

Chiara Margarita Cozzolani

* 27 November 1602 in Mailand, Italien

† um 1677 in Mailand, Italien

Chiara Maria Cozzolani died in the St. Radegonda Convent in Milan between 1676 and 1678.

Composer, singer, choir conductor

“Among these religious people Donna Chiara Margarita Cozzolani deserves the highest praise – ‘Illustrious’ [Chiara] by name, but more by merit, and Margarita [Pearl] for the nobility of her spirit, of exquisite rarity and excellence. In 1620 she took the veil there and acquired a certain fame in performing music, so much so that between 1640 and 1650 she published four music collections.” (Filippo Picinelli, *Ateneo dei letterati milanesi*, Milan 1670)

Profile

Chiara Maria Cozzolani was a Benedictine composer of the seventeenth century who played a decisive role in the first-class musical life in her convent and published several collections with motets and polyphonic psalm settings.

Biography

Margarita Cozzolani was born on 27 November, 1602 as the daughter of a prosperous upper middle-class Milan family (Kendrick, 1996, p.33-34) Two of her aunts already belonged to the neighbouring St. Radegonda Benedictine convent (founded around the year 870). Margarita’s career was therefore presaged at an early age; she may have been linked to the convent already as a convent pupil (*educanda*). In 1615 her uncle – her father had died shortly before – negotiated the required dowry with St. Radegonda for Margarita and her sister Clara. Shortly thereafter Clara signed the renunciation of any inheritance claim in favour of her brother. It can be assumed that both sisters entered the convent as novitiates at the same time. In 1620 Margarita Cozzolani completed her novitiate, swore perpetual profession and took the ordination name “Chiara Margarita”.

It is not known if Chiara Margarita Cozzolani had already received a musical education before entering the convent. One can speculate as to whether she, as a musically talented child, may have been tutored by the violin virtuoso

so Riccardo Rognoni. He apparently lived near the Cozzolani family (*ibid.*, p. 85, footnote 87). As a novice in the St. Radegonda convent, which was famous far beyond Milan for the quality of its music, she received a thorough singing education in any case, as prescribed by the music-loving cardinal and Archbishop of Milan, Federico Borromeo (period of office 1595-1631).

She went on to play a decisive role in the convent’s extensive musical life, which was pervaded by internal competition. Several public disputes regarding convent music arose under Archbishop Alfonso Litta (period of office 1652-79), who did his utmost to push his archconservative church policy through in opposition to the Milan senate, targeting the convents in particular (*ibid.*, p.96-107). The abbess of the convent had to speak on behalf of Chiara Margarita Cozzolani’s musical activity in her convent in several lawsuits. The court records show that music was increasingly becoming a source of conflict between the archbishop and – supported by the senate – the nuns. However, it was not only a question of conflict between Litta and the convent: behind the “differences of opinion” regarding music lay a hidden rivalry between two choirs in the convent, which each tried to coax away the best singers and competed intensely in order to perform for important visitors. The leaders of these competing groups were Sister Maria Faustina Palomera and abbess Chiara Margarita Cozzolani.

The court case brought to light the importance of polyphonic vocal instrumental music in the famous Benedictine convent: as musicians the nuns of St. Radegonda contributed significantly to the city’s prestige and the city leaders were happy to include them as a special attraction for state visits. At the beginning of 1665, when Archbishop Litta procured a restriction from Rome on the polyphonic playing of musical instruments in convents, the nuns provocatively went over his head, fully conscious of their status. In March of the same year Litta pushed through the final prohibition of polyphony in St. Radegonda: until the mid-1670s the polyphonic structure of church services and especially the playing of musical instruments in the nun’s visiting room („*parlatorio*“) was strictly forbidden – a prohibition which was perceived by the aristocratic nuns as a stain on their honour (as stated by abbess Chiara Benedetta Secca Bozella in a letter to one of her benefactors in 1681, quoted in Kendrick, 1996, p. 105, note 53). Only in 1690, long after Chiara Margarita Cozzolani’s death, was the historical position of polyphonic music in St. Radegonda restored as an essential

component of the church service, prayers and recreation through the recommendation of the influential cardinal Pietro Ottoboni.

Chiara Margarita Cozzolani stood out in the convent as a singer and composer and was well-known far beyond Milan for a series of her own musical publications. At the same time she held the highest positions in the convent: in 1664 and 1671 she was the convent's prioress, in 1658-60 and 1672-73 abbess. This indicates the high respect she earned in the convent community and in church circles, as well as her influence both in the convent and in the musical community. Her exact date of death is unknown. Based on the convent records, it is estimated at between 1676 and 1678.

