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PAINTING THE INVISIBLE: IMAGES OF ST. CECILIA IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

Anastasia Moskvina

Abstract

Early modern philosophical thought and artistic theory since Leonardo da Vinci have been informed by a persistent debate over the hierarchy of the arts.¹ Although the dispute concerning sculpture and painting has been extensively studied, this article turns instead to the relationship between the arts of music and painting, and examines artistic engagement with the senses of hearing and sight at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Early modern artists in particular were preoccupied with the substitution of senses and the depiction of the invisible and the intangible. This was especially prominent in portraiture, which aimed to convey the hidden personal traits, or intended characteristics, through physiognomic expressions.² Alongside the secular motives in art, evolving expectations of religious painting in the seventeenth century liberated artists from the use of pictorial and symbolic conventions and instead invited them to explore the alternatives for representing the incorporeal. This opportunity facilitated new ways of engaging with the representation of sound.

Italian art of the early seventeenth century saw an increasing interest in depictions of St. Cecilia – the patron saint of music. Compared with earlier instances of such work, these representations occurred more systematically in a short period of time. The discovery of St. Cecilia's miraculously preserved body in her church in Rome in 1599 seems to have played an important role in the growing fascination with her. However, exploring this surge in attention to St. Cecilia, this piece instead assesses cultural, artistic and philosophical premises in the interest in the saint.

The selected case studies by Bernardo Strozzi, Domenichino and Artemisia Gentileschi, I propose, indicate a shift in how sound is expressed pictorially. Sound becomes conveyed as atmosphere, an implication contained in the pictorial plane itself. This invention contrasts with earlier approaches to portraying St. Cecilia and marks her transformation from an object of devotion into a tool for visual experimentation with sound, and this approach, being a direct result of the changes in philosophical thought and artistic theory, secures the popularity of St. Cecilia in early seventeenth-century art.

Key Words: St. Cecilia, early modern, sound, music, Gentileschi, Strozzi, Domenichino.

Introduction

In Italian art the beginning of the seventeenth century was marked by a particular increase of interest in depictions of St. Cecilia. This fascination was arguably triggered by the discovery of her miraculously preserved body during the rebuilding of the church of St. Cecilia in Rome in 1599. However, this interest was also facilitated by other factors, such as developments in philosophical thought, social life, the status of the artist, the Reformation and, most importantly for this article, changing interpretations of the relationships between music and art, vision and sound.



Fig. 1: Master of St. Cecilia, *Saint Cecilia and Eight Stories from Her Life*, after 1304. Uffizi, Florence.

Representations of St. Cecilia before 1599 can be characterised by attention to her life and iconography.³ The earliest well-known Italian image of St. Cecilia is that by the Master of St. Cecilia in the Uffizi [Figure 1]. The central panel shows the saint seated on the throne, holding a book and a palm. The flanking panels narrate the life of the saint. The iconography of this panel, painted before 1304, does not yet refer to music, which only became a focus in the Quattrocento. St. Cecilia was sometimes depicted with a group of saints, as she was in Raphael's altarpiece *The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia* in the Accademia in Bologna (1516-17).⁴ She also appeared in pictorial cycles illustrating her life, such as the *Legend of Sts. Cecilia and Valerian*, painted by Francesco Francia, Lorenzo Costa, and Amico Aspertini in the Oratory of St. Cecilia, in Bologna (1504-6), and later in Rome, in Domenichino's cycle of frescoes in S. Luigi dei Francesi, painted in 1612-15. These examples retained their devotional nature and never focused solely on St. Cecilia. Raphael was criticised for following the patron's demands and painting a complex composition with the static figures of the saints occupying the main plain, rather than depicting one of the great acts of St. Cecilia.⁵ Domenichino's composition was evidently a response to this criticism, since he constructed a devotional and didactic narrative illustrating the deeds of the saint.

Early seventeenth-century imagery, on the contrary, indicates a degree of secularisation in approaches to depicting St. Cecilia and a consistently high level of artistic interest in her representation. Numerous images appear from 1610 onwards, beginning with those by Guido Reni and Carlo Saraceni [Figures 2 and 3], and, notably, they tend to show her either alone or accompanied by angels. Such a contrast between the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artistic conventions for the images of St. Cecilia indicates the change in her role from an object of devotion into an object of artistic interest; from this point on, she tends to be treated as the sole subject of the paintings. This new attitude is particularly evident in a number of works by Bernardo Strozzi and Artemisia Gentileschi. However, before turning to the analysis of the selected images of St. Cecilia, it is crucial to introduce some of the major social, religious and philosophical concerns of early modern Italian society, which would have contributed to the creative challenges faced by the artists.



