

## A Feminist Icon: Celebrating the Life and Work of Isabella Andreini and the *Commedia dell'arte* in Renaissance Italy

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The late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries brought a wave of opportunity for the female Italian musician. The role of women in society served as a frequent discourse, as their male counterparts decided whether or not their duties should extend outside the domestic realm. Male humanists presented their habitual hostility towards the musical education of women, while the more sensitive and perceptive patrons, like Duke Alfonso d'Este of the court of Ferrara, were in full appreciation of the musical affluence of women musicians.<sup>1</sup> Despite this looming conflict, 'more women emerged as composers in Italy between 1566 and 1700 than in any previous period in Western music history- indeed, than in all of that history taken together'.<sup>2</sup> Emerging from this group were the virtuoso musician-composers Barbara Strozzi (1619–1664), Francesca Caccini (1587–c1640), Gaspara Stampa (1523–1554), and Madalena Casulana (c1540–c1590), all of whom have been justly projected into the canon of music and literature. However, hidden among these successful women is the incredibly talented but historically forgotten musician Isabella Andreini (1562–1604). Andreini rose above the gender discourses in her society and realized her own renaissance through her commendable achievements. As a *Commedia dell'arte* actress, Andreini's role certainly extended past the domestic realm and into that of performance. As the co-director of the renowned company *Compagnie dei Gelosi*, of which music was a regular feature, she both acted in and wrote many of her own plays, two of which this paper will discuss. Her plays acted as a canvas to exemplify her musical talents. Having also mastered a singing voice which has been documented to have sung madrigals and songs in both an Italian and French manner, thereby connecting her to the later compositional output of Claudio

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Newcomb: 'Courtesans, Muses, or Musicians?', *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150–1950*, ed. Judith Tick and Jane Bowers (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 92–93.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Bowers: 'The Emergence of Women Composers in Italy, 1566–1700', *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150–1950*, ed. Judith Tick and Jane Bowers (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 116.

Monteverdi (1567–1643), a thesis that will be discussed later.<sup>3</sup> Her mastery on the stage was so universally recognised and admired that she and the *Gelosi* were invited to perform at the prestigious wedding festivities of the Medici family in Florence in 1589. The celebrations of the wedding of Ferdinand de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine were to be a notable event in the history of music, as they were to be the occasion for the performance of the glorious *Intermedii* of such composers as Lucia Caccini and Vittoria Archilei (1550–1620s or later).<sup>4</sup> It is significant that Andreini was not only present at but was an active participant in such an important occasion in history. In addition to her performance abilities and play-writing skills, Andreini composed nearly 500 lyric poems, thirty of which were set to music. Among the composers who set her songs were Pietro Paolo Torre and Donat'Antonio Spano, whose musical settings will later be discussed.

Andreini took advantage of Neoplatonic and Aristotelian conceptions and used them in her work to reveal poignant feminist statements. Through her theatrical singing and acting she conveyed these statements firstly in her plays through gender reversals, and through her own self-fashioning in transgendered roles. Secondly, her lyric poetry encapsulates a particular vision of the female subject through her adoption of a male authorial voice. By looking at the female subject through the eyes of the male suitor she maintains full control of how much of the woman is revealed to the audience. A profound understanding of Classical myth, poetry, music and art make up both the milieu and the subject of her work and allow her to satirise and reverse gender roles, in this work. It is for this reason that I propose Isabella Andreini as more than a mere comedienne or musician, but rather as a feminist icon.

This paper will survey those aspects of Andreini's mastery on the stage in renaissance Italy for which she is acclaimed, suggesting throughout why those aspects should form an iconic identity. It will answer questions as to how she surpassed the societal barriers of that time, barriers that were of patriarchal foundation. An analysis of the hostility of humanist scholars towards the success of women in the field of music will also be attempted, questioning how and why they oppressed the subject that was, in biblical

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<sup>3</sup> Anne MacNeil: 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. 120/2 (1995), 208–213. Hereafter referred to as MacNeil: 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini'.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Pendle: *Women and Music: A History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), 39.

terms, formed from their very own existence. This analysis will help to substantiate and cast perspective on the truly remarkable achievements of Andreini as a woman musician in an age of conservative and oppressive thought. There has been little concentrated research done on the life and work of Isabella Andreini, but the literature that does exist reflects her inimitable characteristics, her manifest exuberance, and her representation of femininity in its truest form.<sup>5</sup> This paper will therefore argue for the inclusion of Andreini within the canon of iconic women in music, awarding her the justly deserved title of Isabella Andreini: a feminist icon.

