

# THE FEMALE MUSE Celebrating baroque women composers

## Introduction

In the 17th and 18th centuries women composers had few opportunities to obtain institutional posts which afforded many male composers the chance to make a public living through music. The small group who succeeded had the backing of either the church, a powerful patron or a supportive family. Social conventions of the time made it considerably more difficult for an independent female composer to find a publisher unless she was a woman of means and upper class; some managed it hidden behind the name of a father, brother or husband, or under a pseudonym. Lost to history are the many compositions by women who did not have this means or whose work was deemed unworthy of being added to a collection. Our chosen few from various parts of Europe managed to find success in a male-dominated world of composition, displaying talent and refinement of strong musical training. Their music tended to be geared toward domestic music making, some just teenagers pre-marriage, their music written for the smaller ensembles they were allowed to spend time with. Apologies to all those not represented here.

## ITALY Isabella Leonarda 1620 - 1704 Novara, Piedmont

Born into a noble family, Isabella Leonarda entered an Ursuline Convent in the city of Novara at the age of 16. Having taken holy orders she lived there for the rest of her life as a religious sister, becoming director of music and eventually Mother Superior. She showed musical promise from an early age, publishing the first of her collections in 1640, when she was just 20 years old. She became one of the most prolific female composers of the day, highly regarded locally but little known elsewhere.



Leonarda wrote music in nearly every sacred genre: motets for one to four voices, psalm settings, responses, Magnificats, vespers, litanies and Masses, dedicating everything to the Virgin Mary and also to noblemen such as Emperor Leopold I, the Archbishop of Milan or the Bishop of Novara. In one dedication she wrote that she only composed music in her spare time in order to first fulfil her duties within the convent. She also composed for solo and continuo, chorus and strings, and a few songs with vernacular texts. Her Op.16 set of 12 sonatas for violins and continuo of 1693 are thought to be the first instrumental sonatas published by a woman.

## FLANDERS Leonora Duarte 1610 - c.1678 Antwerp

Leonora Duarte was an early baroque Flemish composer and musician, born in Antwerp to a wealthy Portuguese family who were Converso, outwardly acting Catholics who secretly maintained Jewish faith and practices. Her grandfather Diego Duarte was consul for Portugal in Antwerp and an art collector; the Duarte home a rich cultural centre for art and music-making popular with important and influential families in the Low Countries and England. Known visitors included artists Vermeer, Coques and Rubens, poets Huygens and Anna Visscher, the family entertaining guests with personal musical performances. Coques painted their family portrait, and Huygens wrote of them:

*"For Monsieur de Warty and his daughters I have heard to the fulle. Indeed they make a fyne consort and harmony for luts, viols, virginals and voyces. I doubt not but you will fynde great contentement by hearing them."*

Leonora received an excellent musical education that included instruction on viol, lute and virginals as well as lessons in composition. English composer John Bull - a man of colourful reputation 'with more music than honesty' had left England in



some disgrace and after touring Europe had secured the post of organist and director of music at Antwerp cathedral from 1615 until 1628; he was likely one of Leonora's tutors. As she matured she combined her talent with early Italian and French baroque influences gained from the rich traffic of visitors who visited Antwerp. Much of Duarte's music has been lost but thankfully the manuscripts for seven *Sinfonias à 5* have survived and parts transcribed from a volume held at Christ Church Oxford, where it has been since 1763, probably removed from an earlier library on the same site. Originating from Antwerp, it was assembled from a set of five partbooks the music copyist unidentified but thought to be the hand of Gaspar Duarte, Leonora's father. The parts work equally well for strings or a mixed consort of instruments with or without the enhancement of lute or keyboard continuo.

**ENGLAND** Elisabetta di Gambarini 1731-1765 London

An English composer of Italian heritage, singer, musician, conductor and artist of the late Baroque,



Elisabetta di Gambarini achieved distinction in London as an all-around musician, performing on and composing for a variety of instruments and voice. She was the first female composer in Britain to publish a collection of keyboard music. She began her career at 15 singing in Handel's *Occasional Oratorio* (1746 and 1747), then as the First Israelite Woman at the first performance of *Judas Maccabaeus* (1747) and in *Joseph and his Brethren* (1747), performing at the Haymarket Theatre and the great Concert Room in Dean Street, Soho. Later she gave several benefit concerts, appearing as composer, harpsichordist, organist, and singer. For one of these benefit concerts she borrowed Francesco Geminiani's score *The Incharned Forest*; it is believed she was one of his students. There is also information that she may have sought a court appointment during this time.