Appreciation

Of the four musical publications for which Chiara Margarita Cozzolani was known as a composer, three are still preserved, containing motets, psalm settings, a mass and a magnificat. The dedications of these collections show the musical-religious contacts that Chiara Margarita Cozzolani maintained far outside her convent's direct area of influence: her first *Primavera di fiori musicali* (1640, not preserved) was dedicated to the then Archbishop Cesare Monti (period of office 1632-50), while the *Concerti sacri* (1642) were dedicated to Prince Mathias de' Medici, who presumably heard the music of the St. Radegonda Benedictines in the winter of 1640/41 during a stay in Milan. The *Scherzi di sacra melodia a voce sola* (1648) were dedicated by Chiara Margarita Cozzolani to her superior in the order, Pater Claudio Benedetti, "Presidente Generale della Congregazione Cassinense" in Verona. Her final remaining collection, an edition de luxe with *Salmi a otto voci concertati* (1650), was dedicated to the Venetian aristocrat Monsignor Badoardo who held the bishopric at Crema. It is possible that Chiara Margarita Cozzolani composed these psalm settings for the visit of the Austrian Princess Maria Anna, who stopped over in Milan on her bridal trip to Spain and also visited the St. Radegonda convent on June 25th (Kendrick, 1998, p. X).

It is unknown if additional individual works of Chiara Margarita Cozzolani were published. Many of her motets were, however, included in anthologies and distributed in several European countries in the seventeenth century. Her psalm setting *Laudate pueri* even turned up in the Jesuit province of Paraguay and was listed there until the nineteenth century (Illari, p. 11-41).

Chiara Margarita Cozzolani's sparingly voiced motets reflect the intense religiosity of Milan convents in the seventeenth century. As regards the text, the Song of Songs plays a central role. The intensity and dialogical structure of the biblical love poetry is perfectly linked with the compositional genre of musical dialogue. When Cozzolani was active as a composer, this genre played a central role, particularly in religious contexts: the performance and experience of the spiritual dialogue enabled singers and listeners to identify directly with the dialogue partners. The Song of Songs was used as a central text especially in the St. Radegonda convent. The nuns' personal identification with the role of the bride (*Sponsa*) stood in the forefront; however, corresponding to the dominant exegetical tradition in the 1600s, the lovers were often also equated with Mary (A characteristic example of a Marian reading is Cozzolani's dialogic vocal concerto *Psallite superi* (1642); for the Magdalene reading on the other hand, the Easter dialogue *Maria Magdalene stabat ad monumentum* (1650) offers an example of great emotional intensity. (See the analyses of both compositions in Koldau, 2007, p.238-252).

Individual verses from the Songs of Songs are found in Chiara Margarita Cozzolani's motets, however also in other contexts such as the Eucharist, Easter or Corpus Christi (see motets in the edition Chiara Margarita Cozzolani: *Motets* by Robert Kendrick). This demonstrates the versatile applicability and flexible theological content of this biblical book, which served the Italian nuns as none other as a means of meditation and spiritual immersion.

Chiara Margarita Cozzolani's motets are marked by a characteristic, expressive musical language of minimally voiced compositions: suspensions and dissonances contrasting with the "sweet" effect of parts in parallel thirds and sixths, pauses pregnant with affects, sudden harmonic contrasts, rapid and rhetorically insistent repetitions of short motifs and phrases. At the same time a careful, formal system stands out: refrains and slightly varied repetitions of whole sections make for a formal harmony that takes the compositions to an altogether higher plane.

In her music for vespers, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani primarily follows the conventions of a flexible text expression that emerged from the 1620s for the concertato setting of psalms and canticles. Admittedly, the almost obligatory conventions regarding word stress and structural form in the setting of the recurring psalm texts retreated

significantly in the 1640s. Chiara Margarita Cozzolani's eight-voice vespers (1650) illustrate this development: suggestive individual words like *exaltare*, *in altis*, *terribilis*, *torrente* serve much less often as triggers for flexible musical illustrations and the rapid change of individual, heavily marked affects give way to the general tendency towards the broader composition of a single, predominant emotional state. The abrupt contrasts of earlier psalm compositions are replaced by broad passages in the same time and key. The change of instrumentation also becomes more prominent: already here in Cozzolani's psalms the verses are so clearly separated from each other in their instrumentation that the character of distinct movements shines through, leading in the following decades to an isolation of the verses into individual movements and thus to the emergence of the psalm concert.

One special feature substantially raises the vespers compositions of Chiara Maria Cozzolani above those of her contemporaries, including other nun composers: in several compositions Cozzolani interpolates text sections, which breaks up the linear flow of the canonical text and leads to new theological statements. Thus in the "Dixit Dominus" she inserts individual sections of the doxology "Gloria Patri..." already in the course of the psalm setting. Thus this extensive composition possesses a clear context, in spite of its heterogeneous series of contrasting sections. The interpolation, however, also seems theologically necessary: The Benedictine nun certainly makes the doxology a guide, orienting the individual verses to the eternal praise of the Trinity, leading determinedly from the individual sections ("Gloria Patri" – "Gloria Filio" – "Gloria Spiritui Sancto") to her crowning unity "in saecula saeculorum" and the emphatic confirmation of "Amen".