### ***La Pazzia d'Isabella* or Rational Lunacy? The Paradox of a *Prima Donna***

In 1589 *La Pazzia d'Isabella* (*The Madness of Isabella*) was premiered at the court of Duke Ferdinando de' Medici in Florence for the celebrations of his wedding to Christine of Lorraine. According to the accounts of Giuseppe Pavoni, the only known source to have documented proceedings at the Medici festivities, the play was received exceptionally well. Upon the close of the comedy Pavoni states that Isabella left 'such whispering and wonder in the audience, that for as long as the world goes on, her beautiful eloquence and worth will be praised'.<sup>6</sup> Albeit the only source of the wealth of this performance, and possibly subjective in consequence, Pavoni's praise of Andreini proves a valuable insight into how she was received by her audiences. Anne MacNeil has offered a very unique perspective of this play, or more precisely, the meaning behind the play. Having dealt closely with the accounts in Pavoni's diary and, another dedication devoted to this

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<sup>5</sup> Anne MacNeil has written extensively on the life and work of Isabella Andreini and the *commedia dell'arte* in her essays 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman', and 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini'; in her unpublished PhD diss.: *Music and the Life and Work of Isabella Andreini: Humanistic Attitudes Towards Music, Poetry and Theatre During the Late-Sixteenth and Early-Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Chicago, 1994); and in her book: *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'arte in the Late-Sixteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Unfortunately, I have been unable to access her doctoral dissertation due to its local unavailability. I have not identified any other musicologist who has delved deeply into Andreini's life and work. All subsequent references in my bibliography are secondary sources of the social and musical backdrop to early modern Italy which may only briefly reference Andreini.

<sup>6</sup> Giuseppe Pavoni: *Diario descritto da Giuseppe Pavoni*, cited after MacNeil: 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini', 199.

play, she has unearthed many enthralling aspects of its nature that have cast Andreini into a very rewarding light.<sup>7</sup> Surveying the language that Pavoni uses in his diary has revealed to MacNeil ‘humanistic appraisals of social, spiritual and intellectual value’ on Andreini’s part.<sup>8</sup> As suggested by Pavoni’s words, the play was not simply amusement for the court, but ‘a demonstration of familiarity with courtly discourse that impressed the spectators with its urban references to humanistic conceits’.<sup>9</sup> These findings are again central to our perception of Andreini and piece together an understanding of how the play was indeed a fitting gesture for both the wedding festivities and the Florentine court. An example of how Andreini demonstrated ‘humanistic appraisals’ was through her clever manipulation of language. In his diary Pavoni mentions the words ‘virtue’ and ‘valore’, which today would indicate honour and value, but looking back to the context in which they were used in the Renaissance, as MacNeil has done, shows that courtiers would describe virtue ‘as habit of mind, ordered according to human nature, with respect to reason’; when associated with ‘valore’, virtue ‘is said to indicate excellence of good quality; but after Boccaccio, ‘virtue may be ingested in a liquid, thereby causing the drinker to become the property of the beverage consumed’.<sup>10</sup> Particularly relevant to *La Pazzia* is the latter understanding of virtue, as this action is undertaken by Isabella towards the end of the play:

She then set to imitating the languages of all her comedians ... Finally, through the deceptions of the art of magic, with certain waters which she was given to drink, she returned to her former self and then, with elegant and learned style, explaining the passions and travails of love which they experience who find themselves caught in such traps, she brought the comedy to an end, demonstrating in this madness her sane and learned intellect.<sup>11</sup>

In falling victim to a magic potion which brings her to her ‘sane and learned’ self, Andreini depicts the kind of virtue previously mentioned by

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<sup>7</sup> MacNeil could only work from these accounts of Andreini’s play as the text of the comedy has not survived.

<sup>8</sup> MacNeil: ‘The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini’, 200.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

becoming 'the property of the beverage consumed', while simultaneously displaying her knowledge of renaissance humanism. In order to return to a sane disposition, however, the audience would have to have previously experienced Isabella in an unstable temperament. In leading up to the beverage scene, Pavoni reports that she enacts a series of frenzied moments where her personalities and identities flux, sustaining suspense within the audience, and also preparing them for the consumption of the magic waters:

Isabella ... like a madwoman, went running through the city, stopping now this one, now that one, and speaking now in Spanish, now in Greek, now in Italian, and many other languages, but all without reason: and among other things she set to speaking French and also singing certain little songs in the French manner, giving such delight to the most serene bride that she could hardly express it.<sup>12</sup>