Fig. 2: Workshop of Guido Reni, *Saint Cecilia*, ca. 1610. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 3: Carlo Saraceni, *Saint Cecilia and the Angel*, ca. 1610. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

A significant shift in philosophical thought, which was instigated by the development of science and disciplines concerned with the human face and body, placed a cultural emphasis on the value of the power of human thought and the beauty of the human body. In social life, this shift was manifested in the establishment of humanism. In art, it was paralleled by the change of focus from devotional and historical painting to portraiture and self-portraiture. Throughout the high Italian Renaissance, artists were seeking to transform themselves from mere artisans into creators, therefore establishing their own decisive role in choices of pictorial modes and of the manner of execution. This search resulted in a higher level of experimentation in forms, conventions and subject matter. Experimentation, in its turn, implied repetitively revisiting the subject in the search of a better composition and more acute and precise visual metaphors. Thus, a number of themes recur in the oeuvres of early modern artists. For instance, David Rosand points out Titian's and his followers' persistent interest in St. Sebastian, and Elena Ciletti analyses the theme of Judith and Holofernes re-emerging in the art of Artemisia Gentileschi under the influence of Caravaggio.⁶ Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, and most notably, Bernardo Strozzi, are known to have extensively studied the theme of St. Cecilia. Moreover, the artists' experiments were informed by each other's work: Bernardo Strozzi was largely influenced by Caravaggio and at a later period also exposed to Venetian art.⁷ In turn, Caravaggesque pictorial methods and ideas are evident in the works by Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, while significant influences of Raphael and Annibale Carracci are observed in Domenichino's themes and approaches.⁸ Continuous artistic exchange established patterns and ideals in subject matter; it also challenged the artists to revisit their own work, and to engage with the themes explored by others. This practice defined the objects of particular interest and attention, such as Caravaggio's and Strozzi's musicians, early sixteenth-century representations of St. Agatha and indeed of St. Cecilia in the seventeenth century.⁹ One of the popular reoccurring themes at the turn of the seventeenth century was the representation of sound and music, notably in the works of Caravaggio, the artists of his circle and his followers.¹⁰

Alongside this marked interest in experimentation and serial depictions of recurring subjects, the early modern era saw an emergence of a professional female painter and with her, a new genre of female self-portrait. Among the known female artists, Artemisia Gentileschi, Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana were perhaps the most prominent. However, women painters, who had only just had a chance to proclaim their social importance as artists, were still more vulnerable to public opinions than men. Along with their professional skills, their reputation was at stake. The social position of women thus led to the creation of different pictorial languages for male and female painting, which played an important role in construction of artistic identity of both male and female artists. Existing scholarship on early modern female painters largely focuses on these differences and, as illustrated in particular by Mary D. Garrard, places the discussion of art in the context of gender theory.¹¹ These issues will be touched upon below but will not, however, be the focus of this article.

In addition to the change in creative approaches and the development of new genres, early modern art faced a shift in patronage, which moved away from the church and the state into the hands of the secular elite, thus naturally liberating the visual arts and providing a significant interpretative freedom for both artists and patrons.¹² Although the complexities of this social and theoretical change are vast and continuously challenged and revisited by scholars, for the purposes of this article, I accept the traditional Burckhardtian view (also adopted by other prominent scholars) on the relationship between art, philosophy, social history and other aspects of social life, which proposes their interconnection and mutual influence, resulting in the emergence of the very concepts of 'Renaissance' and 'humanism'.¹³ This approach in its turn proposes an understanding of philosophical changes as liberating certain aspects of early modern art in Europe. Another symptom of this change was that the subjects of paintings were, to a greater extent than before, shaped by the demands of collectors. For instance, it is known that requests for self-portraits were made to Artemisia Gentileschi by contemporary collectors; the provenance of some of Caravaggio's works also indicates their circulation on the Roman art market and their private acquisition.¹⁴ At the same time, despite this shift in patronage, the choice of subject matter was not completely secularised: religious imagery still remained one of the major artistic foci. Devotional art was, however, shaken by the Reformation; the new – and often controversial – dogmas caused confusion and anxiety, and led to a search for new forms and conventions to reflect them.¹⁵ Hans Belting argues that during the Reformation the distinct medieval duality of spirit and matter was replaced by a new concept of art, where the two are united and their expression is defined by the artist, thus again underlining the agency of the creator.¹⁶

In devotional painting up to the seventeenth century, especially in altarpieces, the celestial realm was recognised through abundant iconographic paraphernalia, in order to facilitate the viewer's immediate understanding, and a substantial degree of naturalism to assist the viewer's imagination. By contrast, the seventeenth-century representations moved towards increasing compositional simplicity and physicality, thus losing their iconographic context, but instead engaging with non-corporeal aspects of devotional imagery. Early modern religious painting thus became a container for something beyond the visible and tangible, posing a significant new artistic challenge of depicting it. Vincenzo Giustiniani's concept of an ideal method of painting, combining the artist's ability to create a subject from his imagination, and his talent for accurate naturalistic representation of a seen object, was a manifestation of the aesthetic and technical expectations of early modern painters.¹⁷

Alongside the development in visual arts, authors, beginning with Leonardo da Vinci, indicate a significant social interest in music and, in particular, its much debated place within the emerging hierarchy of the liberal arts.¹⁸ Renaissance Italy was a major musical scene in Europe. Venice, with its attention to acoustics in church architecture, circulation of printed

musical pieces and musical theory, was particularly prominent in this regard, and had a significant influence on other centres of culture on the Italian peninsula.¹⁹ Interestingly, Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti point out how the unity of audial and visual experiences is integral in Venetian architecture, which implies a cultural predisposition of either a visitor to a church or a beholder of a painting to engage with it both visually and audibly.²⁰ Juhani Pallasmaa goes further to state that:

Sight is the sense of the solitary observer, whereas hearing creates a sense of connection and solidarity; our look wanders lonesomely in the dark depths of a cathedral, but the sound of the organ makes us immediately experience our affinity with the space.²¹

Just as sound can bring an architectural space to life, the representation of a musical instrument in the depicted space of a painting evokes its sound, leading to a heightened experience of the space – and allowing the viewer to see it through hearing it.

