm. British Museum, London. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

In the British Museum *Concert*, this habit of temporary omission in preparatory drawing, along with the monochrome nature of the graphic medium itself, render it difficult to establish the religious figure's office or order through his costume, and impossible to discern the notation written on the pages of the book propped open on the ledge against the back wall. Given the *Concert* subject of the composition, it would make sense for the rough, illegible jots scrawled on these pages to indicate musical notation. As will be discussed, Carpaccio did feature identifiable music in two of the open books prominently featured in the finished painting of *The Vision of Saint Augustine*. The religious individual's habit, on the other hand, consists of the hooded *mozzetta*, which appears to be worn over a sleeveless, unbelted cloak fastened with a circular clasp beneath the elbow, and a long-sleeved tunic beneath it.¹⁰ A verisimilar reference figure found at the far left of Carpaccio's painting of the *Marriage of the Virgin* (c.1502–04), from the Scuola degli Albanesi cycle and now in the Pinacoteca Brera, wears a costume that, while identical in its basic structure, has been transformed into an example of fancifully embellished, pseudo-historical Jewish dress, and as such contains far more sartorial detail than the British Museum *Concert*.¹¹

Despite the limitations of visual evidence, this chapter presents a new, if necessarily speculative, interpretation of the drawing by situating it not in a past historical or anachronistic context, in which the subject is understood as St Jerome or a sixteenth-century antitype of Jerome, but squarely within its own historical and cultural moment. In the first place, the costume and physical appearance of the religious figure do not prove exceptional to the “documentary” visual culture of the period. Carpaccio, Gentile Bellini, and several other painters included elderly religious brothers wearing modern habits and long beards in the *istorie*, or narrative history paintings, they produced for Venetian confraternities between 1490 and 1510. In the second place, beards had become popular enough among the Venetian clergy that the Patriarch of Venice felt it necessary to officially condemn them in 1509.¹² On the broader historical and cultural front, a number of Venetian monasteries, churches, and other religious institutions and communities accommodated, even supported, members who pursued humanistic and classical studies in addition to religious and theological training, and who participated in secular artistic activities at the side of their spiritual and clerical duties. Viewed in light of the relatively open and relaxed environment of some Venetian religious institutions in the early sixteenth century, the figure in Carpaccio's *Concert* can be seen as an example of a Renaissance archetype more commonly associated at this date with the lay aristocracy: the scholarly connoisseur and collector dedicated to the *studia humanitatis*, who in this case derives profound spiritual value from the art of music.

The Secular Arts in Venice

Standing in his studiolo as its proud owner, collector of its valuable assemblage of books, vases, and musical instruments, and host to the young trio of musicians, this religious individual engages in what humanist conduct treatises of the era justified as a virtuous display of material consumption tempered by liberality, the moral virtue associated with judicious giving and hospitality.¹³ The narrow chamber can be understood as the material manifestation of the scholar's intellectual and cultural interests, with its contents indicative of its various functions. Following in the rich visual tradition of fifteenth-century courtly and aristocratic studioli, the prominently displayed musical instruments symbolize not only the scholar's dedication to the liberal arts, but also the sociable function of his study as a space for artistic production and exchange. As the host of an impromptu concert or perhaps even a musical *ridotto* (an informal, salon-like gathering in the home), the religious scholar participates in a novel facet of intellectual culture in early sixteenth-century Venice.

With the advent of, among other things, music printing, the documentation of private art collections, and the public performance of classical and modern comedies in Venice after 1500, it proves possible to identify the type of erudite amateurs who became important patrons of and participants in the secular arts. For those individuals who supported musicians, instrument makers, composers, and music publishing in particular, music was a central feature in their personal lives and practice of *otium*. In praising one such student of the liberal arts and lover of music, the young Venetian patrician Girolamo di Andrea Barbarigo, the lutenist-composer Franciscus Bossinensis claimed that music provided these individuals with "incredible joy to the soul and pleasure to the senses."¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, many of the greatest champions of the new musical, literary, theatrical, and artistic culture in Venice—men such as Girolamo Donà, Pietro Bembo, and Gabriele Vendramin—were prominent patrician politicians, high clerical office holders, and international merchants.¹⁵ Others were elite *cittadino* (citizen-class) bureaucrats, merchants, and professionals; however, canons, priests, monks, and friars also played a significant role in its early development.