This account examines the cunning way in which Andreini personified her madness, while courteously paying tribute to her patrons. It is also interesting to note the use of music at this point, and the significant role it plays. Music is synonymous with the *Commedia dell'arte*, comprising a huge part of their entertainment, but Andreini's use of it in this play is particularly noteworthy. As Pavoni has pointed out, in the midst of her irrational conduct she utters words in the French language and begins also to sing in the French manner. As Pavoni understood, this appeared to be an accolade on Andreini's part to Christine of Lorraine, but can also be interpreted as a far greater gesture. Analysing *La Pazzia d'Isabella* from a Neoplatonic perspective reveals the play's intrinsic connection with Classical, Neoplatonic and Macrobian myth. If one takes the whole of the play and places it alongside Plato's *Phaedrus* marked similarities are disclosed both in theme and content, but most importantly through their common portrayal of music and poetry. Andreini seems to mirror Plato's dictum that 'divine madness takes hold upon a gentle and pure soul, arousing it and inspiring it to songs and other poetry'.<sup>13</sup> When Isabella is abducted in one scene of the play by a servant in the guise of her lover, she turns to madness and raving upon the realisation of what has happened and the loss of her true lover. This divine madness, stemming from a divine

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 205, citing after Plato: *Euthyphro*.

inspiration of love, results in the creation of music and poetry by Isabella. 'Seen in this light ... The songs and poetry born of her insanity are interpreted ... as the immortal teachings of the gods conveyed through a pure and innocent medium'.<sup>14</sup> From a Neoplatonic perspective the poetic and musical overflow resulting from this divine madness 'symbolizes the concord and harmony of the universe'.<sup>15</sup> This tells us that the musical spectacle was not only for the enjoyment of the audience, but that Andreini parodies Classical mythology in order to portray a very unique message of love, offering the ultimate gesture one could present for the Medici-Lorraine wedding. It is relevant to note however that Andreini's plays were not always documented by envoys like Pavoni and are therefore lacking in their references to music. One such play is Andreini's *Mirtilla Pastorale* (1588) which is the first known pastoral play to be written by a woman. This play represents Andreini's proto-feminist nature and although it may not have direct musical links, it provides a necessary insight to the cultural climate and gender politics of late-sixteenth century Italy. Modelled on a scene from Torquato Tasso's *Aminta*, *Mirtilla Pastorale* identifies with but reverses a popular stereotype in gender discourse and in Classical mythology: the coupling of submission and domination in a dyadic relationship. Using the method which we experienced in *La Pazzia*, Andreini parodies contemporary erotica and crafts it to her own advantage through reversing gender roles.<sup>16</sup> Satirising the domination of the Satyr over the submissive nymph Sylvia in Tasso's *Aminta*, Andreini begins her scene with the same orientation.<sup>17</sup> A Satyr declares his lust for the nymph Fillide, threatening to rape her if she does not reciprocate his feelings. This scene alludes to erotic images of naked nymphs tied and beaten by their dominant, male counterparts, images commonly seen in paintings of the late Renaissance.<sup>18</sup> However, what makes this scene atypical is the firm

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>16</sup> Anne MacNeil: 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman', *The Musical Quarterly*, 83/2 (Summer/1999), 270. Hereafter referred to as MacNeil: 'A Portrait of the Artist'.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>18</sup> Two such examples include: 'Venus, Satyr and Cupid.' (1524–27), Oil on Canvas by Antonio Allegri Corregge, Italian Collection, the Louvre Gallery, Paris; and 'Satyr Whipping a Nymph', (1590–1600), from the series of engravings 'Lascivie' by Agostino Carracci.

placement of the dominant role into the hands of the nymph, or more precisely, the woman:<sup>19</sup>

Perilously close to having at least her bosom bared, Fillide appears to warm to the Satyr's advances as she stalls for time. She promises him a kiss if he will allow her to secure his arms so they will not bruise her delicate skin. Stupidly, he agrees, and once bound firmly to the tree, Fillide degrades him, tearing his beard, choking him and pinching his bared breast. She leaves finally, triumphant.<sup>20</sup>

By rejecting male domination and female subordination Andreini is not only presenting a feminist approach to a dominantly patriarchal society, but she is challenging cemented humanist ideas and beliefs and uprooting the hub of Classical myth. It is the quintessential statement which this play makes that transcends Andreini from an ordinary comedy actress to a feminist icon, an icon to be remembered and celebrated.

