Leonora Baroni, Gemälde von Fabio Della Cornia (ca. 1600-1643)

Leonora Baroni

* um December 1611 in Mantua,
† 6 April 1670 in Rom,

“...mais il me semble qu’ils ne chantent pas si agréablement les airs que la Léonora, fille de cette belle Adriana, Mantouane, qui a esté un miracle de son temps, et qui en a produit encore un plus grand, en mettant au monde la plus parfaite personne pour le bien chanter.”

“...but it appears to me that they (the castrati) do not sing the arias as pleasantly as Leonora, daughter of the lovely Adriana from Mantua, who is a miracle of her time and who created an even greater miracle, by bringing the most perfect person for beautiful song into the world.”

(Maugars, quoted in Thoinan 1865: p. 36)

Profile

Leonora Baroni followed in the footsteps of her mother, the singer Adriana Basile, at an early age and with her she can be considered the most famous and influential solo vocalist of the first half of the 17th century who, due to her connections within the Roman church aristocracy (Giulio Rospigliosi, and the Barberini and Mazarin families, among others), was able to achieve significance beyond her singing career and gained influence within music and church politics.

Cities an countries

Leonora Baroni spent the majority of her artistic career in Rome, where she was particularly active as singer and hostess of musical soirees. Beyond this, she had ties to Naples and Mantua, mostly through her mother, the singer Adriana Basile, and was engaged by the French court for a short time in the 1640’s.

Biography

Origins

Leonora Baroni was born in Mantua in December 1611 as daughter to the famous chamber singer Adriana Basile (called “la bella Adriana”, Ademollo 1888b, Fétis 1868: 251), who was at that time engaged by the Mantuan court and navigated between the positions of a court musician and court lady: a situation typical for early professional singers.

Leonora’s father Mutio [Muzio] Baroni, Basile’s husband, descended from the lower Calabrian nobility and was in service to the Prince of Stigliano. Vincenzo Gonzaga, long-time patron of Basile, awarded her the barony Piancerreto (Montferrat in Piedmont); he himself was one of Leonora’s godfathers, who was named in honour of his deceased wife Elenora.

Leonora Baroni was not only born into a singing tradition through her mother, however, but is rather to be understood as a member of a larger family of artists. Adriana’s sisters Vittoria and Margherita, the latter the leading court singer in Mantua in the 1620’s, were singers, as was Leonora’s sister Caterina Baroni, born in 1619.

Education

Along with her sisters, Leonora Baroni learned singing as a craft, i.e., as a profession passed down from their mother. Adriane Basile was, as was common for chamber singers of her time, not only a singer but also a musician and composer. Basile was known to accompany her singing herself with the (Spanish) guitar and the harp, among other things, and this was apparently also taken up by her daughters, as Caterina was a harpist while Leonora was known as theorist and lutenist, and also as a viol player.
Beyond her musical skills, Leonora also learned courtly manners from her mother. Leonora’s exemplary social behaviour, which is repeatedly referred to in the sources (Thoinan 1865: 27, Prunières 1913: 40), raised her above her actual origins and played a significant role in her singing and social career.

Leonora spoke several languages, was a member of an academy and beyond her singing career she led the life of a Roman noblewoman.

Leonora Baroni spent her childhood in the courts of Mantua, where her mother was engaged since 1610, in her mother’s native Naples and, starting in 1733 in Rome. The large extent to which Leonora Baroni was groomed as the successor to her famous mother is demonstrated by, among other things, her sobriquets “Adrianella,” or “Adrianetta” (Pannella 1964); a perception that is also reflected in their reception, when Marc’Antonio Malagigi complains in Rome during the 1630’s, that Antonio Barberini supports and promotes “the Adrias”—meaning Adriana Basile and her two daughters Leonora and Caterina (“che il cardinale tenga protezione delle Adriane”, Pannella 1964).

First Successes
After Adriana Basile returned to Naples from Mantua with her daughters in 1624 Leonora made her debut in Neapolitan society with great success. This took place in 1627 at the latest, i.e. when she was just about 16, since the first poems dedicated to her are preserved from this time (Steinheuer 1999: 275), as well as the statement by Alfonso Gaetani, that Baroni was a “soggetto da innamorar Giove” [“a subject that could make Jupiter fall in love”] (Pannella 1964), which implies the artful staging as well as Leonora’s role as ideal feminine projection figure. In 1630 Leonora performed with her mother in Genoa, Lucca and Florence, where both are reported to have sung arias (Solerti 1905: 192), which means that Baroni performed as soloist. Tinghi mentions that Baroni received a piece of jewellery from the Florentine Duchess on this occasion (“fu la signorina Leonora regalata dalla Serenissima Arciduchessa d’un bellissimo gioiello”, Solerti 1905: 192), whereas no mention is made of a gift to her famous mother.

