

**Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance: The Emergence of a Musical  
Icon**

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John A. Rice

***Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance: The Emergence of a Musical Icon***

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

300 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-81710-1

How does a female martyr known for having despised music become the patron saint of musicians and the embodiment of the pleasure of music making? This is the paradox of Saint Cecilia and her metamorphoses. A quiet virgin who discarded all earthly sounds during her wedding, this shape-shifting figure was ironically destined to be forever associated with music. She was converted from the woman turning her back to the organ in early representations into the woman who would be depicted passionately playing the instrument and enraptured by her own music making. In *Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance: The Emergence of a Musical Icon*, John Rice explores the complex cultural influences that accompanied this transformation of Cecilia the “anti-musician” into Cecilia the musical icon, taking his readers from Franco-Flemish territories to Italian ones, and from an early appearance in a fifth-century text by a Roman monk to the musical festivities of Charles II’s London.

This is not the first time that scholars have turned to the intriguing figure of Saint Cecilia, nor the first time that a monograph has been dedicated to her. Through Albert de Mirimonde’s explorations of her iconography in 1974, Thomas Connolly’s 1994 discussion around Raphael’s 1515 altarpiece, and Nico Staiti’s reprise of the theme in 2002, to name just a few, the iconographical aspect and its literary sources have been at the center of academic publications.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, several articles have tackled other facets of her cult, and have been more case study-oriented, focusing for example on confraternities

under her patronage or the celebrations of Cecilia’s Day, or providing analyses of specific musical compositions in her honor. In recent years, a growing interest in musical iconography has rekindled the curiosity about Saint Cecilia, with Raphael’s altarpiece being revisited, focusing on the female commissioner and her emulation of the Roman saint in the 2020 monograph *Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy c. 1420–1540*, among others.<sup>2</sup>

John Rice’s book—the product, as the author himself confesses, of an early passion resurfacing after a long period of other intellectual pursuits—brings several new perspectives to a theme that has had its share of academic output. First, it proposes a different image to Raphael’s well-known *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*, underlining an alternative problematic to those adopted by previous scholars. Contrasting the Saint Cecilia of crushed earthly musical instruments, absorbed in the contemplation of angelic music, the book’s cover advances Michael Coxcie’s *St. Cecilia at the Virginal*, with the saint focused on playing music herself alongside a choir of angels. In fact, Rice highlights that the purpose of his book is “to complement Connolly’s, not to compete with it” (8), and indeed it succeeds in becoming a necessary companion piece to Connolly’s study.

Coxcie’s painting embodies the main argument of Rice’s analysis of Saint Cecilia, which follows “a process of cultural evolution that transformed her image into that of a musician and a patron of music” (2). Association by association, from the

text of the *Passio* describing her ignoring the music of the instruments during the wedding, to images depicting her next to the wedding musicians, then next to an organ, to her adoption as patron of musicians and the composition of polyphonic music in her honor, the resulting image of Cecilia as a musician playing an instrument herself, as represented by Coxcie, shows a strikingly different figure, which, taken separately from her religious context, could very well represent simply a woman making music. One of Rice's most important contributions is that of highlighting this very interesting change in the iconography of Saint Cecilia and deciding to explore exactly how and why that happened, approaching the subject from the perspective of cultural history.

*Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance* therefore also has the merit of bringing together in one book the diverse aspects of this topic which scholars have often approached separately. Rice delves into matters of art history, musicology, and history, offering his readers an impressive array of sources, from literary texts and documents to artworks and musical compositions, as well as a wide range of secondary literature. These make the monograph an indispensable source for all scholars interested in the figure of Saint Cecilia and an essential starting point for all those aiming to conduct future research in this direction, as it touches upon all the various aspects of artistic and devotional life in which Cecilia manifested herself. Rice's choice to focus on a large body of material, crossing disciplinary boundaries and spanning multiple centuries as well as several European territories, sometimes leaves us wanting to know more about certain intriguing case studies and their context than the author is able to tell us. However, the book therefore contains the

seeds for possible future research endeavors, of which more will be said later on.