Before advancing to the critical issues surrounding Andreini and her career, including some contemporary humanist appraisals, one must look at her equally feminist lyric poetry. In 1601 Isabella Andreini published a book of poetry entitled *Rime*. As stated above, this volume contained over five hundred poems, thirty of which were set to music by composers of the day such as the Italian monk, Pietro Paolo Torre (*fl* 1622) and the Naples born Donat'Antonio Spano (c1585–90, d. after 1609). It is interesting that in their musical settings each composer offers a different approach to Andreini's compositional perspective.<sup>21</sup> While Spano interprets and appreciates her poem as a fine literary achievement, Torre identifies the underlying statements which Andreini is making and removes them by omitting the fundamental lyrics of the poem which he set, turning it into a secular song of devotion which 'weakens the poem's rhetorical strength, and makes hash of its rhyme scheme and stanzaic structure'.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the way in which Andreini's poetry differs from other composers lies in her unique subject position,

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<sup>19</sup> MacNeil: 'A Portrait of the Artist', 270.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>21</sup> These two musical settings can be found in: Anne MacNeil: *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte In the Late Sixteenth Century*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 100–103, and 105–109. Hereafter referred to as MacNeil: *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte*.

<sup>22</sup> MacNeil: 'A Portrait of the Artist', 260.

that being her employment of the male authored gaze. For example, we can see from the following poem, *Ove si tosto voli sogno* which is set by Torre, that the subject is clearly feminine and that the speaker is presumably male:

Where do you so suddenly fly,  
 dream? Ah, do not depart,  
 since sweetly you console  
 my bitter and anguished suffering.  
 If you alone make my lady compassionate  
 of my long suffering,  
 kind deceiver, why do you go?  
 It is certainly true that the contentment  
 of love flees like a cloud in the wind.<sup>23</sup>

This method proves effective, as the speaker, although male, is under the control of the writer who is female, and is therefore presenting the female subject through the terms and conditions of a woman instead of the usual male dominator, whom Andreini also addressed in her plays. When compared with the more standard compositional output of her contemporary Gaspara Stampa, the true impact of Andreini's style is revealed:

In that noble and illustrious company  
 of Graces who do make you, Count, Immortal,  
 one stands before the rest and spreads her wings:  
 the most sweet harmony of song.  
 ...Pleasure, laughter, Venus and her Cupids  
 are seen making the air around serene  
 wherever her sweet accent echoes forth.  
 And I, if able to remain with you,  
 would little care to make my return to  
 the harmony of these celestial choirs.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 258. The original Italian text of this poem is printed in MacNeil's *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Tomlinson: *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History: The Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 57.

Here we can observe the submissive authorial voice of Stampa's sonnet, where the speaker (female) is clearly in love with her subject, but in 'spreading her wings' the female speaker is appearing vulnerable, certainly more vulnerable than the female subject in Andreini's pastoral poem. Ultimately, Andreini's cunning writing technique, similar to that in her plays, casts a shadow of doubt over solid and accepted societal structures, resulting in Giovan Maria Artusi's idealised household *serva* and *padrona* becoming *servo* and *padrone*, which are construed respectively as feminine and masculine. Whether the dominant or the submissive roles emerge as masculine or feminine, Andreini proves that through poetry she can shift the patriarchal barriers of her time, and this she indeed achieved.

### **The Second Sex: Myth or Reality? Questioning Humanist Philosophies**

As the work of music historians such as Edward E. Lowinsky, Paul O. Kristeller, Nino Pirrotta and Leo Schrade has shown, the revival of ancient learning and the changes in musical style and theory that occurred during the Renaissance is indebted to the work of the humanists.<sup>25</sup> It cannot be denied that their exuberant interest in ancient, particularly Greek musical thought was to be a 'potent force' in the transformation of music not only in Italy, but across Europe.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is necessary first to outline the influence that humanism brought to the discipline before approaching the destructive aspects of their philosophies in relation to gender discourse. In his book, *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought*, Claude V. Palisca details the early development of Renaissance musical science and its close relationship with Pythagorean, Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions. The main music-theoretical source which humanists such as Franchino Gaffurio drew from was the writings of Boethius, whose image Palisca states 'had to be altered from that of a universal musical lawgiver to that of a transmitter of ancient learning'.<sup>27</sup> Identified as a Pythagorean, Boethius bestowed eminence on Pythagoras' discovery of the ratios of the consonances and its subsequent effects in music. Essentially, this legend is introduced by Boethius to show that 'given the inadequacy of the hearing when confronted with a multitude of sensations, only reason coupled with