Perhaps the most famous Venetian example of a religious individual doubly steeped in ecclesiastical and humanist culture during this period is that of Francesco Colonna, the presumed author of the antiquarian-philosophical dream romance, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published by Aldus Manutius in 1499. Colonna was a Dominican friar who studied theology at the University of Padua, where he was also recognized as an antiquarian. He spent much of his life cloistered in the Venetian convent of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, and became a priest at Basilica San Marco, but he also penned Latin epic poetry and enjoyed the freedom of living outside convent walls for an extended period that may have

lasted for more than a decade from 1500 to 1512.¹⁶ Petrus Castellanus, another Dominican friar who was *maestro di cappella* at Santi Giovanni e Paolo during much of this same period, and considered “a monarch of music” by his colleagues, also supplied and edited music for the publisher Ottaviano Petrucci on the side. This included the *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton* (Venice, 1501), Petrucci’s ground-breaking anthology of polyphonic secular song.¹⁷ Frater Felix Fabri, a German Dominican who visited Santi Giovanni e Paolo in 1486 while on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, claimed with great disapproval that “the friars there live as it were in the pomp of secular glory,” and he specifically censured the “secular ceremony” of their polyphonic singing on feast days, which attracted lay audiences.¹⁸ Sanudo later records the friars performing a comedy in the monastery for the carnival of 1533, although with no public in attendance.¹⁹

To cite just one further example, Friar Giovanni Armonio Marso, of the Order of the Crociferi, was a poet, musical composer, playwright, and theatrical performer much admired by Pietro Bembo among others. He wrote a classical five-act comedy in Latin, the *Stephanium*, which was modeled on Plautus. According to the scholar and historian Marcantonio Sabellico, it was performed in the atrium of the Eremitani convent at Santo Stefano in 1502.²⁰ The Crociferi itself, whether the church or a nearby building owned by the Order remains unclear, became an important site for the public staging of both classical and modern comedies in the early 1520s.²¹ Beyond such individual cases, a number of documentary and archival sources confirm that some Venetian priests, monks, and friars composed secular poetry and music, donned lay clothes to offer music and singing lessons to parishioners in their homes, socialized with them there on a regular basis, and even participated in dances.²²

In terms of Venetian visual culture, Carpaccio’s *Concert* is not alone in registering the participation of a religious individual in secular culture and lay sociability. Titian’s so-called *Interrupted Concert* of c.1511–12, now in the Palazzo Pitti, includes the figure of a tonsured Augustinian friar at right, whom Antonio Mazzotta has tentatively identified as the portrait of Gabriele dalla Volta (Gabriele Veneto). Dalla Volta was a prominent Venetian theologian and humanist scholar who was made vicar general of the Augustinian Order in Venice in 1518, and his portrait by Giovanni Bellini has recently resurfaced.²³ He was a major patron of architecture at the church of Santo Stefano, where the Augustinian hermits had their monastery, and was later buried there. During this period, the refectory of the monastery also served as a theater for the staging of classical comedies at carnival.²⁴ As a humanist scholar of the highest order, dalla Volta moved in elite intellectual circles and was a close friend to both Egidio da Viterbo and Pietro Bembo. The figure identified as dalla Volta in Titian’s painting does not play music, rather he holds the neck of a viola da gamba, an instrument associated with secular music and domestic

consorts. He is joined in the trio by two lay musicians: a young singer in “courtly” finery with a plumed hat, and a strikingly handsome keyboardist dressed in a fur-lined robe of dark blue silk, whose skill as a performer is visually established by his central placement, dramatic pose, and the literal foregrounding of his instrument and tensed, playing hands.²⁵ Whether or not the damaged and repainted figure in Titian’s painting portrays dalla Volta, another historical individual, or is a generic reference to an Augustinian friar, the point here is that he participates in a mixed domestic consort in a portrait-like composition that stresses the intimate dynamics of ensemble.