Rice follows the process of Cecilia's transformation from its early stages, exploring in the first chapter of the book the manner in which the reference to the music at Cecilia's wedding, as presented in the fifth-century *Passio*, was picked up and interpreted in liturgical, literary, and artistic contexts. The antiphon "Cantantibus organis," the *Golden Legend* of Voragine, and the many visual representations which paralleled the textual sources, all highlighted the musical episode of the wedding, with very few exceptions. The musical connection was already in the making. Rice then takes a step further in the second chapter and discusses how Saint Cecilia was associated with the organ, which was adopted as her attribute for those occasions in which a more precise identification was needed, as in altarpieces in which she appeared alongside other female saints.

However, although the organ had become her emblem, Cecilia was not yet a musician. In the three chapters that follow, Rice focuses on what he proposes as the turning point in this metamorphic journey: the adoption of Saint Cecilia as patron saint of Franco-Flemish confraternities and guilds of musicians and singers. Chapter 3 looks at the celebrations of Cecilia's Day by these organizations, in which food and music played an important part, while Chapters 4 and 5 represent a detailed analysis of the Cecilian motets composed for the newly found patron of music. These significant changes in the veneration of Saint Cecilia were also accompanied by an iconographic change, which now represented the patron saint of musicians as a musician herself.

The last two chapters turn from Franco-Flemish territories to Italian ones. In

Chapter 6, Rice analyzes the interest in Saint Cecilia in Italy during the sixteenth century, showing that no Cecilian motets were composed before 1563, nor did any organizations seek her protection until 1585. Raphael's "anti-musician" iconography and its legacy, as well as a spread of Franco-Flemish ideas, are presented as the reasons for Cecilia's adoption as patron saint of musicians in Italy. Chapter 7 then reconstructs the consequences of Cardinal Sfondrato's rediscovery of the saint's body in Santa Cecilia in Trastevere (1599); the epilogue following the story further in time and space to the celebrations of Cecilia's Day in seventeenth-century England.

By arguing that the shift toward artworks depicting Saint Cecilia as a musician was connected to the Franco-Flemish organizations of musicians that adopted the saint as their patron and then influenced Italian developments as well, Rice proposes a very interesting link between the visual and the musical. But, at the same time, this narrow focus keeps him away from other possible connections. The devotional aspect, which cannot be severed from the analysis of this saintly figure, often remains unexplored, falling into the background in favor of the pleasure of music making. Devotion to Saint Cecilia was a particularly important aspect of the religious life of women at the time, as she offered an example to follow in their everyday lives. Rice does present several cases in which particular commissions are

related to women, but does not analyze the symbiotic relationship between Cecilia's iconography and female devotion. As images of Saint Cecilia were a hybrid product, we may also wonder whether representations of female musicians, just like those of Musica herself earlier on, might have played a role, alongside the confraternities of musicians, in this transformation of Cecilia into a musical icon.

*Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance: The Emergence of a Musical Icon* succeeds in considerably enriching our understanding of this fascinating saint and the intricate visual and musical connections surrounding her, while bringing together for scholars of all fields an impressive array of primary and secondary materials. In doing so, it does not exhaust the subject, but rather sparks more questions and more curiosities around several case studies: the breviaries produced in Bruges at the end of the fifteenth century for female patrons; the concentration of Cecilian imagery in the church of St. Columba in Cologne; or the particular devotion to Cecilia at the court of Charles V. John Rice's book leaves us, therefore, not only with answers but also with an invitation to revive our curiosity about this female saint who fled all earthly music only to become a musical icon herself.

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## NOTES

1 Albert de Mirimonde. *Sainte-Cécile: Métamorphoses d'un thème musical* (Geneva: Éditions Minkoff, 1974); Thomas Connolly. *Mourning into Joy: Music, Raphael, and Saint Cecilia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Nico Staiti. *Le metamorfosi di santa Cecilia: L'immagine e la musica* (Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2002).

2 Tim Shephard, Sanna Raninen, Serenella Sessini, and Laura Ștefănescu, *Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy c. 1420–1540* (London: Harvey Miller, 2020), 77–80.