Of particular importance for this article is the increase of interest, in the early modern era, in the visionary, hidden, and intangible. A number of sixteenth-century accounts demonstrate dominating considerations regarding the relationship between the public image and the real personality of an individual, between the true substance and the surface, the hidden and the revealed. The expression of interiority, and the signification of the hidden, becomes one of the major philosophical and social concerns.²² Thus, for artists the aspects of early modern philosophical thought and artistic theory outlined above further complicate the task of visual expression of what is perceived but not seen. In this context, the contemporary preoccupation with music places an additional emphasis on the ideas of sound and listening and generates a desire for a visual representation of sound – or for a perceived *implication* of sound. Secular portraits start to suggest audial interactions. As E.H. Gombrich argues, the realm of sound extends into that of sight and movement, creating a ‘synaesthesia’ of merged senses of sight and sound. He suggests that it happens naturally, which is why artists have always been interested in this synthesis and attempted to combine sight and sound in visual forms.²³ Furthermore, Bronwen Wilson, in her analysis of Giovanni Moroni’s portraiture, argues that the ‘sitters’, (judging by their position and scale on the canvas, posture and attentive expressions), seem to be listening, as if the viewer was in active conversation with them.²⁴ This is particularly evident in the National Gallery’s *The Tailor* [Figure 4] and *Portrait of a Man with Raised Eyebrows* [Figure 5] by Moroni. Early modern portraiture thus invites us to engage with the subject via sound, by either talking or listening to them. Considering these experimentations with sound, St. Cecilia, as the patron saint of music, becomes a perfect character to encourage such audial engagement. In addition, her illusory nature also gives great freedom for artistic interpretations of beauty, femininity and sanctity, which were among the major social and philosophical concerns in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, securing her popularity among the painters.²⁵



Fig. 4: Giovanni Battista Moroni, *The Tailor*, 1565-70. The National Gallery, London.



Fig. 5: Giovanni Battista Moroni, *Portrait of a Man with Raised Eyebrows*, 1570-75. The National Gallery, London.

Historiographically, early modern images of St. Cecilia and, in particular, self-portraits as St. Cecilia, have mainly been studied in the contexts of self-representation, feminism and social history, concerning the position of women within society.²⁶ Whilst papers on portraiture largely focus on problems of representation of character and the identity of the sitter, the artists' interest in sound, (reinforced or perhaps caused by the wider social interest in music), remains somewhat overlooked.²⁷ This article will attempt to begin to fill this gap.

Case Studies

The first case study for this article is *St. Cecilia* [Figure 6] by Bernardo Strozzi (ca. 1615). This painting shows a woman with her head tilted, her eyes looking upwards and her lips open. She is wearing a dress with loose lacing on one side, which reveals her white undershirt, a golden scarf tied in a knot on her shoulder and pearls adorning her hair. The saint is shown on a dark background with a dim halo-like highlight around her head. She is holding a palm branch – a symbol of martyrdom – and a broken violin, which identifies her as patron saint of music. These iconographic references, common by the seventeenth century and easily recognisable, are, however, not made obvious and, moreover, seem to be conflicting with the secular mode of representation, which underlines the saint's physicality and sexuality. The decision to show her portrait-length, wearing a partially undone contemporary dress and with her lips parted, clearly presents her as an object of desire. Even the scarf, which seems to be an evolution of a belt, usually shown tied in a knot on the saint's waist as a symbol of virginity, now frames her breasts and shoulder, thus emphasising her sexuality.



Fig. 6: Bernardo Strozzi, *Saint Cecilia*, ca. 1615. Private Collection.

The figure of St. Cecilia seems to be placed in a transitional realm between devotional image and secular portrait. The specific atmosphere of this image renders St. Cecilia simultaneously holy and incorporeal and physically present. The half-length format and the dark background additionally emphasise the physical proximity of the saint and the space she belongs to. Although the space lacks articulate dimensions and structure, it suggests an atmosphere shared by the saint and the beholder and invites a reaction more complex than that of observing – it invites to touch and to listen.

St. Cecilia was one of the early figures recognised as Christian martyrs, although her initial association with music remains debated. According to the lives of the martyrs, one of St. Cecilia's acts was 'singing to God alone' at her wedding.²⁸ Being rethought and re-interpreted throughout centuries, this story led to the common association between St. Cecilia and angelic singing. Furthermore, it led to the belief that sound produced with one's own voice is akin to the choir of angels and therefore superior to instrumental music.²⁹ Sixteenth-century Venetian music theorist Gioseffo Zarlino emphasised the difference between sound and voice and proposed the dominant role of the human voice over any other sound as being natural and God-given.³⁰ A similar metaphor is illustrated in Raphael's *The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia* [Figure 7], painted a century earlier than Strozzi's *St. Cecilia*, where the presence of both angels and broken instruments manifests the triumph of heavenly singing over secular instrumental music.