While I am certainly not proposing Colonna or Marso or any other historical individual as the subject of Carpaccio’s *Concert* drawing in the British Museum, identification of the type—a religious scholar who pursues humanistic study and may facilitate the production of secular culture—fits seamlessly with the setting, arrangement, and mood of the composition, which is that of a private, domestic idyll transpiring in a secluded space far removed from the official duties and mundane cares of *negotium* (work, public life). This world of private contemplative and convivial leisure was epitomized in early sixteenth-century Venice by the very real domestic space of the *studiolo*, but also by the imaginary, far-off *locus amoenus*, or pleasant outdoor place evoked in the classical Roman literature on *otium*, the bucolic poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, and the Renaissance pastoral romances and poetry inspired by it, including the hybrid *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Jacopo Sannazaro’s *Arcadia*, which was published in two pirated editions in Venice in 1502 and in an authorized Naples edition of 1504, and Pietro Bembo’s *Asolani*, published in Venice by Aldus Manutius in 1505. Music, like the reading and reciting of poetry, facilitated mental travel from the real setting of the urban *studiolo* to the ideal second world of the *locus amoenus*, which was commonly visualized in Venetian painting and engraving as a bucolic landscape in the rural Veneto. For Renaissance scholars, the study had long served as a liminal space, whether it facilitated union with God, classical authors, or the mythical inhabitants of Arcadia.²⁶

The Monastic *Studiolo*

In Carpaccio’s *Concert*, the garlanded cornice shelf that lines the small chamber of the scholar’s *studiolo* is studded with books and vessels suggestive of ancient vases, in similar fashion to his other paintings and drawings of saints and monastic scholars in their studies, including the sketch on the verso of the British Museum *Concert* (see Fig. 11.2). Following in the humanist tradition of fifteenth-century *studioli* dedicated to the liberal arts, it is also adorned with musical instruments. In addition to the musicians’ own instruments (two lutes and a rebec), a tambourine and *viola da braccio* with its bow hang from the cornice shelf on the back

wall, while a recorder and cornett receive prominent positions on the ledge in the central foreground. These latter are rendered in calibrated perspectival foreshortening to extend toward the virtual grasp of beholders, implying that we too could take up a part and participate in an impromptu moment of music making. The open book standing directly behind these instruments on the back ledge is similarly positioned to face forward for the benefit of beholders, inviting us to look deeper into the picture and potentially engage with the musical activity in a second way through sight-reading. These interactive pictorial effects are indebted to the illusionistic devices of earlier portraits and music-making scenes from the context of the North Italian courts, particularly Lorenzo Costa's groundbreaking *Concert* of c.1490 now in the National Gallery, London.²⁷ Near the front edge of the deep ledge in the foreground of his *Concert*, Costa depicts an artfully arranged still-life of foreshortened instruments—a rebec and a recorder—that project toward the space of beholders, while the open music book, with its detailed though sketchy and illegible notation, is turned to face the lutenist.

As briefly mentioned near the start of this chapter, Carpaccio may have intended to include legible music on the pages of the open book in his *Concert* had it become a finished painting, although in the unfinished compositional sketch they feature only the most abbreviated, staccato indication of text or musical notation. Carpaccio deployed the analogous device of a sheet of music and a music book opened to face out toward the beholder in *The Vision of Saint Augustine* (see Fig. 11.1), and the music is clearly legible in the completed painting. Edward Lowinsky, who first attempted to identify the music, proposed that the prominent sheet of music pressed flush to the picture plane at the base of the dais beneath the saint's desk is secular in its meter, while the music in the bound book just behind and above it on the dais is a four-part sacred melody, suggestive of an Ambrosian hymn. He interpreted this juxtaposed display of sacred and secular music scores as symbolizing Augustine's relationship to music before and after his conversion to Christianity.²⁸ While this intriguing reading received some subsequent favor, the visual evidence does not confirm it, as both the three- and four-voice songs depicted fit the meter and style of contemporary *laude*, devotional songs which were integral to the musical practices of the Venetian *scuole*.²⁹ While likely not intended as a point of moral and spiritual contrast, the prominence of the two songs certainly foregrounds Carpaccio's musical literacy, and very likely his awareness of the two influential passages in the *Confessions* in which Augustine advocates the utility of affective song in reaching a devotional state, texts which for centuries were central to the theological justification of the use of music in church.³⁰

