

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Shephard, Tim, Sanna Raninen, Serenella Sessini, and Laura Ștefănescu. Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy 1420–1540

Barbara Swanson

Volume 45, numéro 2, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094850ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39793>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Swanson, B. (2022). Compte rendu de [Shephard, Tim, Sanna Raninen, Serenella Sessini, and Laura Ștefănescu. Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy 1420–1540]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 350–352. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39793>



Shephard, Tim, Sanna Raninen, Serenella Sessini, and Laura Ștefănescu.
Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy 1420–1540.

Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. Pp. iv, 408 + 227 col. ill. ISBN 978-1-912554-02-7 (hardcover) €140.

Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy addresses the prevalence of musical images in the Italian Renaissance, whether in churches, palaces, streetscapes, domestic interiors, or the pages of books and manuscripts. As such, the writers survey a wide range of objects and mediums, including altarpieces and psalters; music theoretical treatises and partbooks; *cssoni*, decorated instruments, and maiolica tableware; as well as large-scale paintings, sculpture, and medals. The volume is organized into four sections: “Convergences,” which establishes a theoretical framework for considering relationships between music and art in the Renaissance; “Divine Harmonies,” which surveys musical themes in religious art; “Classicisms,” on the relationship of music to the Liberal Arts and various mythological personae; and “People,” which addresses representations of the Italian elite, including their weddings, festivals, portraits, and music-making.

The authors’ stated approach is to focus not on the creators of art objects but on the reception by well-educated Italians who enjoyed such objects and found meaning within them (6–7). As such the volume excludes discussion of specific artists, musicians, composers, or musical works except to make select points—as in the discussion of a canon by composer Adrian Willaert portrayed in Titian’s *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, created for Alfonso I d’Este while Willaert was in the duke’s employ (217–18). Instead, the authors follow a path through the spaces of Italian life, identifying the kinds of works depicting music therein: images of angels, Mary, female saints, David, and Christ in churches, chapels, and domestic devotions (chapter 2); musico-classical references in the objects and artworks of *studioli* as well as public-facing domestic spaces and buildings (chapter 3); and the secular Italian home and streetscape, including images of festive music-making on wedding chests and in festival books (chapter 4).

The introduction and epilogue especially emphasize the perspective of a well-educated but non-specialist Renaissance audience—that is, an amateur musician, enthusiastic collector, reader and occasional writer, and pious observer, but not a professional musician, poet, humanist, art connoisseur, or cleric—and sets “realistic expectations” regarding the meaning of art objects for this audience. In this sense, the book assumes a quasi-populist stance, elevating

the experience of a “reasonably well-informed” Renaissance viewer over that of specialist interpretations (6–7). Although this perspective is represented through the choice of objects, organization of chapters, and occasional commentary, it is often only implied rather than overtly stated—as in the discussion of sacred theatre and its influence on how a viewer might have seen related paintings; or discussion of painted church interiors and how the images might resonate with the devotions within.

One of the volume’s significant contributions is its juxtaposition of the wide-ranging meanings attributed to music in Renaissance Italy: as a gateway to the divine and sign of spiritual virtue or lineage in the case of religious images; as ennobling and civilizing in the case of much classical imagery; as appropriately sensuous in the case of wedding imagery but excessively so in the case of Bacchic images; as a metaphor for poetry and poetic inspiration in classical and pastoral artworks as well as portraits; and as a symbol of social, civic, and familial harmony. Unfortunately the book lacks a conclusion—not counting the brief epilogue which reinforces the range and kinds of musical images encountered by Renaissance Italian viewers—and as such, readers need to sift these themes from 348 pages of extensive commentary. A conclusion would further allow the authors to draw attention to exciting strands of thought not highlighted by the chapter titles or which cross between chapters—including art images that evoke the musical elements of theatrical events and festivities, whether *sacra rappresentazione* (81, 99) or the raucous pre-wedding celebration known as *mattinata* (213–14). To that effect, an entire chapter on festivities and events would not have been out of place given the number of times such discussions occur. Similarly, one could imagine adding a section on Minerva to the “Classicisms” chapter, since discussion of Minerva recurs in chapter 3—including as a guarantor of virtue in music-making scenes (168), a standard of good judgement (205), and model for Philosophy in the *Tarocchi di Mantegna* (143). This would certainly balance the many male figures represented in the other sections of the “Classicisms” chapter, namely “Apollo and the Muses,” “Orpheus the Orator,” “Marsyas and Midas,” and “Bacchus and the Art of Noise.”

That said, the breadth of images and depth of commentary throughout the book are impressive and speak to the scope of the project from which this study emerged: MARI (Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy), funded by the Leverhulme Trust with Tim Shephard as principal investigator, Sanna Raninen as research associate, and Serenella Sessini and Laura Ștefănescu as

(then) doctoral students, with Beth Williamson of the University of Bristol as a project advisor. A publicly available catalogue on the project website includes more than 1,200 music-related artworks (<https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/mari-project/>). The project team (and co-authors) together represent the disciplines of musicology (Shephard, Raninen) and art history (Sessini, Ștefănescu) with the intended goal of avoiding interdisciplinary knowledge gaps—whereby a musicologist might “misread” an art object or an art historian might mistake an aspect of musical history (8).

Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy is one of very few books to provide such an integrated survey of music in Italian Renaissance art. There are certainly exhibition-related volumes such as *Art and Music in Venice: from the Renaissance to the Baroque* (Paris: Hazan, 2013); edited volumes such as *Make a Joyful Noise: Renaissance Art and Music at Florence Cathedral* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); or monographs like Chriscinda Henry’s *Playful Pictures: Art, Leisure, and Entertainment in the Venetian Renaissance Home* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021). But these frequently focus on a specific region and a more limited set of visual representations. *Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy* stands apart by integrating an extensive roster of images from more than a century of Italian art, and identifying meaningful trends across these. As such, it is an invaluable reference work and helpful companion for the study of music in the art of this period.

BARBARA SWANSON

Dalhousie University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39793>