Rome
In 1633 Adriana Basile moved with her family to Rome, where during the 1630s Leonora advanced to the leading chamber singer of her era. The family did not live under the appointment of a patron but ran its own household, in which Basile and her daughters made appearances at soirees, among other settings, and gave concerts. Perhaps through the agency of the poet Fulvio Testi (Steinheuer 1999: 275), who also contributed to the anthology dedicated to Leonora “Applausi poetici alle glorie della Signora Leonora Barona” (Costaguti/Ronconi 1639), she came to the notice of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, who would come to be one of her most important supporters and patrons. Due to Rome’s gender politics, which proscribed women performing in public, Leonora Baroni was never officially a member of Barberini’s household or court music although she frequently gave concerts there. These events were declared private in spite of the fluctuating size of the audiences, and thus remained chamber music, which was open to professional women singers and women dilettantes of society. In Leonora Baroni’s case, whose parents both belonged to the lower aristocracy, this was of central importance, as she was always able to maintain her status of a lady of standing and knew how to present herself as such, despite of her de facto activity as professional singer (Prunières 1913: 40).

Besides Barberini, from whose family Pope Urban VIII (1623 to 1644) came, Baroni put together an extensive network in Rome and maintained lively contact in particular with Giulio Mazzarini (the future Cardinal Mazarin, whose career and promotion by Antonio Barberini was probably due in part to Baroni), and Giulio Rospiglione (the future Pope Clemens IX).

Leonora Baroni was the only women (Steinheuer 1999: 275, Bertini/Parisi a) who was a member of the Accademia degli Umoristi, one of the most influential and important academies throughout the entire 17th century, to which besides many prominent people of Rome’s aristocracy (including both Cardinals Barberini), Guarini, Marino and Pietro della Valle also belonged. As a member, Leonora Baroni also composed poetry and—at least in the anthology “Momentum Romanum” (1638)—was also published (regarding Baroni’s merits as a poet, see also Ademollo 1884: 12).

In 1639 a Roman “Avviso” [“communication”, public dispatch] referred to her as superior to all other singers of her time (Pannella 1964): Baroni was at the zenith of her fame as a singer. Scores of poems of homage to her were published by Francesco Ronconi (cited in Pannella 1964: Vincenzo Costaguti) as “Applausi poetici alle glorie della Signora Leonora Baroni” (Bracciano 1639) including ver-
ses by Braccioli, Testi and Giulio Rospigliosi. An encounter with John Milton, who wrote three Latin poems in Baroni’s honour (Milton 1969: 155ff.) also took place during the years 1638/1639.

Insight into Baroni’s activities toward the end of the 1630’s is provided in a report by the French viol player André Maugars, who in his widely-read “Response faite à un curieux sur le sentiment de la musique d’Italie” (Thoinan 1865: 25-43) from 1639 writes in detail about the Italian and Roman music scene and in it also describes Leonora Baroni: She is a confident soprano with a full, well-balanced voice and a smooth ‘messa di voce’ and good dynamic control, ‘without making grimaces’. She also composed and had perfect command of interpretive delivery of words, which refers to the newer, expressive ‘Stile recitativo’. Baroni’s skill both in enharmonic and chromatic modulation, which Maugars explicitly mentions, indicates a sovereign command of various styles. As a musician she played, according to the opinion of the celebrated viol player Maugars, the theorbo and viol perfectly; she accompanied her own song incomparably on both instruments (Thoinan 1865: 37, Solerti 1903: 164).

“No lewd glances”

Almost as long as the description of Baroni’s musical merits is the list of assertions that Baroni is no coquette, but sings with chastity and modesty. (Thoinan 1865: 37) Maugars, who describes Baroni as a lady above all reproof (Thoinan 1865: 36f.) illustrates the dilemma in which professional women singers found themselves around 1600: paid, public performances were equivalent to prostitution, which is why women singers were only permitted within private chamber music. (While there was a tradition in Church music of nuns performing behind screens, this cannot be generalised.) A more liberal model such as, for example, the Venetian ‘meretrici oneste’ (honourable, cultivated courtians), was unthinkable in the church state Rome. Nonetheless, the soirees in which women singers performed were correspondingly liberal.

When Maugars therefore insists that Baroni’s sighs are not lascivious and her glances are not lewd, but that her gestures are rather those of an honourable girl (“d’une honnestë fille,” Thoinan 185: 37), it indirectly shows how much these women singers were sexualized and presented and received in this vein.

