

## Venice's *Ospedali Grandi*: Music and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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**Venice's *Ospedali Grandi***  
**Music and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries**

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At the core of Venetian culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the institutions known as *ospedali grandi*. This welfare system included four charitable institutions called *ospedali*, each attached to a church. The four *ospedali* housed female wards with various ailments and social conditions that made them undesirable to the rest of Venice. The *Ospedale degl'Incurabili* accepted syphilitics, orphans and reformed prostitutes; the *Ospedale della Pietà* housed abandoned children; the *Ospedale di Santa Maria dei Derelitti ai Santi Giovanni e Paolo* took in homeless children; the *Ospedale di San Lazarus e dei Mendicanti* cared for lepers.<sup>1</sup> One element of the *ospedali's* services was to educate their wards in many subjects, including music.<sup>2</sup> The *ospedali* also formed musical ensembles, called *cori*, and gave performances in their respective churches in order to raise funds and attract patronage.<sup>3</sup> Each ward who entered into the care of one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jane L. Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice: Musical Foundations, 1525-1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Pincherle and Manton Monroe Marble, "Vivaldi and the 'Ospitali' of Venice," *Musical Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (July 1938): 300.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Oleskiewicz, "The Rise of Italian Chamber Music," in *The World of Baroque Music: New Perspectives*, ed. George B. Stauffer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 71.

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*ospedali* received some degree of musical training, and the most talented girls were selected to become *figlie del coro* and perform in the *cori*.<sup>4</sup> The *cori* grew quite famous and did indeed draw the attention of audiences and patrons. Financial support from the wealthier Venetians allowed the *cori* to flourish and reach a high standard of musicianship. The *cori* then began accepting students who did not qualify as wards at the *ospedali* but who showed promise of musical talent.<sup>5</sup> The *ospedali*, which started merely as charitable institutions, began to draw international attention from European aristocrats and tourists because of the *cori*'s high-calibre performances.<sup>6</sup> The *cori* of the *ospedali grandi* contributed to Venetian culture by breaking gender and class barriers and by attracting attention from patrons and audiences within Venice, and throughout Europe.

The *ospedali* contributed to Venetian culture by empowering women, in opposition to the social conventions of the time. Since the majority of the wards and students, and many of the employees of the *ospedali* were girls and women, the structure of the *ospedali* relied on female leadership and encouraged the education of females. The *ospedali* developed educated women, virtuosic female musicians, and leading female administrators.

Each ward in the *ospedali* received a thorough education, including rigorous musical training. Pupils studied vocal and instrumental performance (on several instruments), sight-singing, and ear-training daily.<sup>7</sup> *Figlie del coro* who chose to remain with the *cori* once they reached adulthood received further education in performance, copying music, and sometimes in composition.<sup>8</sup> The *ospedali* viewed the education of their wards as an important

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<sup>4</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 101-102.

<sup>5</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 56-57.

<sup>6</sup> Pincherle and Marble, "Vivaldi," 309.

<sup>7</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 128.

<sup>8</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 127.

part of the girls' "spiritual development," and therefore took a serious approach to learning.<sup>9</sup> Accounts of the education at the *ospedali* suggest that the young women studying there might have received a better education than higher class women studying elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The educational systems at the *ospedali* grew in acclaim so that by the eighteenth century, the *ospedali* were known more for their schools than for the charitable work that was their original purpose.<sup>11</sup> These schools provided female wards with a well-rounded education (including musical studies), that likely would not have been available to them outside of the *ospedali*.

