

*Dagli Incurabili alla Pietà:  
le chiese degli Ospedali Grandi e la musica tra XVI e XVIII secolo*  
Laura Moretti

PhD dissertation, Università IUAV di Venezia, 2006  
supervisors Richard Schofield, Deborah Howard, Iain Fenlon

The thesis investigates the role of music in the architectural development of the churches of the four Venetian *Ospedali Grandi* between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> It has been presented on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2006 and discussed on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2006 at the Department of History of Architecture of the Università IUAV di Venezia. The result has been the highest possible (*'con dignità di pubblicazione'*).

The four Venetian *Ospedali Grandi*, which stood out among a host of other organizations devoted to welfare, were charitable institutions, created mostly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, devoted to the care and support of different categories of persons in need. One thing they had in common was that they all looked after and educated orphans: all the orphans were taught to read and write and recite the catechism but while the boys were trained in skills that would be useful in the city's various workshops, any girls who showed the slightest inclination were given a musical training that would serve them for a place in the choir.<sup>2</sup>

Music gradually became one of the main sources of funding for the four institutions, which were all constantly plagued by financial difficulties. They trained the orphan girls (the *putte*), who regularly performed vocal and instrumental music in the churches, attracting large audiences, and this brought in generous offerings and

---

<sup>1</sup> I have already studied the relationship between architecture and music in the context of Renaissance Venice: in my graduation thesis I examined the relations between the architecture of the Basilica of St Mark and, in particular, the transformations introduced by Jacopo Sansovino in the second quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the chancel area, and a new kind of musical composition, known as *'a cori spezzati'* (polychoral music), which began in the Veneto area at the beginning of the century, but was developed most fully in St Mark's throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the centuries that followed. L. Moretti, *Architettura, liturgia e musica a San Marco nell'età del doge Andrea Gritti (1523-38)*, Università IUAV di Venezia, supervisor F. Amendolagine, co-supervisors D. Bryant and C. Caffagni, 2000. Part of the dissertation was published in L. Moretti, 'Architectural spaces for music: Jacopo Sansovino and Adrian Willaert at St Mark's', *Early Music History*, 23 (2004), pp. 153-84 and in L. Moretti, 'Lo spazio della musica: Jacopo Sansovino e Adrian Willaert a San Marco', *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, CLXII (2003-4), pp. 399-435. A more extended version of the study, in the form of an essay, is to be published by Giampiero Casagrande editore: L. Moretti, *Gritti, Sansovino e Willaert: il nuovo volto del palcoscenico marciano*, in *Le Architetture di Orfeo. Musica e Architettura tra Cinquecento e Settecento*, Milano (anticipated publication date Feb. 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For the history of the four great Venetian hospitals, among the numerous studies see: B. Pullan, *Rich and poor in the Renaissance Venice, the Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620*, Oxford 1971; F. Semi, *Gli "ospizi" di Venezia*, Venezia 1983; B. Aikema, D. Meijers, *Nel regno dei poveri. Arte e storia dei grandi ospedali veneziani in età moderna 1474-1797*, Venezia 1989.

bequests. Spectators would rent seats, known as *scagni*, for fixed sums. This gave rise to a regular 'system', quite different from the performance of sacred music in other churches.<sup>3</sup>

The musical performances were held in the churches adjoining the four hospitals, and in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries they became some of the most important musical locations in the city, with international reputations. The construction of the four churches involved some of the greatest architects operating in Venice: Jacopo Sansovino, Andrea Palladio, Giuseppe and Antonio Sardi, Baldassare Longhena and Giorgio Massari. In this particular context architecture became a means to solve problems connected with musical activities, as it was the setting for the famous musical performances of the *putte*.<sup>4</sup>

In this special context a very close relationship was established between musical activity and architecture. As each of the buildings was transformed and adapted, architecture was driven to provide new responses to the continually evolving demands of music.

Although this highly specific theme presents features of great interest, it has never been dealt with directly but only in a tangential and rather reductive fashion. The basic problem in most of the scholarly studies is that the subject is approached purely from the perspective of architectural history, with the musical aspect being dealt with rather summarily or simplistically. This has given rise to a number of commonplaces, impeding a full understanding of the theme, which really calls for a study of an interdisciplinary nature.

The analysis of the primary and secondary sources has made it possible to identify certain main themes, which provide the basis for the questions that are raised; the work has been organized around these themes. I have analyzed sources of all kinds, combining the musical material with the architectural material, and adopting an interdisciplinary point of view. This method of enquiry has made it possible to observe the problems from a new point of view and to offer new answers.