Fig. 7: Raphael, *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*, 1514. Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, Bologna.

Strozzi's oeuvre demonstrates a great interest in depictions of music-making. However, the artist also observes a distinction between the earthly and the divine music. His street musicians are shown in the act of making music, blowing their cheeks out when playing the wind instruments [Figures 8 and 9]. In these pictures, the artist seems to be interested in the physical, anatomic process of producing the sound and in a visual record of the act of playing an instrument. In the images of St. Cecilia the instruments, on the contrary, are used as mere signifiers of the idea of sound: what is contained in the pictorial plane is an *implication* of sound. The parted lips, therefore, do not just denote sexuality or religious awe (as it seems in, for instance, *St. Francis in Ecstasy* or *The Martyrdom of St. Dorothea*) but possibly suggest singing. The lack of suggested association with the sound of a particular instrument removes the constraints on interpretation and allows the viewer to experience this implied sound that fills the pictorial plane, as they imagine it. The absence of other characters in the picture draws the viewer closer and invites him or her to listen. By contrast, in Raphael's *St. Cecilia*, the saint herself is listening to the angels singing within the picture, excluding the viewers from audial interaction within the scene and constraining them to merely visual engagement.



Fig. 8: Bernardo Strozzi, *Street Musicians*, 1630s. Museum Palac w Wilanowie, Warsaw.



Fig. 9: Bernardo Strozzi, *The Piper*, n/d. Galleria di Palazzo Rosso, Genoa.

It must be noted that Raphael's *St. Cecilia* marks a turning point in the history of representations of this saint. This altarpiece indicates a shift from primarily devotional to artistic and creative contexts of representations. As advocated by Hans Belting, this shift coincides with the emerging understanding of painting as art in its present meaning and of the artist as creator. The image, which prior to Cinquecento was taken literally, now, according to Belting, acquires complexity and added levels of meaning through becoming an image of an image.³¹ The picture now becomes a simulation and not a direct representation and is therefore intended to be perceived differently. Thus, it appeals to the beholders' senses and requires their awareness of the new rules of engagement with an image.

The visual complexity of Raphael's altarpiece in itself seems to be an indication of the implied complexity of its meaning. This work seems to be combining different genres of painting, as we understand them now. The composition of the instruments scattered on the ground is close to a still life; the saints standing in a group comply with the Renaissance conventions for altarpieces. The angels framed by the opening in the clouds are reminiscent of a ceiling fresco. The viewer is invited to differentiate between these levels and, in Belting's terms, to distinguish between spirit and matter. The two are shown in interaction with each other, through the progression of spaces from the material at the bottom of the picture (in the form of the familiar and physically tangible composition on the ground) through the transitional space of the saints' presence in the middle, to the spiritual celestial realm at the top (manifested in the depiction of the angelic choir). The altarpiece is intended to be sensed and interpreted by the beholder, as opposed to the earlier devotional images which rendered the spiritual as immediately present.

Domenichino's *St. Cecilia* (1617-18) [Figure 10] seems to be a further development of Raphael's compositional approach. The three levels of Raphael's composition – material, spiritual and transitional – are merged into one, thus bringing the earthly, the tangible, closer to the spiritual. In Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, the Virgin is shown as an incorporeal vision, surrounded by clouds made of putti and distanced from the beholder by the curtain and the threshold. In comparison, Domenichino's *Cecilia* is present in the same space as the viewer, merely screened off by a low partition. The saint, although possessing more defined iconographic attributes than those in Strozzi's work – an articulate halo, the score of a cantata to the Glory of Saint Cecilia and a putto who assists her – is similarly shown looking up, not playing but barely touching the bass viol she is holding and ignoring the musical score supported by a putto.³² Her lips are parted, again, in suggestion of either religious awe or heavenly singing. The viol here is symbolic and iconographic; however, occupying a

prominent position in the painting and repeating the contours of her body, it also serves a signifier of her femininity and brings a physical dimension to her figure. By contrast with Raphael's masterpiece, Strozzi creates an enclosed space instead of an open landscape. This space plays a definitive role in articulation of the atmosphere shared with the beholder: it creates a space for reverberation. St. Cecilia's hint of singing and playing evokes association with sound, which, in a confined space, is targeted at the beholder who thus becomes an inevitable participant in not visual but audial interaction with the subject.



Fig. 10: Domenichino, *Saint Cecilia with an Angel Holding a Musical Score*, 1617-18. Louvre, Paris.