The *ospedali* also allowed their *cori* to perform in public, though convention generally discouraged women from such activities. An eighteenth-century account describes how the *figlie del coro* were exceptions to the public view that women who appeared onstage were immoral.<sup>12</sup> Somehow, the *cori* escaped the common association of immorality with female public performance and audiences not only accepted, but celebrated the *cori*'s concerts. Restrictions applied to some of the *cori*'s church performances, however. A 1722 account of one such performance describes a scene where an all-female *cori* comprised of singers, organists, and other instrumentalists performed behind an iron curtain so as not to be seen by the audience.<sup>13</sup> While the members of the *cori* did hide themselves during some church performances, there are also accounts that tell otherwise. A 1739 account depicts a woman "conducting an orchestra and beating time with all the grace and precision imaginable."<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>9</sup> Wendy Heller, "Usurping the Place of the Muses: Barbara Strozzi and the Female Composer in Seventeenth-Century Italy," in *The World of Baroque Music: New Perspectives*, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Heller, "Usurping the Place of the Muses," 146.

<sup>11</sup> Pincherle and Marble, "Vivaldi," 300.

<sup>12</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Pincherle and Marble, "Vivaldi," 301.

<sup>14</sup> Charles de Brosse, quoted in Pincherle and Marble, "Vivaldi," 301-2.

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account draws particular attention to the physical beauty of the conductor while she and her ensemble are performing. The inconsistency between these two accounts suggests that in some situations, women were allowed to perform without restriction, while many church performances required them to be hidden from view. Since social convention generally forbade women from any kind of participation in liturgical services, even a hidden performance represented a relative freedom for the members of the *cori*.

Like the commercial opera theatre, the *cori* produced and recognized virtuosic soloists among their singers. Some of the scores that Antonio Vivaldi composed for the *coro* at the *Pietà* (where he was resident composer during the beginning of the eighteenth century) include names of specific soloists for whom he wrote them.<sup>15</sup> Composers wrote and rewrote works to showcase individual *figlie del coro*. Some of the *coro*'s music includes alternate cadenzas for performance by a new soloist.<sup>16</sup> Denis Arnold describes the difficulty of the music these soloists performed and explains that by Vivaldi's time, the *coro* soloists at the *Pietà* were "no longer girl-pupils from an orphanage, but just as professional as those who were receiving large fees in the *Teatro S. Angelo* or *S. Giovanni Grisostomo*."<sup>17</sup> Arnold's comparison of the *cori* singers to operatic professionals is a testament not only to the quality of the musical training at the *Pietà*, but also to the opportunity for success and recognition the *ospedale* gave to their *figlie del coro*.

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<sup>15</sup> Pincherle and Marble, "Vivaldi," 305-306; Denis Arnold, "Music at the 'Ospedali,'" *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113, no. 2 (1988): 161-2.

<sup>16</sup> Faun Tanenbaum Tiedge, ed., preface to *Selected Sacred Music from the Ospedale della Pietà*, vol. 74 of *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, ed. Christoph Wolff (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 1995), xix.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, "Music at the 'Ospedali,'" 161-2.

Women at the *ospedali* were not all performers, however. There were also administrative and teaching positions open to women. Each *ospedale* had a Prioress to take care of administration. The Prioress was in charge of the professional and domestic staff of the *ospedale* (one account of the staff at the *Pietà* counts over 200 members), and had female assistants to help manage and supervise the activity of the *ospedale*, including the musical activity of the *coro*.<sup>18</sup> Board members at the *ospedali* appointed the Prioress positions to senior members of the *cori*. Jane Berdes explains that the Prioress was “the highest post open to a member of a *coro* and quite possibly to any Venetian woman.”<sup>19</sup> This position represented a great opportunity for the female wards. In addition to internal positions, such as the Prioress, external musicians were often hired by the *ospedali* to teach at their schools. While many of these teachers were male, the first external musician to teach at any of the *ospedali* was in fact a woman – Marieta Giusti in 1612 at the *Pietà*.<sup>20</sup> Even the teaching positions, though not exclusively for women, brought female leaders to the *ospedali*.

Traditionally, when women reached adulthood, they either married or entered a convent. The combination of education and work opportunities that the *ospedali* provided for their female students gave these women a third possibility; they could choose to become *inservienti della musica*, servants of music, and continue contributing to the *cori* as adults.<sup>21</sup> Life as an *inservienta della musica* appealed to many of the *figlie del coro*. A letter from an eighteenth-century visitor to Venice claims that the *figlie del coro* “were too educated to be content to assume either of the two roles

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<sup>18</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 74-5.