The material, most of which is unpublished, is articulated in four chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. Each chapter focuses on one of the four hospitals, considering some key themes of particular significance with regard to the relationship between the buildings and the music performed in them. The study

---

<sup>3</sup> On music in the four great Venetian hospitals, see: D. Arnold, 'Orphans and Ladies: The Venetian Conservatories 1680-1790', *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association*, LXXXIX (1962-3), pp. 31-48; D. Arnold, 'Instruments and Instrumental Teaching in the Early Italian Conservatories' *Galpin Society Journal*, XVIII (1965), pp. 72-81; *Arte e musica all'Ospedaletto. Schede d'archivio sull'attività musicale degli ospedali dei Derelitti e dei Mendicanti di Venezia (sec. XVI-XVIII)*, Venezia 1978; G. Ellero, 'Origini e sviluppo storico della musica nei quattro grandi ospedali veneziani', *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana*, 13:1 (1979), pp. 160-7; M. V. Constable, 'The Figlie del Coro: Fiction and Fact', *Journal of European Studies*, XI (1981), pp. 111-39; M. V. Constable, 'The Venetian 'Figlie del Coro': Their Environment and Achievement', *Music and Letters*, LXIII (1982), pp. 181-212; Joan Whittemore, *Music of the Venetian Ospedali Composers*, New York 1995; J. L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women musicians of Venice*, Oxford 1996; H. Geyer e W. Osthoff (eds.), *La musica negli ospedali/conservatori veneziani fra Seicento e inizio Ottocento*, Roma 2004.

<sup>4</sup> I have published a general overview of the question in L. Moretti, *Gli spazi per la musica nelle chiese dei quattro grandi ospedali veneziani*, in D. Howard, L. Moretti (eds.), *Architettura e Musica nella Venezia del Rinascimento*, Milano 2006, pp. 323-51.

follows a chronological order, making it possible to reveal some of the special dynamics of development.

The introduction focuses on a series of questions regarding the context of the four *Ospedali Grandi*: the foundation of the institutes, their internal organization and financial, administrative and managerial matters, and the different categories of people who received assistance. I have analyzed the hospital buildings from the architectural point of view. Subsequently I have considered the question of their musical life: the origin, evolution, management and government of the choirs, the range and number of voices, the musical repertoire, and the hiring of teachers from outside.

The first chapter looks into the relationship between the design of the church of the *Ospedale degli Incurabili*, the first stone of which was laid in 1565 to a project by Jacopo Sansovino (1486-1570), and its acoustic qualities, praised by numerous 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century sources. The building has a mixtilinear design, composed of a rectangle whose short sides consist of semicircles; it is limited in height and has a flat wooden ceiling: over the last forty years it has been repeatedly claimed that this particular architectural conformation was dictated by reasons connected with music. I have analyzed the state of knowledge in the field of architectural acoustics at the time of the building. I have considered the history of the institution, in order to understand the possible objectives of those who commissioned the hospital and the church. The aim has been to establish whether the acoustic properties for musical performance might have been a priority for this building, and what models the architect might have had.

In the second chapter I focus attention on the high altar of the church of the Ospedaletto and the *cantoria* above it. From the documentary sources available we know that work was carried out in this area of the church at various stages by Andrea Palladio (1508-80), Antonio (d. 1661) and Giuseppe Sardi (1624-99), Baldassare Longhena (1598-1682), and that in the intervals between the interventions of the three architects, a number of other modifications were made between the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Historical research has not been able to establish the precise contribution of each of the three architects, nor the exact nature of the other modifications. Musical activity developed significantly in this period at the institute, and at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the choir was situated in a large *cantoria* above the high altar. A great number of sources has been considered with the aim of clarifying the architectural history of this part of the building, totally conditioned by the presence of the *cantoria*.

The third chapter examines the construction history of the *cantoria* in the church of the hospital of *San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti*, which is in a way paradigmatic of some of the dynamics at work within the whole group of buildings under consideration. I have examined the relationship between the various architectural modifications and the musical repertoires and the different kinds of instruments that were adopted in the various historical periods. It has been essential to consider how the structures used for music were connected physically with the adjoining institute. I have examined the spaces for music in the four churches, paying particular attention to the *cantorie*, and thus reveal the complex network of emulation and rivalry among the four institutes.

In the fourth and final chapter I analyze the 18<sup>th</sup>-century project by Giorgio Massari (1687-1766) for the church of the *Ospedale della Pietà*, in relation with the report on this project that Doge Pietro Grimani (in office from 1741 to 1752) commissioned in 1744 from Giovanni Poleni (1683-1761) and Bernardino Zendrini (1679-1747). This survey, which drew on ideas of a Vitruvian matrix, took into consideration the acoustic qualities that the church designed by Massari would have; the report influenced later historical approaches to this topic. I have analyzed the document and compared it with the building as eventually created, paying particular attention to questions of a musical nature. I have considered the figure of the architect, examining his previous works, to see whether he ever showed any specific interest in the theories of sound diffusion as illustrated in the survey carried out by the two academics. The aim has been to verify what models he might have considered in the project-stage and to establish whether the observations formulated by Giovanni Poleni and Bernardino Zendrini have any basis in fact.

The analyses carried out in each of the four chapters make it possible to propose an original interpretation of the theme, presented in a new light. What clearly emerges is the fact that a network of complex relationships of cause and effect grew up over the years between the demands of music and architectural transformations. The individual episodes, when seen sequentially, reveal the dimension and the organic nature of the phenomenon, and suggest that architecture developed in response to the demands of music, which played a vital role for the institutes in terms of their finances and their image.

The material has been backed up by an appendix in the form of short catalogue entries on the individual churches and by a wide range of illustrative material, including drawings, prints and photographs.