Returning to the British Museum *Concert* and its notable display of instruments, it is worth remembering that both the recorder and the

cornett on the front ledge are wind instruments, and thus augment the range of bowed and percussion instruments depicted elsewhere in the room, moving Carpaccio's portrayal in the direction of encyclopedic display. Writing in a section of his *Ricordi* (Venice, 1554) on the "ornaments of the home," the humanist scholar and courtier Fra Sabba da Castiglione compliments those lords and great gentlemen who "delight in adorning ... their rooms and studies ... with musical instruments such as organs, harpsichords, monochords, psalteries, harps, dulcimers, *bal-dose*, and other similar things; and others with lutes, violas, violins, lyres, flutes, cornetts, trumpets, *tibie* (long pipes), bagpipes, *dianoni*, trombones, and other similar things."³¹ This penchant for both variety and copiousness in collecting instruments is in some sense already hinted at in Carpaccio's drawing, if on a far less ambitious scale than in the famous intarsia designs for Federico da Montefeltro's studioli in the ducal palaces at Urbino and Gubbio, which show *trompe l'oeil* renderings of numerous musical instruments as if they were the contents of the storage cabinets whose doors they decorate.³² Sabba da Castiglione commends musical instruments as ornaments of the studiolo on philosophical and therapeutic grounds, because "such instruments are most delightful to the ear and greatly refresh the spirits, for, as Plato said, they record the harmony that is born from the movements of the celestial spheres."³³ He also justifies their display in the studiolo on aesthetic grounds, claiming, "also they are very pleasing to the eye when they are diligently made by the hands of excellent and ingenious masters."³⁴ Renaissance collectors prized finely crafted musical instruments as works of both visual and audible art, and as such they were signed by their famous makers like paintings and prominently displayed in studioli.³⁵

The taxonomic accumulation of musical instruments visually represented in the Duke of Urbino's studioli became a real material feature of dedicated music studies in Venice by the mid-sixteenth century. Francesco Sansovino proudly describes distinguished patrician *studi di musica* as public ornaments of the city in his guidebook to Venice, *Venetia, città nobilissima, et singolare* (Venice, 1581), noting their valuable collections of ancient and modern instruments and music books.³⁶ He also describes these studies as gathering places for professional vocal and instrumental *virtuosi*, who performed "singular concerts" for their cultivated hosts and patrons. Inventories from the later sixteenth century confirm that some Venetian prelates also possessed impressive studioli filled with collections of music books and instruments, most notably Gioseffo Zarlino, the renowned music theorist and composer who was priest and *maestro di cappella* at Basilica San Marco from 1565.³⁷

In her art-historical examination of the Renaissance scholar in their study, Dora Thornton details just one monastic example, that of the Franciscan friar Franceschino da Cesena, whose bedroom and attached

studiolo within the complex of the Malatesta Library, where he was librarian, are documented in a 1489 inventory.³⁸ Frate Franceschino owned and displayed a remarkable assortment of antiquities, natural curiosities, art (including a painted portrait of himself), portrait medals, casts of coins and seals, and small relief plaquettes, all objects typical of humanistic and antiquarian collections in the Renaissance. In a decorative scheme, highly evocative of that featured in Carpaccio's British Museum *Concert*, his study "is described as having strings of paternosters threaded with casts of coins or medals colored white and red, looped along the top of wall panels around the room, reaching from corner to corner."³⁹ The sheer volume and variety of objects in Frate Franceschino's collection, if not their impeccably ordered arrangement, recall Lorenzo Lotto's preparatory sketch for a portrait of *An Ecclesiastic in his Chamber* now in the British Museum, which he likely made in Venice c.1527–30 while a resident in the Dominican monastery at Santi Giovanni e Paolo.⁴⁰

A North Italian example of a studiolo-like setting originally associated with a monastic complex connects the Renaissance tradition of the humanist study dedicated to the liberal arts with the activities of a religious community, in this case female. Around 1500, the Cremonese artist Alessandro Pampurino frescoed an octagonal ceiling now installed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is ornamented with lunettes and medallions showing Apollo and the nine Muses.⁴¹ The ceiling was likely made for the library of a new convent built in 1498 for the former Cistercian nuns of San Giovanni della Pipia in Cremona, which housed women from among the most prominent Cremonese families.⁴² The ceiling decoration falls loosely within the fifteenth-century courtly tradition of Leonello d'Este's studiolo at Belfiore, Federico da Montefeltro's studioli and *tempietto* at Urbino, and the studiolo and *grotta* of Isabella d'Este at Mantua.⁴³ In Pampurino's grisaille imagery, the chaste and graceful Muses are depicted in elegantly choreographed poses wearing voluminous *all'antica* robes, either singing and playing their respective musical instruments, or accompanied by their other attributes. Eight of the Muses, including Thalia with her viol, are set within individual circular medallions in sections of the ceiling representative of the celestial spheres (Fig. 11.5). According to the interpretation of Marcin Fabianski, from this elevated position they transmit the light of divine inspiration to the earthly world below through their music.⁴⁴