Just how much the required demonstration of chastity and honour conflicted with the expected performance is demonstrated by the repertoire, which frequently contained “galanterie”—a song genre of entertainingly suggestive ambiguities. It is said, for example, of Vittoria Archilei that she was requested by a clerical audience not to sing sacral music but these “galanterie” instead (Palisca 1963: S. 346); it can be assumed that Baroni also had command of this repertoire. The mention of Leonora Baroni and Adriana Basile in a letter by Matias de Medici from April 1630 in which he tells of a concert the two of them gave during which a song containing the word “zizì” (colloquial for penis) was particularly successful is instructive in this regard: “Adriana e sua figliola (...) a cantare milles galanterie di canzonette ed una in particolare dove entra il Zizì, che diede grandissimo gusto a una mano di belle dame” (“Adriana and her daughter sang a thousand ‘galante’ songs and one in particular, in which the word zizì (penis) was used, especially pleased a handful of beautiful women.” – Pannella 1964).

Unlike her mother, who in Mantua also performed divertissements composed by herself in what was called “Intermedien”, Baroni never appeared on stage and limited herself to chamber music, similar to her sister Caterina who—in a move typical of female professional musicians at the start of the 17th century—entered the cloister Santa Lucia (Selci) which was known for its musical culture as Suora Costanza in 1641 and continued to be active as singer and harpist in this non-public arena (Bertini/Parsi b).

Private life

Leonora Baroni is rumoured to have had affairs with, among others, Antonio Barberini, Giulio Rospigliosi and Giulio Mazzarini (Rolland: 58), but to date research has found no source-based evidence for this. The affairs cannot be ruled out; a liaison with Milton, already mentioned sceptically by Ademollo is less probable (Ademollo 1888a: 26). What does stand out is Baroni’s late (for her time) marriage: not until 1640 at the age of almost 28, does she marry Francesco Barberini’s private secretary, Giulio Cesare Castellani, like herself a member of the lower aristocracy. Research has not turned up any mention of children or pregnancy to date.

Since Leonora Baroni was not a simple chamber music employee it is possible that her marriage was not arranged by the Barberinis in order to keep her at their court. A marriage due to Adriana Basile’s departure from Rome, who retired to her reserved property in Naples in 1640 is, however, quite likely. Without being in her mother’s charge, Baroni as a single woman would not have
been able to continue to move freely in society, which makes a marriage of convenience, providing Baroni with social and moral protection, probable. Her unmarried sister Caterina’s entrance into the convent was also probably prompted by Adriana Basile’s departure.

France
It was Cardinal Mazarin who, in his efforts to make Italian music popular in France, invited Leonora to the French court. Leonora Baroni only accepted this invitation when it was officially issued by Queen Anna of Austria, and she subsequently arrived in Paris with her husband in 1644. Mazarin paid a high price for her visit: for the journey and her stay Baroni received 1000 “double pistolet” each (Rolland 1908: 57). Baroni’s Italian style was, however, found quite strange in France (Félis 1868: 251), and her stay was only made successful by the enthusiastic support of the Queen (see the list of favours bestowed in Rolland 1908: 59)—which itself was probably due to Mazarin’s efforts.

The report by Abbé Scaglia, who describes Baroni’s voice as “large” and better suited for the public arena of the stage and the church than for chamber music (i.a. Rolland 1908: 58, Pannella 1964) and characterises her Italian style – probably the ‘stile recitativo’ – as “hard on the ear” also originated during her time in France. In her performances before the Queen, Leonora Baroni also improvised musical accompaniment to her singing (Ademollo 1884: 12).

Reports that Baroni was involved in musical theatre works that Mazarin imported from Rome during her time in Paris were already refuted by Thoinan (Thoinan 1865: 36).

When the musical-political climate in Paris did not relax, Baroni returned to Italy already in 1645, furnished among other things with a lifelong pension which the Queen had granted her. Bertini and Parisi speak of envy and resentment (Bertini/Parisi a); furthermore, according to Pannella the castrato Atto Melani contested her role as court favourite (Pannella 1964).

Return to Rome—Music and Politics
The return to Rome took Leonora Baroni and Giulio Castellani through Turin, where she found another supporter in the Princess Regent Christine von Savoyen, with whom she maintained contact for years; a connection which is especially interesting with regard to Baroni’s composing activities (Steinheuer 1999: 276).

The balance of power in Rome had meanwhile shifted with the pontificate of Innocence X in 1644 and the flight of the Barberinis to France, but Baroni’s prudent diplomacy in earlier years paved the way for her to put on soirees in her household under the Pamphili, and these were soon a central feature of Rome’s cultural life. In addition she also had the continuing protection of the Rospigliosi, who with Giulio Rospigliosi furnished the papal secretary of state during the subsequent pontificate of Alexander VII and, finally, in 1667 the Pope himself.