By 1748 her reputation allowed her to promote and perform her own benefit concerts, where she sang and played her compositions on the organ. She published *Six Sets of Lessons for the Harpsichord* while still in her teens, pleasant two-voice compositions; a note on the cover states that "Opera Prima may be had at her home, Argyle Buildings London" In 1759 came *Lessons for the Harpsichord Intermix'd with Italian and English songs.*, her keyboard writing uncomplicated, spirited and attractive. Her publications had many subscribers, amongst them Handel and Geminiani, as well as various dukes, lawyers, barons and peers. After marriage Elisabetta gave one concert as Mrs. Chazal. She died aged 33 in Castle Court, Strand, her will mentioning a daughter Giovanna Georgiana.

**ENGLAND** "Mrs Philharmonica",

An anonymous British composer probably born around 1698, she published at the age of 16 under this pseudonym with London musical instrument maker Richard Meares 'at the sign of the Bass Viol, St Paul's' Churchyard' around 1715, who must have recognised her worth and encouraged publication. Her works include a set of six trio sonatas for two violins with violoncello obbligato and continuo, as well as a set of six divertimenti. These are all charming compositions suited to a domestic Georgian London setting. They show good training in the English and Italian style with the influence of popular composers of the day. The trio sonatas are individual and often witty with virtuosity in both the upper and cello parts.

**ITALY** Francesca Caccini 1587 - 1641 Florence

An early Italian baroque composer, singer, lutenist and poet, Francesca Caccini was born into a musical family who frequented the Medici court as a vocal ensemble. She remained in the Medici household her whole life apart from a short period when she was married and lived in Lucca. Returning as a young widow of property she tried to raise her status within the court but remained a servant, music teacher to the young princesses who frequented the convent of La Crocetta, and coach, composer and performer of chamber music for entertainments in the women's court. She became the court's most highly paid musician because her virtuosity so well exemplified the idea of female excel-



lence projected by Tuscany's de facto Regent, the Grand-Duchess Christina of Lorraine. She was said to be a quick and prolific composer, equal in productivity to her court colleagues Peri and Gagliano and her contemporary Monteverdi. Among her surviving manuscripts is a volume of around 100 pages, a *'First book of Music'* published in Florence, 1618. This contains a variety of vocal music for one or two voices both *Spirituali* and *Temporari* - canzonettas, hymns, motets, arias, madrigals &c. She is said to have composed the music for up to 16 staged works, but only one manuscript survives in full, the 1625 *Festa* comedy-ballet *La liberazione di Ruggiero* which was performed (by members of the Medici court) to the visiting prince of Poland who took it back to Warsaw for another performance. It is now regarded as the first opera written by a woman, risqué in subject, vocally demanding and spectacular in performance. The band consisted of strings, sackbuts, recorders and keyboards. Most of the drama is recounted in recitative, and Caccini unifies the music with instrumental ritornelli and Sinfonias. A final eight-part madrigal originally accompanied dancing horses.

Caccini left the employ of the Medicis in 1641 and disappeared from public record.

### ITALY Barbara Strozzi 1619-1677 Venice

Barbara Strozzi was born at a time when Venice was a city of wealth, academic and baroque innovation but struggling with threats of plague, maritime and papal crises and much political conflict. An illegitimate child, she grew up in households frequented by the greatest literary and artistic minds of the age, her mother in the employ of poet and intellectual Giulio Strozzi, a member of one of the most powerful families of Florence and of *Il Incogniti*, a prestigious academy and political force. Barbara was 'legitimised' in Strozzi's will of 1628 as his *figliuola elettiva*—his 'chosen daughter', her mother Isabella named as his longtime servant. When Barbara showed musical promise Strozzi arranged for her to study for 3 years with Francesco Cavalli, director of music at St. Mark's Basilica; at 15 she was performing as *'la virtuosissima cantatrice di Giulio Strozzi'* .. As Barbara Strozzi she composed and published eight collections of songs without the support of the Church or patronage, her works finding their way around the rest of Europe. In 1635 composer Nicolò Fontei said his songs were inspired by the famous Signora Barbara.