Again in the first Magnificat of the 1650 collection she isolates a verse that returns several times in the course of the composition: The praise "magnificat anima mea Dominum" breaks out spontaneously (mainly) after the verses, which emphasise the elevation of the virgin and "ancilla Domini". Moreover, Cozzolani later inserts the statements "quia fecit mihi magna" and "respexit humilitatem ancillae suae" where it refers to God bringing down the arrogant and raising up the humble. This free intervention in the canonical text – repeatedly forbidden by the church authorities – reminds us of the identification of the nuns with biblical female characters: such as Mary, who according to Luke 1.46–55 replied to Elizabeth's

blessing and greeting with the canticle "Magnificat anima mea Dominum". Chiara Margarita Cozzolani allows this expression of praise to reappear, as if spontaneously, in her setting.

With this kind of theologically motivated interpolation, which from a compositional perspective represents a music and text related means of structuring and creating unity, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani clearly stands out among seventeenth century church composers. Her motets and psalm settings fundamentally reflect the general development of Northern Italian concertato music as found in corresponding compositions of her Northern Italian contemporaries and compatriots. Yet those things of special importance to the Benedictine nun seem to be subtly reflected in her music: Chiara Margarita Cozzolani's selection of themes, her formulation and her own musical interpretation of the spiritual texts demonstrate and seem to reproduce a specific religiosity which on the one hand is characteristic of seventeenth century Milan nuns, and on the other seems reflect Chiara Margarita Cozzolani's own interpretation of the liturgical writings and her self-conception as a nun.

Reception

In contrast to other composing nuns in Milan and other Northern Italian cities, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani is not mentioned in contemporary reports of musical activity in convents.

Just as few musical publications or individual compositions are devoted to her (dedications of musical publications to nuns were not usual in the seventeenth century and often led to musical activity in their convents being terminated).

At any rate there is a single remaining testament to the high estimation in which contemporaries held the musician. In his panegyric writing *Ateneo dei letterati milanesi* (Athenaeum of Cultured Milanese, 1670) Filippo Picinelli described the outstanding musical culture at the St. Radegonda convent and singled out Chiara Margarita Cozzolani:

"The nuns of St. Radegonda in Milan distinguish themselves in their musicality with such a rare excellence that they count among the finest singers of all Italy. They wear the habit of the Holy Father Benedict but beneath their black garments of him who belongs to them, they seem to be as pure swans filled with melodiousness that fills the heart with astonishment and rouses the tongue

to their praise. Among these religious, Donna Chiara Margarita Cozzolani deserves the highest praise – ‘Illustrious’ [Chiara] by name, but more by merit and Margarita [Pearl] for the nobility of her spirit, of exquisite rarity and excellence. In 1620 she took the veil there and acquired a certain fame in performing music, so much so that between 1640 and 1650 she published four music collections.[...]” (Italian original quoted in Kendrick, 1996, p. 467)

The musical responsibility that Chiara Margarita Cozzolani had in the exceedingly musical convent, according to the Milan case records, also demonstrates the estimation her fellow nuns had for her (apart from the internal competitive disputes).

In the last two decades Cozzolani’s music has become much better known, both by academic reappraisal, through the interest in compositions by women, and by the specialisation of various ancient music ensembles in unknown and unusual repertoire. The Italian female ensemble Cappella Artemisia (Bologna) set itself the challenge of performing works composed for male and female voices under the conditions of a convent, hence exclusively performed with female voices (For a discussion of various possible solutions to this problem see Kendrick, 1996, p.188-204). The American ensemble ‘Magnificat’ (San Francisco) in cooperation with the music researcher Robert L. Kendrick, has devoted itself to the complete works of Chiara Margarita Cozzolani (The Cozzolani Project, <http://www.cozzolani.com/>, with two CDs on which the collections of 1650 and 1642 are recorded, and a further recording of the remaining compositions as part of other CD projects). Performers and critics increasingly point out the excellent quality of Cozzolani’s music; the Benedictine nun is an indispensable part of today’s concert repertoire when it comes to the works of seventeenth century female composers.

Research

Significant research was carried out in the 1990s particularly by Robert L. Kendrick, where Chiara Margarita Cozzolani’s compositions were comprehensively classified within the religious context of their time and the compositional development in Northern Italy during the mid-seventeenth century.

Need for Research

Compositional studies:

The psalm settings and the *Messa a quattro* in particular still require systematic study. This primarily relates to compositional technique and classification within the stylistic development of the Italian psalm concert in the mid-seventeenth century. The motets still require a comprehensive study of text selection, contextualisation and musical structure; here the work of Robert L. Kendrick offers an important basis.

Cultural-historical contextualisation:

A systematic study of the St. Radegonda convent with regard to musicians and any other compositions for internal use is also needed (again the work of Kendrick provides the best starting point). An expanded contextualisation with regard to female composers and composing nuns, and the special conditions concerning music making in Italian convents in the seventeenth century is also necessary.

Authority control

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Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):

□ <http://d-nb.info/gnd/124118755>

Library of Congress (LCCN):

□ <http://lcn.loc.gov/n98031718>

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Editing status

Editorial staff: Ellen Freyberg, (deutsche Fassung)

Meredith Nicollai, (English version)

Translation: Trevor Pichanick

First edit 27/08/2012

Last edit 25/08/2017

mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de

Forschungsprojekt an der

Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg

Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard

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