The relationship between the image and the text, that is, the recognisable musical score, is also of interest. J.L. Koerner has argued that in early modern art the text becomes surpassed by the painted image. This idea culminates in Rembrandt's painting, and his 'epiphany of the face', when the face is realised as dominating over the word, manifesting the final establishment of the modern *visual* culture. The text, Koerner suggests, is used to frame the character, not explain it, as: 'painted surface and written text play against one another'.³³ Similarly, Domenichino's Saint Cecilia quite literally dismisses the written text, which, as in Rembrandt's *Moses with the Tables of the Law* [Figure 11], serves as a reference to something recognizable by the viewer – either the Tablets of the Law or a familiar musical piece. Its familiarity initially draws musically literate viewers into the picture but then leaves them listening instead of looking. A similar treatment of written music is observed in Strozzi's *Portrait of a Female Musician*, identified either as St Cecilia or as Barbara Strozzi, and two versions of Orazio Gentileschi's *St. Cecilia and an Angel*. The open sexuality of the former has led to debates about the identity of the sitter.³⁴ The compositional relationship between Strozzi's portrait and some of the pictures of St. Cecilia by Strozzi, and the presence of recognisable musical attributes, clash with the underlined physicality of the sitter and other symbols which can be interpreted as hints of identity. The tenderness of Strozzi's subject, through its direct compositional relation to the artist's earlier *The Virgin Presenting the Christ*

Child to S. Francesca Romana, places it in a more devotional context, although still retaining the link with the naturalism of contemporary portraiture.³⁵ However, the two are united by the similarity of aural spaces, filled with *implied* sound through associations with musical instruments, and the ambiguity of pictorial conventions which allows one to read these paintings simultaneously as realistic portraits, devotional images and allegorical representations.

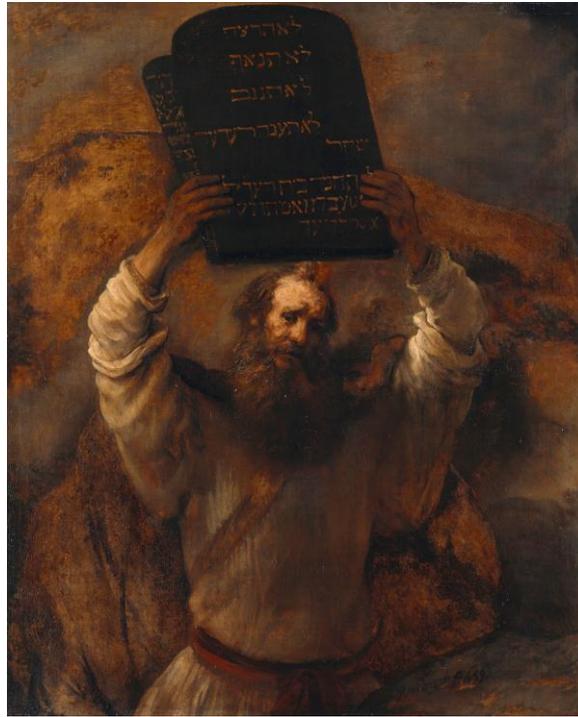


Fig. 11: Rembrandt, *Moses with the Tables of the Law*, 1660. Gemaldegalerie, Berlin.

So far, this article has been looking predominantly at works by male artists. Although the blurred identity of the sitter, who could simultaneously be interpreted as the artist, a saint and an allegory, seemed particularly appealing to all early modern painters, the aforementioned allegorical ambiguity was most strongly expressed in the paintings by female artists.³⁶ As a result, representations of St. Cecilia by female artists and self-portraits as musicians by women form a separate category of painting.

Self-representations as St. Cecilia by female artists were a logical development of their self-portraits as musicians. With the emergence of a type of ‘female professional artist’ in the sixteenth century, it became common among female artists to show themselves at the keyboard, as illustrated by the most famous self-portraits of Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana. Scholars tend to see the pictorial convention of a woman seated at the keyboard as the artist’s statement of education and nobility. As pointed out by Katherine A. McIver, self-portraits as musicians were also appealing to male artists, however, where a man had more freedom to choose a pictorial mode for his work, a woman had to be careful to conform to social standards and expectations.³⁷ Thus, a self-portrait as St. Cecilia was a safe way of expanding beyond the common type of self-portrait as a musician, which allowed a degree of experimentation but did not undermine the female artist’s vulnerable dignity. It also potentially added another positive connotation to a self-portrait: this saint, in addition to being a musician, was seen by women as an example of a chaste woman and a spouse, and became an image for them to emulate and with whom to associate themselves.³⁸ It is through this connection with music and musical education that St. Cecilia became relevant to the self-

portraits of the *donne nobili*, but in its turn, it is the association with St. Cecilia that facilitated further experiments with representations of music-making and sound.

Expanding on multisensory characteristics of visual representations of making music, scholars have suggested that in self-representations as a musician and as St. Cecilia, the idea of touching the instrument becomes an allegorical substitute for touching the canvas with a paintbrush.³⁹ This motif adds a different dimension to the meaning of touch and serves as a signifier of the agency of the painter. The idea is further complicated by a close association between touching and looking, most notably put forward by Merleau-Ponty.⁴⁰ Juhani Pallasmaa discusses this association in relation to architectural spaces, pointing out the role of kinaesthetic experience as superior to visual and arguing that looking can be perceived as a form of touching.⁴¹ Thus, the complexity of sensual experience becomes evident even in relation to a two-dimensional pictorial plane, which seemingly is intended to be seen and not heard or touched.