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<sup>25</sup> Claude V. Palisca: *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), xi.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

accurate observation and measurement can establish the true relationship of tones'.<sup>28</sup> This rediscovery of ancient musical theory, along with a revived interest in aspects of Greek tonality with its system of *tonoi*, octave species and the so-called *harmoniai* which were widely misunderstood until the Renaissance, was largely inspired by humanism in Italy, thus highlighting it as a significant theoretical force in music history.<sup>29</sup> Absent from humanist theories and interests however were the considerable achievements of women musicians in these ancient times. As Sophie Drinker discloses:

In early Greece, women were at the centre of these three types of music ... They danced, sang and played instruments, especially flutes and cymbals and drums. From childhood to the grave, at home, in small group gatherings, and in formal public ceremonies, early Greek women had opportunity and occasion to use music, and incentive to compose it. The result of such a setting was a rich musical experience for women in general and a great wealth of songs composed for women and by women.<sup>30</sup>

Among these women were Sappho (*fl.* c612 BC) and Kassia (*fl.* c810 AD) who were central figures in the development of musical styles and instruments and who rivalled the intellect of many of their male counterparts. One such style includes that of the Mixolydian style which is usually attributed to Sappho along with the invention of the *pektis* and the *magadis*, both of which are usually identified as harp-like Lydian instruments.<sup>31</sup> Kassia, an important figure of Byzantium, is documented as having composed sacred poems set to music, secular epigraphs, and liturgical Sticheron.<sup>32</sup> Where is the voice of these women in the writings of the humanists? Have they been forgotten or simply overlooked? It is apt to draw on an extract of Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* at this point:

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>30</sup> Sophie Drinker: *Music and Women: The Story of Women in their Relation to Music* (New York: The City University of New York, 1995), 91.

<sup>31</sup> James R. Briscoe: *New Historical Anthology of Music by Women* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 1–3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7. Sticheron were hymns of the Byzantine rite sung between the verses of psalms by two choirs in alternation.

Women have arrived at excellence  
in every art in which they have striven;  
in their chosen fields their renown is apparent  
to anyone who studies the history books.  
If the world has long remained unaware of  
their achievements, this sad state of affairs is  
only transitory; perhaps envy concealed the  
honors due to them, or perhaps the ignorance  
of historians.<sup>33</sup>

While Ariosto acknowledges the ‘excellence in every art’ which women have achieved, he also notes that the honours due to them have been ‘concealed’. Many women of the Renaissance, including Andreini, were also to become victims of this humanist hostility. Before approaching a deeper analysis of why this hostility existed, let us first analyse the source: the humanists themselves.

As stated by Anne MacNeil, ‘the late Renaissance tension between conceptions of art as either feminine or masculine is nowhere more apparent than in sixteenth-century women’s constructions of self and in the styles of theatrical performance practiced by Isabella Andreini and her peers’.<sup>34</sup> These theatrical styles and controversial tensions were frequently discussed in the writings and responses of contemporary humanists and music theorists. The responses of the humanist Erycius Puteanus will take precedence in this discussion as being a dominant critical source for Andreini’s work. In a letter to her in 1601, later printed in his *Epistolarum fercula secunda* of 1603, Puteanus expressed his admiration of Andreini’s lyric poetry along with her pastoral play *Mirtilla*.<sup>35</sup> This appraisal, however, did not acknowledge Andreini for the way she refused to trade her feminine power for its masculine complement or how she exerted both forms of artistic authority in their respective social spaces.<sup>36</sup> Instead, Puteanus presented Andreini and her work in a masculine frame by tracing Neoplatonic and Aristotelian arguments associating masculinity with the

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<sup>33</sup> Lodovico Ariosto: *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Anthony Newcomb; cited after: *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150–1950*, ed. Judith Tick and Jane Bowers (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 90.

<sup>34</sup> MacNeil: ‘A Portrait of the Artist’, 252.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

literary and rhetorical arts.<sup>37</sup> His 'bold assertion of Andreini's artistic masculinity extended to the ridiculous end of calling her a man ... and finally, he made an etymological pun on the name Andreini, using the Greek words *aner* and *andros*, to show that even [her] name would betray her inherent manliness':<sup>38</sup>

Truly in my opinion you supply a defect of nature, Andreina, who are not only capable of male glory but in fact an equal partner in it. No, more, abandoning your own sex, you transform yourself by the labor of virtue into a man. Now if the word virtue derives from the word man, then you are more fruitful than a man, you who, though a woman, bring forth the fruit of virtue. But if the word man derives from the word virtue, then the reward of the better name, I mean the name of man, is due to you who perform the offices belonging to the better name. Therefore you are a man. And indeed you are called a man by name, if you look closely at the name Andreina.<sup>39</sup>