<sup>19</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 122-3.

<sup>20</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 57.

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traditionally open to women.”<sup>22</sup> It is also possible that these educated women were less desirable in marriage since a man would never take wife who was more educated than himself.<sup>23</sup> Women who became *inservienti della musica* also secured some level of financial independence for their continuing work with the *cori*. Everyone living in the *ospedali* worked and earned a basic salary, which in turn paid for their room and board.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the more qualified employees could often make a larger salary. Female music teachers often taught extra lessons to paying students who came to the *ospedali* to benefit from the renowned musical training.<sup>25</sup> Students talented enough to become *figlie del coro*, including the *inservienti della musica*, also made a larger salary of at least 100 lire per year.<sup>26</sup> The *ospedali* allowed women to choose education and independence over marriage or a convent.

The *ospedali* and their *cori* contributed to Venetian culture by making exceptions to social gender conventions. The *ospedali* provided women with a high-quality education and allowed them to perform in public. Additionally, the *ospedali* created paying jobs for their wards that were likely unavailable outside of the *ospedali*. As a result, women could choose an independent life at the *ospedali* over marriage or life in a convent. In addition to altering gender conventions, the *ospedali* also revised some conventions of social class.

The four *ospedali* took care of wards that the rest of Venice did not want to support. As the *cori* gained a reputation for their music, the Venetian public recognized these lowly wards for their talents, rather than for their poor social rank. An account from Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes his surprise upon meeting the

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<sup>22</sup> Grosley de Troyes, quoted in Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 81-2.

<sup>23</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Pincherle and Marble, “Vivaldi,” 307.

“angels of beauty” he heard perform at the Mendicanti, and realizing that the beautiful voices of the *figlie del coro* belonged to poor, disfigured women. Rousseau writes, “M. le Blond presented one after the other of these renowned singers to me whom I had known only by name and by voice. “Come Sophie...” She was hideous. “Come Cattina...” She had only one eye. “Come, Bettina...” She was disfigured by pockmarks. Scarcely one of them but had some notable defect.”<sup>27</sup> At the other *ospedali*, the *figlie del coro* may not have been visibly disfigured, but society would still have considered them undesirable due to their social status. Berdes speaks of the dichotomy present in the *ospedali*; audiences would come from across Europe to rejoice in the fine musical performances of the *cori*, starring some of the least desirable people in Venice – people whom the upper classes generally tried to ignore.<sup>28</sup> The *cori*'s performances attracted positive attention toward the lower social classes. The *ospedali* also generated direct interaction among social classes.

In contrast to convents, which restricted entrance to nobles, the *ospedali* accepted girls from all classes and ranks.<sup>29</sup> The *ospedali* initially took in wards from only the lowliest groups, but as the educational systems of the *ospedali* gained a positive reputation, they began to attract higher-class students who wanted a high-quality education. Two categories existed for these middle- and upper-class girls. The *figlie d'educazione* received free admission based on a musical audition, and with the expectation that they would perform with the *cori*. The *figlie di spese* were paying students who took music lessons from teachers at the *ospedali*.<sup>30</sup> The admission of girls from higher classes created an increasing

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quoted in Pincherle and Marble, “Vivaldi,” 302.

<sup>28</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 116-7.

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variety of social classes among the *figlie del coro*. While some of the classroom lessons at the *ospedali* might have separated aristocratic students from lower class students, the *cori* contained all of the most musically-talented students, regardless of social class.<sup>31</sup> In fact, when an opening occurred in one of the *cori*, governors of the *ospedale* searched for and recruited a replacement based primarily on her musical talent, not social class.<sup>32</sup> The *coro* therefore became one of the only places where girls of all backgrounds joined in the shared goal of creating high-quality music.

The *cori* dissolved barriers of class in Venetian society by drawing international attention to performances by the lowliest people in Venice, and by recruiting higher class girls with musical talent to perform in these same ensembles. The *cori* also drew the attention of Venice's wealthier citizens. Patronage became an important part of the *ospedali* and of Venetian culture since patrons who enjoyed the *cori*'s performances often contributed financially to further develop the *ospedali* and the *cori*.