Sound in Artemisia Gentileschi's oeuvre has been addressed by Nanette Salomon and Elena Ciletti.⁴² Ciletti in particular points out the variety of audial experiences, from a tense silence to an expressive scream, which are conveyed in Gentileschi's variations of *Judith and Holofernes*. However, it is the dynamic aspect of sound and not its aesthetic quality that is taken into consideration here, whereas the task of expressing a pleasant sound of music, rather than scream or silence, seems more challenging.

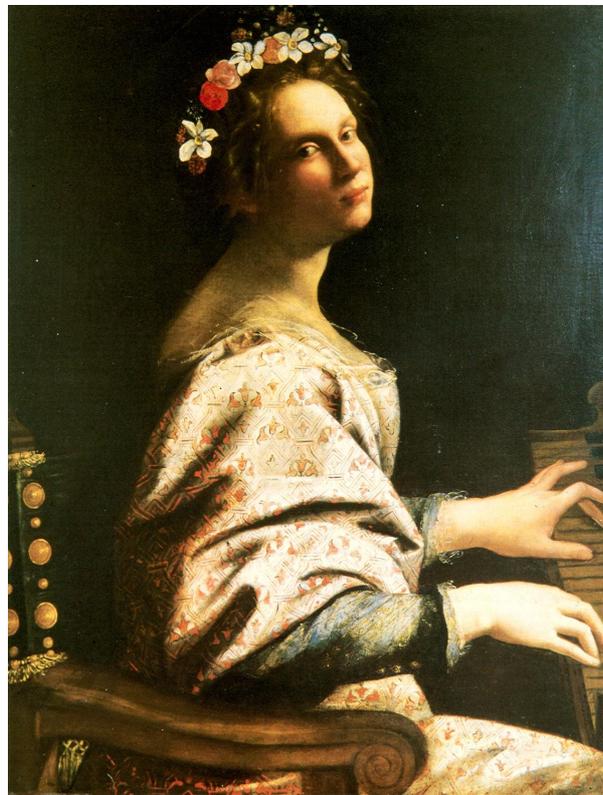


Fig. 12: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Saint Cecilia*, 1620. Private collection, Trento.

In Gentileschi's *Self-portrait as Saint Cecilia* (1620) [Figure 12], the artist is shown calmly looking at the viewer, with her hands on the keyboard. Very subtle references to St. Cecilia are made through the wreath of flowers on the sitter's head and the pearl-like decoration on her chair – both are symbols of marriage. Here, the task of depicting the saint, considering the problems and aims outlined above, is further complicated by the task of presenting the self. The fact that the painting is a self-portrait invites considerations of physiognomic likeness, the

psychology of self-representations and the social implications of a female self-portrait. However, the primary concern here is that this painting is also about the process of producing music. The saint/artist is shown gently touching the keys but not playing – a convention that, as we have seen in the paintings analysed above, can be interpreted as a visual signifier of implied sound and was becoming prominent in seventeenth-century art.



Fig. 13: Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432. Sint Baafskathedraal, Ghent. Detail.



Fig. 14: Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432. Sint Baafskathedraal, Ghent. Detail.

A major change in early modern artistic concerns can be seen in comparison with, for instance, *the Ghent altarpiece* by Jan and Hubert van Eyck [Figures 13 and 14]. The processes of singing and playing the organ, shown on the wings of the altarpiece, are presented as very realistic, immediate and physical. St. Cecilia is painted pressing the keys and the musical angels are shown in an inherently human effort of reading the music and producing the right sound. The artists endeavour to capture a moment in time and to render the scene actually present, thus drawing it closer to the mortal observer. By contrast, Gentileschi, like Strozzi and Domenichino aims to create an atmosphere. In Gentileschi's self-portrait as St. Cecilia the artist/saint is shown in a confined space, which is not disrupted by external noises. The movement of her hands demonstrates awareness of the skill of playing the piano, but the keys are not actually pressed – they only *imply* the sound, which is to be imagined by the viewer. The space, only shared by the seated woman and the beholder, seems simultaneously filled with intense silence and the flow of music, the beauty of which is worthy of the chaste beauty and grace of this woman. Like in Rembrandt's *The Denial of*

Peter [Figure 15], in which the three denials are shown in one scene, it is not a single moment that is captured, but rather the process, the continuity of which is condensed in the visual field. As in the paintings addressed above, the viewer is invited to participate in this audial experience and to become immersed in the atmosphere. Paradoxically, St. Cecilia's visual engagement with the viewer draws her closer and encourages the beholder to engage audibly instead. This invites a truly multisensory experience of interaction, facilitated by the artist's skill and the viewer's recognition of a direct association between St. Cecilia and music.