Fabianski has hypothesized that following in the humanist mode, the room would have functioned as a "studiolo-musaeum," evoking the original significance of the term *musaeum* (museum), or *musaeion* in the ancient Greek, as the sacred place of the Muses: "an 'antique' place set aside for studies, learned conversations and, possibly, concerts."⁴⁵ The musical activity of Italian Renaissance nuns has been the subject of much recent scholarship. While the use of convent space for informal concerts of the type imagined by Fabianski remains unexplored in Cremona, they



Figure 11.5 Alessandro Pampurino, *The Muse Thalia Playing a Viol*, detail of the ceiling from Casa Maffi, Cremona, c.1500. Fresco. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum.

have been documented in Venetian and Florentine convents with a large number of nuns from elite families.⁴⁶ Despite this lack of evidence, it seems likely that the ceiling now in the Victoria and Albert Museum represents a precocious instance of what Giancarla Periti has aptly termed “courtly conventual culture,” in which the profane subject matter of classical mythology and history and medieval chivalric literature came to

ornament the residential sections of some wealthy and less strictly observant religious houses in North Italy.⁴⁷ Given the overtly classicizing subject matter of Pampurino's ceiling decoration—the lunettes also contain paired portraits of ancient Roman emperors and empresses—and the small, circular format of the room itself, Fabianski is surely correct in his assertion that the “camerin” was intended to function as an intimate and secluded space dedicated to the arts and humanistic study. There, the abbess, nuns, and potentially also their lay female patrons could cultivate knowledge and perhaps play music, in the home of Apollo and the Muses, much as some of them would have done in the secular court settings of their early youth.

The Music of the Muses

Pampurino's Muses also provide a productive lens through which to view the female musicians in Carpaccio's *Concert* (see Figs. 11.3 and 11.5). The two women in the right foreground of the Venetian drawing play the lute and rebec, while their seated male accompanist tunes his own lute to their playing. As briefly mentioned at the outset, the women's long, loosely bound curls and voluminous, relatively unstructured dresses confer on them an ideal, otherworldly status far removed from the appearance of real Venetian women in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Their physical mien converges somewhat with the depiction of angel musicians in altarpieces of the period, but even more so with representations of the Muses and nymphs, as well as the generic, idealized courtly women found in both contemporary pastoral imagery and literary fiction.

Carpaccio's female musicians are wholly absorbed in their playing, seemingly unaware of their male counterparts. One plays with her face raised as if in a state of inspiration, the other with a distant gaze that seems to reach far beyond the confines of her physical setting. Depicted in this way, the young women hover at the border between the ideal and the real, between a distinct social identity as elite and accomplished women performing in a mixed domestic consort, and a more timeless allegorical role akin to that of the classical Muses figured in princely and aristocratic studioli and libraries dedicated to the liberal arts. The elegant yet informal aspect of their courtly pastoral *habitus* recalls the domestic literary and music culture fashionable in Venice around 1500. Specifically, it strongly suggests the sensual, vaguely classicizing appearance of the female figures in the exquisite woodcuts that accompany the 1492 Venetian luxury edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which was a major bestseller, and those of the more rarified *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and other Aldine editions of the period, as well as the unillustrated poetic description of Bembo's *Asolani* (Fig. 11.6).



Figure 11.6 *Polia and Poliphilo Enter the Garden and the Fountain*, woodcut from Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1499), fol. 184v. Houston, The Menil Collection Library, RB PQ 4619 .C9 1499. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

As instruments for the young women, Carpaccio has appropriately chosen noble and refined strings with soft, delicate sound. The lute and other bowed instruments, although not typically the rebec, were commonly played by court ladies and urban *gentildonne* in late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Italy. The lute in particular is closely associated with the vocal accompaniment of sung poetry and sonically appropriate to the type of small consorts that gathered to play in intimate domestic spaces such as the *studiolo*. Like their counterparts in the aspirational and escapist literature of the period, Carpaccio's female musicians embody the courtly female ideal of *leggiadria*, the almost celestial physical quality of lightness and grace espoused by both Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier* (Venice, 1528).