MacNeil describes this 'clever but predictable and overwrought etymological game' which Puteanus here employs as 'a trademark of Renaissance Humanism'.<sup>40</sup> This game leaves a bitter aftertaste for Andreini and for all women, as in 'praising the individual, he derided women as a group, stating that Andreini's birth in female form was a defect ... that all women by nature chatter and babble, whereas Andreini spoke well, and that eloquence and learning were foreign to women, whereas the great actress proved her 'manhood' through writing and rhetoric'.<sup>41</sup> Puteanus also formed an image of Andreini as the Queen of the Amazons, Penthesilea, who although beautiful and valorous 'died a violent death and was essentially a tragic and impotent figure'.<sup>42</sup> Overall, what appears on the surface of Puteanus's letter as an expression of great praise for Andreini, for her virtuosity and her work, is but a façade concealing a truly hostile humanist attitude, an attitude which claims Andreini's physical self and her intellect as masculine because it was perceived as normative and natural to

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 256, cited after Erycius Puteanus. *Epistolarum fercula secunda*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

do so. The casual and stringent manner in which Puteanus asserts feelings such as ‘therefore you are a man’ proves just how normative this contention was. This masking of femininity by masculinity gravely suggests an element of envy on the part of the humanists, an envy which has indeed concealed the honours due unto women.

Joining the hostility displayed by Puteanus is that of the music theorist Giovan Maria Artusi, a well-educated humanist scholar who trained in the tradition of Battista Guarino. Due to his many years of humanistic training he granted ‘priority to the rules of pure counterpoint over the new, interdisciplinary ideals grounded in the representation of affect that Monteverdi espoused’.<sup>43</sup> Monteverdi’s use of dissonance in his music, for example the dissonant canto entrance of *Cruda Amarilli* where Artusi feels that the soprano part fails to agree with the bass,<sup>44</sup> prompted an attack where he focused on the ‘errors and unnatural acts of the highest sounding part’.<sup>45</sup> In his 1600 publication *L’Artusi, overo Delle imperfettioni della moderna musica* the second conversation of the treatise outlines how Artusi deplores ‘the irregular melodic, harmonic, and modal practices of some modern composers who thereby satisfy neither sense nor reason’.<sup>46</sup> These responses were typical of Artusi, as the presence of dissonance not only failed to satisfy sense or reason for the scholar, but represented the overall effeminacy of modern music which of course proved conflicting to his traditional education.<sup>47</sup> For Artusi ‘Lingering traces of scholastic music theory, wherein the harmony of the spheres held mastery over dissonance, invite an interpretation of consonance as both natural and masculine and dissonance as unnatural and feminine’.<sup>48</sup> Artusi was not a direct critic of Andreini’s work but spoke frequently on the female position in music, a markedly negative one which further solidified their status as the second sex. He believed that the ‘feminine be subsumed within a dominant masculine frame that he identified as ‘natural’ because

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>44</sup> See: Claudio Monteverdi, Madrigal, ‘Cruda Amarilli’, in Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca: *A History of Western Music*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (New York: Norton & Norton Company, 1996), 205.

<sup>45</sup> Anne MacNeil: *A Portrait of the Artist*. 250.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Carter: *Monteverdi and his Contemporaries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), VI, 173.

<sup>47</sup> Anne MacNeil: ‘A Portrait of the Artist’, 250.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

he perceived it as normative'.<sup>49</sup> Following in the footsteps of his mentor, his beliefs appear to echo the ideas of a letter Guarino sent to Isotta Nogarola where he chastises her 'for an unchecked expression of anger and frustration': '... you show yourself so cast down, humiliated and truly womanish that I am able to perceive nothing which accords with my previous magnificent [manly] opinion of you'.<sup>50</sup> As with Puteanus, this oppression of the feminine was seen as normal and was, therefore, executed with a distinctly casual determination by such scholars. They deemed these women as men when they excelled in their work, but cast them as 'womanish' when they displayed signs of apparent weakness and incongruity. This appropriation of the masculine over the feminine is what would ultimately supplant women as the second sex in every art in which they were present. One must ask at this point where this hostility emerged from and how Andreini along with many other renaissance and baroque women musicians so successfully surpassed their oppressors.