In 1637 Giulio Strozzi founded the *Accademia degli Unisoni* to promote Barbara's talents. Reports of the proceedings of the academy describe her role as singer and hostess, her performances and activities attracting some interest, bordering on scandal, since women were rarely included in such meetings. Some scathing satires were written, however information about Barbara's life builds a picture of an extraordinary woman of talent, beauty, intellect and business acumen. A portrait from 1639 depicts her as a mythical Flora, dispenser of charms both intellectual and physical. In her hand a viola da gamba, and on the table next to her duet music and a violin, as if waiting for someone to play with her. Dedicating her collections to various people, Strozzi published 125 pieces of vocal music in her lifetime, highly individual settings testing the limits of cantata and serenata forms, and long stretches of high soprano

tessitura testing both singer and audience. *Arie* Op.8 (1664) was dedicated to the Duchess Sophia of Braunschweig and Lüneburg who was making a grand tour that year. It reveals Strozzi's ambition to be known in a wider world, with amorous texts referring both to Sophia and herself by name. Strozzi never married but brought up four children. She died in obscurity in Padua in 1677 with little wealth or property.

### FRANCE Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre 1665-1729 Paris

French composer Élisabeth Jacquet worked successfully as a harpsichordist and composer in Paris during the reign of Louis XIV. She hailed from a musical family and received her training from her father, a harpsichord maker and organist who taught his sons and daughters with equal enthusiasm. She performed at the palace of Versailles as a child prodigy aged five and later became a favourite court musician, composing for the king. After marrying



organist Marin de La Guerre in 1684 she dedicated herself to teaching and performing all over Paris to great acclaim. Writer Titon du Tillet described her thus: 'She has marvellous facility for playing preludes and fantasies off the cuff. Sometimes she improvises one or another for a whole half hour with tunes and harmonies of great variety and in quite the best possible taste, quite charming her listeners' Most importantly for her success, some of Elisabeth's compositions were published with the royal blessing of Louis XIV and thankfully a number of these publications have survived, including works for solo harpsichord, violin sonatas, trio sonatas and cantatas. In her lifetime E. Jacquet de la Guerre favourably compared to the more well-known French composers Couperin and Marais. Her sonatas show how masterfully she balanced this French courtly style with the Italian influence of Corelli.

### **ITALY & GERMANY** Anna Bon 1738 - 1767 (*Venice, Bayreuth*)

Born to parents who worked in opera production, her mother a singer and her father a librettist and set designer, at the age of four Anna Bon was enrolled in the Ospedale Della Pietà in Venice as a fee-paying pupil (*figlia de spesi*). where she benefitted from the legacy of Antonio Vivaldi, studying until the end of 1754, though she did leave periodically to tour with her parents as a musical prodigy. In 1755 the parents accepted a position within the court of Princess Wilhelmine of Prussia in Bayreuth and 16-year-old Anna held a position of composer and chamber music virtuosa, dedicating her Op.1 Six Chamber Sonatas for flute and continuo to the flute-playing King, Frederick the Great. When Princess Wilhelmine died in 1758 Anna and her parents continued touring and in 1762 were employed at the court of Prince Nicolaus of Esterházy in Eisenstadt. Anna married an Italian singer in 1767 and lived in Thuringia; thereafter she disappears from history.



### **PRUSSIA** Wilhelmine 1709-1758 Margravine of Brandenburg-Bayreuth

Princess Friederike Sophie Wilhelmine of Prussia was the eldest daughter of Frederick William I of Prussia and Sophia Dorothea of Hanover, a granddaughter of George I of Great Britain, and the elder sister of Frederick 'the Great' who was also a composer. In 1731, Wilhelmine married the Margrave of Brandenburg-Bayreuth who had been expecting to marry her younger sister Sophie, but at the last minute the king made the decision to replace Sophie with Wilhelmine.

Her husband came into his inheritance in 1735 and the pair set about turning Bayreuth into the next Versailles, rebuilding the Palace, commissioning the building of a new opera house and theatre, and founding the University of Erlangen. These undertakings pushed the court to the verge of bankruptcy but as a patron of the arts, composer and opera director, Wilhelmine herself shaped the town's cultural life to a significant extent. The Margrave Opera House was declared a world heritage site in 2012, the only example of a completely preserved baroque opera house where visitors can still enjoy baroque court opera culture in a fine acoustic.



After her death in 1758 King Frederick built the Temple of Friendship at Sanssouci in Wilhelmine's memory but sadly her musical compositions were not collected or preserved. Most of her operas, cantatas, concerti and sonatas have been lost and little has survived other than an opera, *L'Argenore* of 1740 and the Concerto in G minor for harpsichord and strings composed in 1734. Much of the original solo part was missing until the 1990s when extensive investigations by Bayreuth musicologist and harpsichordist Irene Hegen led to the rediscovery of the lost manuscript; which she completed and transcribed.