Similarly, writers including Castiglione praise women's music making in the then gender appropriate terms of purity, modesty, and *dolcezza* (sweetness or gentleness).⁴⁸ The music that elite young courtly and urban women learned to sing and play as a social grace during the first decade

of the sixteenth century consisted primarily of refined love songs, such as Franco-Flemish chansons and Italian frottole based in medieval conceits of courtly love and the poetry of Dante and Petrarch, in which, to quote William F. Prizer, “love is essentially ethereal and unrequited, seemingly existing *in vacuo*.”⁴⁹ As Castiglione famously reminded his readers, such music of longing was associated with the amorous nature of youth, not with the gravity and austerity of old age. Erudite historical beholders would have perceived Carpaccio’s amateur female musicians as chaste and spiritually elevated based on their Muse-like role in the *studiolo* as figures symbolic of musical harmony, and on their physical demeanor and musical repertoire. However, they must also have noted, as Muraro did, the dissonance between the old age of the religious scholar and the idealized vision of youth, beauty, and sweetness embodied by the musicians and their musical repertoire. The religious scholar stands not in a recognized attitude of prayer, but one of attentive self-containment. This chapter thus frames his engagement with the concert in the age-appropriate terms of meditation and reflection, perhaps even detached devotion, rather than, *pace* Muraro, in terms of regret or penitence.

Beyond Carpaccio’s assumption of an audience well-versed in the type of melodic love songs sung and played by amateur female musicians, he may also have gestured at the amorous associations of secular music in choosing the gender composition of the ensemble via the common metaphor of creating harmony through bodies in tune. While the male lutenist could be present in the composition in the capacity of a professional musician and tutor, his youth, beauty, and idealized physical appearance similar to that of the young women—the shoulder-length curls, long robe, and wide mantle swathed casually but artfully over his upper arm—point instead to the intimate mixed gender ensembles of courtly and pastoral concert paintings of the period, which celebrate social, natural, and ultimately celestial or universal harmony. However, as Laurie Stras has pointed out, precious little documentary evidence (beyond the paintings themselves) survives to confirm the existence of such ensembles in the first half of the sixteenth century.⁵⁰ Yet Carpaccio chooses quite literally to foreground gender dynamics in his composition by placing the recorder and cornett on the front ledge, which, as instruments that were typically played only by men in Renaissance polite society, complicate both the gender and the harmonic composition of the ensemble if one takes the beholders’ virtual potential to take up an instrument and play fully into account.

Conclusion

Carpaccio’s British Museum *Concert* addresses the sacred-secular cultural spectrum by expressing a religious scholar’s humanistic learning and self-cultivation through an elegant if surprising figuration of the rejuvenating effects of music as a form of sensory and spiritual nourishment.

Beyond seeming to demonstrate the scholar's appreciation of secular music and its ideal vision of a spiritual love that reaches toward the sacred, the musical performance in Carpaccio's *Concert* also operates as a metaphor for the outward orientation and captivating reach of the planned painting. Its spatially unresolved, stage-like dissolution of the front wall of the studiolo in favor of a low ledge allows beholders privileged visual access onto a decidedly private scene. Carpaccio even toys with the idea of bringing one of the female musicians forward, crossing over into the beholder's share of the imagined space by dissolving the right end of the ledge, a move that allows the figure greater prominence and freedom of movement but fails to square with the planned architectural logic of the composition.

Finally, as François Quiviger has argued, beyond its practical preparatory role for achieving harmony in ensemble, the visual iconography of tuning an instrument—as the young man seated to the back of the studiolo does—could, like the open book, function as a sensory prompt and symbolic call to attention and concentration on the part of the beholder.⁵¹ As a counterpoint to the theoretical musical knowledge demonstrated in *The Visions of Saint Augustine*, the witty play with performance dynamics and material musical symbolism in Carpaccio's compositional study for a *Concert* further reveals his profound engagement with an experimental humanist tradition alive in Venice during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, which through art connected the sacred and the secular, the classical and the contemporary, and the spiritual and the sensory.