In her book *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir discusses the place of women in society and how they have become the 'Other' of Western civilisation. She contends that 'she [woman] is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He [man] is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other'.<sup>51</sup> At the core of de Beauvoir's argument is the belief that women are objectified by men due to the Western culture in which they live, by the myths that are placed on women and not from the natural rules of biology. Therefore, woman is an object to society and to man, because over time society has formulated what 'woman' and 'man' are, and hence what they are not. The socio-economic factors which have decided these gender roles have been largely contingent on patriarchal doctrine, taking for example the renaissance culture in which women were confined to domesticity and to motherhood, thereby alienating them from the arts or from any aspect of political or intellectual society. This in turn would validate the superiority of the male over the female in their respective cultural standing, confirming the female sex as 'secondary' to the male. Expanding on the myths which surround women, she outlines in the chapter 'The Data of Biology' how men manipulate these myths in order to assume a higher order than women, but for a reason born of their own

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>51</sup> Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 1/1947 reprint 1997), 16.

disquiet: fear. According to de Beauvoir ‘the term “female” is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman’s animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex; and if this sex seems to man to be contemptible and inimical ... it is evidently because of the uneasy hostility stirred up in him by woman’.<sup>52</sup> The female’s association with the animal kingdom and biology conjures up ‘a saraband of imagery’ which, on the whole, justifies the uneasy sentiment of the male: images of the preying mantis and the spider when ‘satiated with love’, the monstrous and swollen termite queen, the bitch in heat ‘trailing behind her a wake of depraved odours’, the she-monkey and the most superb wild beasts—the tigress, the lioness, the panther—all of which carry with them a degree of discomfort and intimidation for the male onlooker.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, de Beauvoir is relating that, together with her mythical associations with sin and greed, with virginal facets, with nature, mortality and death, woman is a potent force, an all-powerful entity which man cannot understand and must therefore fear. She is the one who induces the uneasy hostility in man which he must therefore project back onto her. It can perhaps then be suggested that the resentment shown by the humanists of the Renaissance arose as a result of their lack of understanding of women and femininity, and also from an added feeling of envy, for in the eyes of de Beauvoir:

She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and false-hood; she is healing presence and sorceress, she is man’s prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d’être*.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout her career, Andreini was subject to the tribulations of sexism and discrimination, always facing the criticism of the humanists who transposed her from female to male at a simple decree. However, her ingenuity was such that it caught the attention of these humanists firstly before they had transgendered her, proving her uniqueness as an actress, musician and poet. One must remain perplexed as to how Andreini maintained a successful career while also raising a family and upholding her much-admired virtuous outlook in life, despite such hostile attacks as

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

those from Puteanus. I propose that it was this very virtuosity coupled with her shrewd intellect which allowed her to transgress the social and cultural boundaries in place in the late-sixteenth century. If one recalls the clever way in which the nymph Fillide resumes control over the Satyr in her play *Mirtilla*, the way Isabella conducts her rational lunacy on the stage in Florence, and the way Andreini adopts the male authorial gaze in her lyric poetry, what emerges is an intriguing pattern of entrapment whereby she is manipulating masculinity and the male sex. Through an understanding of men and their behaviour, Andreini knows that Fillide can manipulate the Satyr into assuming the female position by coaxing him with his libidinal desires; she understands that Isabella's madness will validate the myth of the neuroticism of women, but through switching this madness with harmony and music at the approach of the finale, she supplants in the minds of her audience the grandness of her own intellect; and lastly she understands that adopting the male authorial gaze in her poetry would allow her to control the objectification of women and to monitor the gaze of the man. It can be supposed that Andreini had a perceptive understanding of both sexes so that along with her employment of transgendered roles, she could make her feminist statements. Ultimately, she was able to transgress gender biases in society through making her very own pun of them on the stage. Is this the workings of a repressed, secondary sex? I think one can safely assume that it is not and that the myth of 'The Second Sex' is exactly that, a myth, and one that Andreini understood and exploited to her significant advantage. As the research of Gill Halstead shows, sex, gender and music are socially imbedded as a union which exerts more problems than the difference in power that women and men typically experience in relation to music, it is a union which is reliant on 'the socially grounded affect of music'.<sup>55</sup> Halstead, through a culmination of biological and psychological research, has proven that 'although men and women have for centuries been stereotyped as possessing masculine or feminine characteristics, there is nothing within these categories which is in principle unavailable to either sex ... In this sense, it would seem unproductive constantly to discuss gender as an issue' which would augment the functional significance of music.<sup>56</sup> The results of Halstead's research are enough to undermine and deconstruct the obscured gender

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<sup>55</sup> Gill Halstead: *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 215.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

philosophies of the humanists. Despite the wealth of knowledge and inspiration which they brought to the discipline, they were palpably uneducated in matters of gender which blinded them from the majesty of the female sex; it blinded them from seeing beneath the mask of the talented and beautiful Isabella Andreini, an actress, a musician, a poet, an icon: a woman.