Fig. 15: Rembrandt, *The Denial of Peter*, 1660. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Considerations in conclusion

Early modern concerns with a hierarchy of arts and music, and preoccupations with the visualisation of the invisible, informed the portrait-like development of religious imagery and popularised representations of St. Cecilia as an obvious signifier and embodiment of such intangible aspects as sound, beauty and sainthood. St. Cecilia became an object of experiment. Her sainthood also distanced the observer from viewing the portrait in terms of physiognomic likeness, potentially dangerous in its interpretations.⁴³ Her association with music enabled her to be presented not just as a saint but also as a personification of music, which broadened the freedom of artistic interpretation even further.⁴⁴ In early seventeenth-century art, the distinctions between realistic portraiture, devotional and allegorical representations were blurred. As Mary D. Garrard proposes in her analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-portrait as allegory of painting*, and Hans Belting argues in *Likeness and presence*, the increasing artistic attention to mythological and allegorical scenes, which are known to be fictional, undermines the formerly literal perception of devotional painting, which is also seen as increasingly ambiguous.⁴⁵ Thus, the confusion of meanings and perceptions leads to the merging of artistic conventions and approaches.

The conventions of portraiture, employed for devotional imagery in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, allowed artists to play with the balance between the secular and the religious, attempting to encase the spiritual substance in the secular form. Following the criticism of Raphael's altarpiece, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, it became common to show an 'idle' St. Cecilia. This indicates that concerns with the primacy of moral qualities of devotional painting, still valid in the sixteenth century, were superseded by artistic

curiosity by the beginning of the seventeenth century, thus giving way to experiments engaging with the synesthetic, the illusory, and the substances beyond the pictorial.

The persona of St. Cecilia facilitates association with the heavenly music. Such music, liberated from constraints of actual performance and tangible experience, is expressed as a hint, an idea, or a guess of music-making. This implication of unearthly sound creates an atmosphere, a timeless substance, which fills the pictorial plane and flows into the viewer's imagination. The senses become substituted and confused. The idea of gentle touch, employed in all the representations of St. Cecilia considered above, becomes a metaphor for painting and looking, whereas looking becomes analogous with listening. Philosophical preoccupations with a hierarchy of senses, which present such a challenge for the artists, whose creativity is restricted by the flat surface of a canvas, thus become expressed in their desire to break those constraints by painting a substance of sound. In this context, St. Cecilia becomes a mediator between the physical world and the realm of senses, as much as between the human world and the celestial realm, and facilitates the artistic experiments with the intangible better than any other character would.

Notes

¹ Early modern period is commonly defined as an era immediately succeeding the Middle Ages and continuing until late eighteenth century. It is associated with the age of travel, discoveries, trade, humanist thought, birth and rapid development of sciences and art in their modern understanding (see: Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe 1450-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 2). The Italian states, regardless of their gradual political decline in the period between the Renaissance and European Enlightenment, enjoyed the heritage of the Renaissance, retained their internationally acknowledged position in the forefront of social, cultural and artistic development of Europe, and, through continuous trade and international communications, played an integral role in early modern globalization. See: *Early Modern Italy*, ed. by John A. Marino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 253-256.

² Moshe Barasch, 'Character and Physiognomy: Bocchi on Donatello's St. George: a Renaissance Text on Expression in Art', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36 (1975), pp. 413-430 (pp. 417-419); Peter Burke, 'Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes', in *Rewriting the Self*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 17-28 (pp. 20, 25-26); Maria H. Loh, 'Renaissance Faciality', *Oxford Art Journal*, 32.3 (2009), 341-363 (p. 349).

On questions of intended impressions conveyed by poses and facial expressions of the sitters, see: Harry Berger, Jr, 'Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze in Early Modern Portraiture', *Representations*, 46 (1994), 87-120.

³ Richard Lockett, 'St. Cecilia and Music', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 99:1 (1972), 15-30 (pp. 16-24).

⁴ And possibly in his *Madonna di Sant' Antonio*, where the saint is depicted with a book, according to earlier conventions.

⁵ John Pope-Hennessy, *Raphael* (London, New York: Phaidon, 1970), p. 230.

⁶ See: David Rosand, 'Titian's Saint Sebastians', *Artibus et Historiae*, 15 (30) (1994), 23-39; Elena Ciletti, "'Gran maccina e bellezza": Looking at Gentileschi's Judiths' in *The Artemisia Files*, ed. by Mieke Bal (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 63-106.

⁷ *Bernardo Strozzi. Paintings and Drawings*, ed. by Michael Milkovich (Binghamton, New York: State University of New York at Binghamton, 1967), pp. 10-11.

⁸ Richard E. Spear, *Domenichino* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 30-31; Rossella Vodret, 'The Spread of Caravaggio's Influence: Caravaggism in Italy', in *Caravaggio and His World: Darkness and Light*, ed. by Edmund Capon and John T. Spike (London: Thames and Hudson for the Art Gallery of the New South Wales, 2004), pp. 52-58 (p. 54).

⁹ See: Liana De Girolami Cheney, 'The Cult of Saint Agatha', *Woman's Art Journal*, 17 (1996), 3-9.

¹⁰ Benedict Nicholson, *The International Caravaggesque Movement* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), pp. 217-218.

¹¹ See: Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 6-24.

¹² Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon and Kathleen Russo. *Self-portraits by Women Painters* (Aldershot and Brookfield: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 27, 41.

¹³ Robert Black, 'Humanism', in *Renaissance Thought: A Reader*, ed. by Robert Black (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 68-94 (pp. 69-70).