Notes

- 1 On this double-sided pen and ink drawing in the British Museum, inv. 1895,0915.806, see the collection online: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/>. For three related drawings of monastic scholars and philosophers in their studies, including another double-sided drawing now in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, see Lauts, cat. nos. 28 and 36, plates 82–84; Muraro, 61, figs. 34–35.
- 2 My interpretation departs from the brief but illuminating discussion of the drawing and its social-historical context found in Fortini Brown 2012, 21–23.
- 3 Ruvoldt discusses the system of reverential display in humanist studies as inherited from the church and Alberti's designation of the study as a *sanctum sanctorum*, 640–641.
- 4 Fiocco, n6, 35.
- 5 Muraro, 50–51.
- 6 There are, for example, multiple compositions of sacred music in the Capirola Lutebook, an exquisitely illuminated manuscript intended for amateur players discussed by Victor Coelho in this volume.
- 7 The English translation of Cortesi is from Shephard 2014, 74.
- 8 Castiglione, 100.
- 9 On Carpaccio, the eyewitness style, and the Venetian *istoria*, see Fortini Brown 1988, 4, 96–97.

- 10 For an overview of male religious dress during this period, see Warr and Concha Sahli.
- 11 The figure in the Brera *Marriage of the Virgin* also wears a long beard, although he is not tonsured (as is appropriate to the historical narrative), and stands in a similar pose, although with his arms folded across his chest in an attitude of prayer rather than gathered at the waist. Lauts, no. 22, pl. 129.
- 12 Newton, 38.
- 13 Guerzoni, 333–340.
- 14 Bossinensis dedicated his first edition of *frottole* (Venice: Ottaviano Petrucci, 1509) to Barbarigo, likely in the hope of attracting his patronage: Boorman, 712.
- 15 Donà's biography, published in 1544, describes his love of music and *otium*, as does his correspondence with Marsilio Ficino, Lorenzo de Medici, and others. For a modern biography, see Gullino. Donà followed in the footsteps of Leonardo Giustinian, the patrician statesman, poet, and author of popular love songs, who instantiated the local song form known in his honor as the *giustiniana*. His own correspondence is rooted in the antique literature on *otium* and beautifully evokes its spiritual benefits, Labalme, 24–27.
- 16 Pozzi.
- 17 Blackburn, 24–25.
- 18 Blackburn, 39–40.
- 19 Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 57, col. 528 (18 February 1533). The comedy was performed “tra loro frati” (between the friars only).
- 20 In addition to the monasteries of the Crociferi and Eremitani, the Venetian churches of San Cassiano and San Canciano in Biri were also used for performances of musical theater and comedies with paid admission in the first decades of the sixteenth century, as documented in Sanudo's *Diaries*. On this, see Pirrotta and Povoledo, 101, 331–332.
- 21 Sanudo records performances of Plautus, Ruzante, and Macchiavelli at the Crociferi. The monastery was destroyed in 1513 and not rebuilt until 1543, so its refectory could not have been the site of theatrical performances in the 1520s as is sometimes posited. On this see Sherman, 57.
- 22 Howard, 103.
- 23 On this portrait now in a private collection in Florence see Mazzotta.
- 24 For example, Plautus' *Asinaria* was staged there on 16 February 1515 (Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 19, col. 439).
- 25 For a recent discussion of Titian's *Interrupted Concert*, including its damaged physical condition, see Goldfarb. Mazzotta, 13, intriguingly suggests a potential identity for the keyboardist as Lorenzo da Pavia, the famous maker of luxury instruments, musician, and agent of Isabella d'Este, who was born c.1470–75, and would thus have been around 35–40 years old at the time of Titian's painting.
- 26 Ruvoldt cites Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, and Nicolò Machiavelli on this point, 242–244.
- 27 For a recent interpretation of Costa's *Concert* as a portrait of the children of the noble Bentivoglio family, Costa's employers in Bologna, see Wallace. The National Gallery rejects this hypothesis, preferring to see the painting as the generic representation of a fashionable courtly entertainment, *cantare al libro* (singing from a book): <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/lorenzo-costa-a-concert>.
- 28 Lowinsky discusses the music in his epilogue to Roberts.
- 29 My thanks to Tim Shephard (personal communication) for his close analysis of the musical notation in Carpaccio's painting. On music in the *scuole*, see Glixon 2003; and with a particular focus on *laude*, Glixon 1990.