Her return to Rome also marked the beginning of Baroni’s directly ecclesiopolitical activity, since she was given the assignment of representing French interests at the papal court (Steinheuer 1999: 276). Potential plans to return to France were dashed for health reasons (possibly only a pretext), but also probably because Baroni was very well established in Rome. According to Steinheuer her influence also made itself felt in two papal elections (Steinheuer 1999: 275).

Old Age and Posthumous Reputation (Legacy)
With increasing age and increasing diplomatic and political activity, Baroni distanced herself from her singing career, a fact that is particularly supported by statements of the Genoese envoy to the Papal court, Ferdinando Poggi. He reports that “Lionora” no longer wants to be seen as “virtuosa canterina” (Ademollo 1884: 10f., Pannella 1964). Nonetheless, even after the death of her husband in 1662 Baroni’s household remained a central feature of Rome’s social and musical life, in which she took active part in a style befitting a well-connected aristocrat. Even as late as 1669, a year before her death, she once more performed as a singer for her friend and patron Giulio Rospigliosi within the intimate chamber music setting (Ademollo 1884 13f.).

Baroni died on 6th April 1670 in Rome and was interred next to her husband in the Santa Maria della Scala Church; the grave exists to this day.

Appreciation
Leonora Baroni should be understood as the central figure among female vocal soloists of the late 16th and early 17th centuries (along with Vittoria Archilei, Francesca Caccini, Adriana Basile and Ippolita Recupito), especially within the specifically Roman environment, in which, however, she is counted among chamber singers and not as a stage singer. Beyond this, however, Baroni has to be seen as a musician and, although none of her works have survived, as a composer. On top of this come her musical political work as socially high-standing hostess of musi-
cal events and her ecclesiopolitical influence, in particular with regard to the papal election of Clemens IX. Finally, Baroni’s significance as iconic ideal and object of numerous poems of homage in which she is stylized as the idealized court lady have to be taken into consideration; a lifestyle that she particularly cultivated during the last phase of her life in Rome, after she had largely taken leave of concert life.

Reception

Leonora Baroni’s reception has been shaped by the research carried out in particular by Ademollo around 1900 which exaggerates Baroni’s role as interpretive singer and ideal feminine figure, often viewed through the eyes of prominent Church men and artists (Maugars, Milton, Rospigliosi) whom she encountered and who wrote about her. That Leonora Baroni did not have as wide a reception as, for example, Francesca Caccini is probably due to no works or certain repertoire having survived, which would offer a starting point for biographical research; tellingly, Ademollo begins his research with the poems of homage dedicated to Baroni (Costaguit/Ronconi 1639, Milton 1969: 155ff.).

Increasing focus, however, is also being placed on her skills, constantly extolled by contemporary sources, as a musician and her activities that went beyond musical matters within the Roman ecclesiodiplomacy, which allows a more differentiated image.

List of Works

Although Leonora Baroni was active in an intermediate area among interpretation, improvisation and composition typical of the early 17th century, and, at the very least, composed strophic variations (Thoinan 1865: p. 37, Baron 1977: p. 27) none of her works have survived.

Repertoire

Baroni’s exact repertoire has not survived; inferences, however, can be drawn: as chamber singer in the church state, her repertoire comprised mostly solo songs and cantatas and arias which she accompanied herself, and encompassed sacred and worldly music. Baroni sang Italian style, which is why she at first found little appreciation in France in 1644/45 (Thoinan 1865: 36); she mastered the newer ‘Stile recitativo’ as can be deduced from the diminutions and word interpretation attributed to her. Maugars expressly mentions that she knew how to construct both enharmonic and chromatic passages, i.e., she was equally at home in the newer as well as in the older modulating schemata (Thoinan 1865: 37).

Portions of Baroni’s repertoire can be determined by her origins and stations of residence: thus, Baron uses the example of the worldly Spanish song to argue that Adriana Basile passed her repertoire on to her daughter (Baron 1977: 36). Similar influences could be assumed for Mantua—combined with the history of the “Concerto delle donne” in neighbouring Ferrara – and the Roman vocal style of the early 17th century.

Research

The research and the collection of sources available on Leonora Baroni was carried out to a large extent by Ademollo and Solerti around 1900; Ademollo includes the Maugars source, quoted by Thoinan in 1865. More recent, extensive research is not available: Steinheuer’s entry in “MGG” (Steinheuer 1999: column 274ff.) summarises the available knowledge of the Baroni family and constitutes a solid basis for further research.

Need for Research

No monograph exists on Leonora Baroni (Ademollo’s “Leonora di Milton” is merely a brief overview, see Ademollo 1885); there is no up-to-date source analysis that takes recent research aspects into account. A more interdisciplinary categorisation of Baroni’s musical and extra-musical activities, in particular with regard to authorship and gender-political approaches has yet to be undertaken.

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