- ¹⁴Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622*, p. 7; Lorenza Mochi Onori, 'An Artist's Success: Critical Opinion and Market Value', in *Caravaggio and His World: Darkness and Light*, ed. by Edmund Capon and John T. Spike (London: Thames and Hudson for the Art Gallery of the New South Wales, 2004), pp. 38-43 (p. 41).
- ¹⁵Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 172-177.
- ¹⁶Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 15-16.
- ¹⁷Lorenza Mochi Onori, 'An Artist's Success: Critical Opinion and Market Value', in *Caravaggio and His World: Darkness and Light*, ed. by Capon and Spike, p. 39.
- ¹⁸Linda Phyllis Austern, 'Portrait of the Artist as (Female) Musician', in *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women*, ed. by Thomasin LaMay (Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 15-62 (pp. 20-21); Leonardo Da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. by A. Philip McMahon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 14-15, 26; also see: Leslie Korricks, 'Lomazzo's "Trattato... della pittura" and Galilei's "Fronimo": Picturing Music and Sounding Images in 1584', in *Art and Music in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Katherine A. McIver (Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 193-214.
- ¹⁹Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi's Venice: Music and Celebration in the Baroque Era* (London: Souvenir, 2003), p. 6.
- ²⁰Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti, *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 5.
- ²¹Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and Senses* (London: Academy Group Ltd, 1996), p. 35.
- ²²See: Barasch; Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Giovanni Della Casa, *Galateo: A Renaissance Treatise on Manners* (Toronto: Victoria University in the University of Toronto, 2001).
- ²³E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon Press, 1977), pp. 310-311.
- ²⁴Bronwen Wilson, 'Giovanni Battista Moroni, Portraiture, and the Ethics of Early Modern Conversation', in *Heidegger and the Work of Art History*, ed. by Amanda Boetzkes and Aaron Vinegar (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 79-102 (p. 85).
- ²⁵See: Castiglione, pp. 86-87; De Girolami Cheney, Craig Faxon and Russo, pp. 42-43; Della Casa, pp. 159-175.
- ²⁶See, for example: Babette Bohn, 'Female Self-portraiture in Early Modern Bologna', *Renaissance Studies*, 18 (2004), 239-286; De Girolami Cheney, Craig Faxon and Russo; Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ²⁷On questions of identity and character, see, for instance: David Rosand and Ellen Rosand, 'Barbara di Santa Sofia' and "Il Prete Genovese": On the Identity of a Portrait by Bernardo Strozzi', *The Art Bulletin*, 63 (Jun. 1981), 249-258; Harry Berger, 'The Face as Index of the Mind: Art Historians and the Physiognomic Fallacy', in *Fictions of the Pose*, ed. by Harry Berger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 107-118.
- ²⁸Johann Peter Kirsch, 'St Cecilia', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), iii <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03471b.htm>> [accessed 5 May 2014].
- ²⁹Luckett, p. 21; Stanislaw Mossakowski, 'Raphael's "St. Cecilia": An Iconographical Study', *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte*, 31. Bd., H. 1 (1968), 1-26 (p. 4).
- ³⁰Claude V. Palisca, 'Introduction', in Vincenzo Galilei, *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, ed. and trans. by Claude V. Palisca (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. xvii-lxix (p. xxxii).
- ³¹Belting, p. 475.
- ³²Anonymous, 'St Cecilia with an Angel Holding a Musical Score', in *Louvre* <<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/saint-cecilia-angel-holding-musical-score>> [accessed 17 December 2013]
- ³³Joseph Leo Koerner, 'Rembrandt and the Epiphany of the Face', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 12 (1986), 5-32 (pp. 13-17).
- ³⁴See: Rosand and Rosand.
- ³⁵Diane De Grazia and Erich Schleier, 'St Cecilia and an Angel: The Heads by Gentileschi, the Rest by Lanfranco', *The Burlington Magazine*, 136 (1994), 73-78 (p. 74).
- ³⁶Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622*, pp. 18-19.
- ³⁷Catherine McIver, 'Lavinia Fontana's 'Self-Portrait Making Music'', *Woman's Art Journal*, 19 (Spring-Summer 1998), 3-8 (p. 6).
- ³⁸De Girolami Cheney, Craig Faxon and Russo, pp. 31, 64.
- ³⁹See: Linda Phyllis Austern, 'Portrait of the Artist as (Female) Musician', in *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women*, ed. by LaMay.
- ⁴⁰See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).
- ⁴¹Pallasmaa, p. 29.
- ⁴²See: Elena Ciletti, "'Gran maccina e bellezza": Looking at Gentileschi's Judiths' in *The Artemisia Files*, ed. by Bal, p.102; Nanette Salomon, 'Judging Artemisia: A Baroque Woman in Modern Art History' in *The Artemisia Files*, ed. by Mieke Bal (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 33-62 (p. 53).

⁴³ See: Harry Berger, 'The Face as Index of the Mind: Art Historians and the Physiognomic Fallacy' in *Fictions of the Pose*, ed. by Harry Berger, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 107-118.

⁴⁴ Linda Phyllis Austern, 'Portrait of the Artist as (Female) Musician', in *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women*, ed. by LaMay, p. 31; Luckett, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Belting, p. 472.

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