### Conclusion

Andreini's presence in music history has been noted, but when compared to the wealth of information which exists on her contemporaries, distinctly few musicologists have been exposed to the allure of this woman. It must therefore be proposed that this feminist icon be celebrated in order to substantiate her place in the history books and to open the eyes of the world to her enduring spirit. However, it is imperative to note that in acknowledging and studying the woman behind the mask there are many more hidden historical tropes to be discovered. Although speculative, Andreini's connection with Monteverdi proposes the fascinating, if not fact-altering possibility, that she may have been a muse for the composer and an important inspiration in his work.<sup>57</sup> If this were to prove true it would create many diverse prospects for the music historian in researching this concern. Also, a further, more intense analysis of Andreini's plays and poetry could prove richly informative in revealing aspects of Renaissance culture and politics that may not have been uncovered hitherto, aspects such as gender politics in the theatre. Presumably, the underlying feminist effigies in Andreini's work would have been subtly enforced upon the audience during her performances; however they would not have been able to escape the intellects of her colleagues with whom she acted so closely. This suggests that the *Gelosi*, made up mostly of men, would have accepted if not agreed with her clever pun on gender stereotypes. When we couple this with the overall performative nature of gender in the theatre, a nature brought about through a long tradition of transgendered roles, what results is a unification of the two sexes at the forefront, and a remarkable portrayal of equality. Thus, what we must consider is the possibility that theatre culture and politics in the Renaissance were much more liberating than those perceived of its society, and indeed educational, as the spectators

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<sup>57</sup> For further reference to the Monteverdi/Chiabrera/Andreini connection, see MacNeil's footnote no.32. MacNeil: 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini', 208–209.

who frequented such plays as Andreini's would have been edified by her use of Classical myth, humanist discourse and her inescapable feminist statements. The recognition of this woman would therefore enhance not only the discipline of music, but universally vital aspects of Western history and culture.

Pavoni's description of Andreini's *La Pazzia d'Isabella* also:

alters our understanding of theatrical and musical performance practices in late sixteenth century Italy by offering an indication of the depth of interaction between the *commedia dell'arte*, musical performance and court politics for symbolising power and grandeur through allusions of myth, nature and scholarly discourse.<sup>58</sup>

This aspect of musical history intertwined with court culture and politics offers an invaluable insight into how music was performed and for what purpose. The background to Andreini's performance in 1589, as mentioned above, proved to be a landmark in music history, as the musical content of festivities such as those of the Medicis were foundational to the evolution of styles and genres such as monody and opera, genres which were intimately linked to the musical spectacles of the *commedia dell'arte*. Also, the allusions of myth, nature and scholarly discourse which Andreini espoused, in some measure, prove how comedians contributed to establishing an ancient foundation on which to anchor the political prestige of the Medici family.<sup>59</sup> In this way:

the reading of Isabella Andreini's performance within this cultural context reveals an actress who both affirmed and subverted class and gender roles in the course of playing her theatrical trade, bringing to it a success founded on talent and imagination, surely, but also on the ingenuity of the social mirror she held up to her patrons and their minions.<sup>60</sup>

At this point I wish to remind the reader of the magnetism of this woman: a woman who dared to uproot the hub of humanistic society, who excelled as a playwright and a lyric poet, who defended the rights and beauty of

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<sup>58</sup> MacNeil: 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini', 214.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

women by giving them a voice through her work, who sang so beautifully as to leave 'such whispering and wonder in the audience, that for as long as the world goes on, her beautiful eloquence and worth will be praised'. Let the history books now give a voice to Pavoni's wishes and allow this woman to be praised, for this she deserves. Let us return one last time to the madness of Isabella Andreini and her intellect and conclude:

If ever anyone reads my neglected verses,  
do not believe in their false ardors,  
for loves imagined on stage  
I have set forth with feigned affects;  
With lies, no less with false words,  
I have portrayed the Muses' high madresses,  
sometimes bewailing my fictive sorrows,  
sometimes singing my fictive delights;  
And as in the theatre I have played  
now a woman, now a man, in varied style,  
as Nature would instruct, and Art as well,  
Thus following once more my star  
of fleeting years, in green April,  
with varied style, I have penned a good thousand pages.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Isabella Andreini: *Rime*. Cited after MacNeil: 'A Portrait of the Artist', 269.

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