One of the purposes for musical performance at the *ospedali* was to attract benefactors. Venetians valued high-quality music in their church services, and were more likely to become patrons of a church and affiliated *ospedale* if they were impressed by the *coro*'s music.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the indulgence system encouraged wealthier Venetians to contribute to the *ospedali*. One could earn indulgences by providing funds or attending services at the *ospedali*'s affiliated churches.<sup>34</sup> This system therefore attracted an audience to the *cori*'s performances. As the *cori* drew the attention of patrons to the *ospedali*, new funds allowed the *cori* to further

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<sup>31</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 101-2.

<sup>33</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 25.

develop. This cycle allowed for the rapid success of the *cori*.<sup>35</sup> Patronage became crucial to the success of the *ospedali* and the *cori*. Some patrons left legacies to the *ospedali* after their deaths; others “adopted” a *figlia del coro* by helping her financially and including her in family vacations.<sup>36</sup> The *cori* affected Venetian culture by drawing significant attention from patrons to the *ospedali* and their churches.

Finally, foreigners from other European countries recognized the *cori* as important tourist attractions in Venice.<sup>37</sup> A number of documents recount travellers’ awe at music’s elevated status in Venetian culture after attending a concert by one of the *cori*. A guidebook from 1740, describing the musical activity at the *Incurabili*, reads,

Those little girls who are left without their parents are accepted into this holy place, where they are trained to sing and to play for the holy functions held in the church. Such is the perfection which they attain in so doing that for this very reason many foreigners are attracted here throughout the year; no visitor of importance who was come to Venice leaves without having first honoured this holy place with his presence.<sup>38</sup>

Tourists to Venice viewed the *ospedali* as attractions because of the high quality of the *cori*’s performances. Additionally, the *cori* put on special performances to honour sovereigns from other countries who visited Venice.<sup>39</sup> One account of such a performance, in honour of the Duke of Saxony, describes forty

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<sup>35</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 88, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Heller, “Usurping the Place of the Muses,” 146.

<sup>38</sup> G. B. Albrizzi, quoted in Berdes, *Women Musicians*, 104-5.

<sup>39</sup> Pincherle and Marble, “Vivaldi,” 309.

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girls, ten from each *coro*, singing newly-composed music.<sup>40</sup> This performance was not a regular church service, but a special program to honour the Duke. The *cori* thus played a crucial role in projecting a positive image of Venetian culture to important visitors.

Musical activity at the *ospedali grandi* contributed to Venetian culture by dissolving conventions of gender and class, by attracting the attention of patrons, and by projecting the image of a music-loving Venice across Europe. The *ospedali* gave young girls a quality education in a number of subjects, including music. Musically-talented wards earned opportunities to perform publicly, and some achieved great success as musicians. Other female wards took on leadership and employment opportunities within the *ospedali* and the *cori*. The *cori* allowed women to pursue lives as musicians rather than marrying or entering a convent. Such educational and employment opportunities were generally not available to women outside of the *ospedali*. In addition to granting opportunities to women, the *ospedali* also brought together people of different social classes for the sake of creating and enjoying music. Venetians celebrated the *cori*'s concerts, performances primarily consisting of girls and women from the lowest social ranks. With time, the *cori* began to accept members from all social classes, thus bringing together girls from different social backgrounds to perform in one ensemble. The *cori*'s success drew attention from within Venice and from across Europe. While patrons and tourists were interested in the *cori* for their music, this attention also helped the *ospedali* develop their education and welfare systems. The *ospedali* used their *cori* to attract positive attention from patrons and draw in funds. The *cori* at the Venetian *ospedali grandi* allowed women and men, aristocrats and orphans, patrons of the arts in Venice, and

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<sup>40</sup> Arnold, "Music at the 'Ospedali,'" 165.

tourists and nobles from across Europe to unite in their appreciation and love of well-performed music.

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