- 30 See McKinnon, 154–155. It seems much less likely that Carpaccio has in mind Augustine’s comparatively obscure *De musica*, a treatise on metrics and rhythmic which was of interest to some Renaissance grammarians and music theorists.
- 31 Sabba da Castiglione, “Ricordo cerca gli ornamenti della casa,” *Ricordi, ovvero ammaestramenti di Monsignor Sabba Castiglione Cavalier Gerosolimitano* (Bologna, 1546), cited from the modern edition edited by Barocchi, 3:2919. Fortini Brown sees Carpaccio’s *Concert* as early visual evidence for such music studies, 2012, 21.
- 32 In the *studioli* at Gubbio and Urbino, many of the cabinets display different musical instruments as if they were stored within them or resting on external shelves. On the representation of music in the Duke of Urbino’s *studioli*, see Guidobaldi; Raggio and Wilmering. On the Gubbio study, see Guidobaldi’s contribution to the present volume.
- 33 Barocchi, 3:2919.
- 34 Barocchi, 3:2919. Da Castiglione gives the examples of Lorenzo da Pavia, who worked in Venice from 1495 to 1515 (often for Isabella d’Este, but also for popes and other Italian nobility), and Bastiano da Verona, who remains unidentified, as the most excellent masters at crafting musical instruments.
- 35 On this, see P. Thornton.
- 36 Sansovino describes “studi di musica” among the *Fabriche publiche* (public works) of Venice in Book 8, 379–380.
- 37 Zarlino’s *studiolo* included music books and instruments alongside other typical items such as paintings, globes, astrolabes, clocks, medals, and cameos. See Palumbo Fossati Casa, 274–277.
- 38 D. Thornton, 84–85.
- 39 D. Thornton, 85.
- 40 Lotto painted at least one portrait of a Dominican friar while living in the Venetian monastery. On the British Museum drawing, see the online catalogue: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1951-0208-34.
- 41 In addition to the iconography of Apollo and the Muses, the ceiling features a *trompe l’oeil* oculus with three contemporary figures in imitation of Mantegna’s *Camera picta* in Mantua and paired portraits of Roman emperors and their wives in the lunettes below. The most thorough and up-to-date information on the ceiling can be accessed on the V&A Online Collection: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72907/ceiling-from-the-casa-maffi-ceiling-pampurino-alessandro/>. See also Shephard 2023.
- 42 On the complex history of this Cistercian convent, known colloquially as “della Colomba,” and the refusal of its community to a forced merger with the Augustinian monastery of Santa Monica in 1498, see Shephard 2023.
- 43 Leonello d’Este’s *studiolo* in the villa at Belfiore in Ferrara, begun in 1447 and long since destroyed, was perhaps the first dedicated to the Muses, with individual Muses painted by Cosmè Tura, Michele Pannonio, and Angelo Macagnino among others. Duke Federico da Montefeltro’s *Tempietto delle Muse* at Urbino has figures of the Muses painted by Giovanni Santi in the 1480s. On the decoration of Leonello’s *studiolo* in relation to his musical interests, see Shephard 2014, 30–62, and on the *Tempietto delle Muse* at Urbino, Wedepohl. For a rich overview of the theme of the Muses in the ornamentation of studies and related spaces, see Claudia Cieri Via’s introduction, “Il luogo della mente e della memoria,” to Liebenwein, XXVI–XXXII.
- 44 On the disposition and meaning of the Muses in this monastic context and the broader iconographic tradition, see Fabianski, 205–208; Shephard 2023.
- 45 Given the grotesque decoration surrounding the Muses on the vault, Fabianski also refers to the room as a *grotto-musaeum*, 209. For a history of the

- museo/museion* in the Renaissance as a place dedicated to art, study, and collection, and the relationship to memory (the Muses are the daughters of *Mnemosyne*), see Cieri Via in Liebenwein, XI–XII.
- 46 For a recent overview of nuns' music in early sixteenth-century convents, see Stras 2017.
- 47 Periti explores the complex secular ornamentation of convent parlors, monastic cells, and abbatial apartments in Parma during the early sixteenth century. In Cremona, the "camerin" painted by Pampurino inspired the similar decoration of a room off the cloisters in the church of Sant'Abbondio in 1513, as analyzed by Leino and Burnett.
- 48 Fermor discusses the concept of *leggiadria* with particular regard to movement, while Stras addresses the characterization of courtly women's music making by Castiglione and other courtiers, 55–59.
- 49 Prizer, 10.
- 50 Stras 2018, 61.
- 51 Quiviger discusses the iconography of tuning in his chapter, "Sound," from *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*, 137–152, and again in his contribution to the present volume.

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