

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Glixon, Jonathan E. Mirrors of Heaven or Worldly Theaters? Venetian Nunneries and Their Music

Roseen Giles

Volume 41, numéro 2, printemps 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085985ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29862>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Giles, R. (2018). Compte rendu de [Glixon, Jonathan E. Mirrors of Heaven or Worldly Theaters? Venetian Nunneries and Their Music]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(2), 184–187.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29862>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2018

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

éerudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

idiosyncratic, Gibbons's use of terminology in subsequent chapters comes across as clear, appropriate, and helpful.

Gibbons's *Conflicts of Devotion* is significant for offering a broad pattern of how to develop an argument about different poets in relation to a few particular liturgical texts, as well as for its specific insight into how five writers responded to the rhetorics of accommodation and exclusion in the Elizabethan Prayerbook. Gibbons's approach to the complexities of early modern religious identities and to the nuances of the poets' engagements with the religious controversies and subjects of their day is skilful, generous, and, in this reviewer's opinion, exemplary.

ANTON E. BERGSTROM

Wilfrid Laurier University

**Glixon, Jonathan E.**

*Mirrors of Heaven or Worldly Theaters? Venetian Nunneries and Their Music.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii, 451 + 9 plates, 1 fig., 26 music examples. ISBN 978-0-19-025912-9 (hardcover) US\$55.

The stories of the nuns of Venice are not easy ones to tell. There are few traces of these once thriving communities which, following the suspension of the nunneries in the late eighteenth century and the dissolution of the Venetian republic, were stripped bare, both physically and spiritually. But the daily lives of these women can reveal far more than a liturgical history of uneasy ecclesiastical reform; the nuns participated in civic and social dynamics that reflected the unique inner channels of *La Serenissima*: the virgin city. Venice's history is unlike that of any other Italian city. With an urban landscape essentially unaltered for centuries and a government in place for a millennium, the Venetians retained a remarkable consistency in their practices, even as they embraced a propensity to mythologize almost every aspect of civic and spiritual life. Jonathan Glixon's *Mirrors of Heaven or Worldly Theaters? Venetian Nunneries and Their Music* is a study in historical virtuosity; despite the tragic lack of documentation concerning the Venetian convents, the author has nevertheless succeeded in sketching a rich history for a virgin subject. Through extensive archival research and by his own characteristic astuteness, Glixon

reveals not only that the nuns of Venice were active participants in musical culture for centuries, but that the nunneries themselves were important spaces for performance and cultural exchange.

Like nearly every religious community, the Venetian convents had a somewhat colourful relationship with authority; the nuns' daily activities were either prized or censured by a complex and ever-changing web of civil, church, and public entities. In many cases, the particulars of the nuns' resistance to or acceptance of regulation reflect a singularly Venetian way of doing things. Some of the women came from wealthy or high-ranking patrician families who, as a result of Venice's hierarchical social structure and geographic limitations, were seldom able to allow more than one daughter to marry—the rest, regardless of their religious predilection, were destined for the nunnery. As Glixon convincingly argues, patrician families competed for prestige and distinction not only through their lavish palazzi and their male heirs, but also by subsidizing conspicuous displays of ceremony to honour their cloistered younger daughters, of which there might be several. The political dynamics of the nunneries, and especially the relative opulence or simplicity of their monacation ceremonies, are therefore closely bound to the idiosyncrasies of Venetian society. At the heart of Glixon's contribution is the idea that, unlike in most other Italian cities between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the nuns of Venice shaped the musical soundscape of the city not so much as performers but as patrons. The limited but compelling evidence suggests that the nuns routinely hired some of the leading male musicians of the city to give musical instruction to the women at various stages of their initiation, and to provide music for their public liturgies and entertainments—events that were famous for attracting not just Venice's elite but also visitors and foreign dignitaries.

No less important for Glixon's study is the way in which the book's structure reflects the geography and physical plan of a typical Venetian nunnery (13). The customs, rules, and regulations concerning the nuns' activities (musical or otherwise) were determined by the spaces in which they occurred: the external church frequented by the larger public and male priests, the semi-public parlors, the private cloister, and the various "porous grates" and thresholds that delineated these spaces. Following an introduction to the early history of Venice's nuns, the book begins with the public face of the Venetian nunneries: the liturgies and rituals conducted in the exterior church (chapter 2).

It continues with a detailed study of the daily offices of the nuns (chapters 4 and 5) and the semi-private musical activities in the church and parlor (chapter 6), then concludes with a fascinating discussion of the licit and illicit musical and theatrical entertainments held in the nunneries (chapter 7). The numerous and impressive appendices—including full transcriptions of relevant documents—testify to the wealth of archival evidence that Glixon has uncovered in support of his claims; these are invaluable both for reference and as an important step towards further research.

As a comprehensive study of Venice's nunneries (of which there were, at their height, 73), Glixon's book shows the tremendous variety in the demographics and priorities of these religious communities. While the wealthiest houses like San Zaccaria or Santa Caterina were known for lavish and controversial expenditures on music and decoration both for patronal feasts and monacation ceremonies (including the infamous *sagre*), the poorest convents, despite their financial constraints, also participated in the inevitable game of push-and-pull with church authorities. The nunneries were home to women from many walks of life: the patrician daughters who came to the convents willingly or unwillingly (the *monache forzate* in the case of the latter), the young apprentices destined for marriage or vocation (the *educande*), or the reformed prostitutes (the *convertite*). There are many questions regarding the musical activities of the Venetian nuns for which Glixon does not claim to have definitive answers; the relative participation of professional male musicians and the nuns themselves in music for clothing and profession ceremonies is unclear, nor is there absolute certainty regarding the way the nuns sang daily plainsong, whether it was accompanied or *a cappella*, metrical or unmetred, or troped with polyphony. Glixon sews together the remaining fragments to infer what the nuns' daily activities would likely have been, while being mindful that there are significant gaps in the documentation. Though the reader will find it frustrating that more detailed records were not kept of the "paradise of delights" and "heavenly music" heard and seen in Venice's nunneries, Glixon's remarkable findings show that the archives can sometimes provide pleasant surprises. As mentioned in chapters 2 and 4 (61–63, 138) there are, astonishingly, several documents that provide delightful details about the wine and pastries (*buzzoladi*) that the nuns were expected to give musicians

as payment for services rendered. It seems that the issue of refreshments following religious celebrations was, then as now, of the utmost importance.

ROSEEN GILES

Duke University

**González Tornel, Pablo.**

***Roma hispánica. Cultura festiva española en la capital del Barroco.***

Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispanica, 2017. Pp. 392 + 130 ill. ISBN 978-84-15245-58-2 (paperback) €33.66.

Pablo González Tornel's recent book joins a growing body of scholarship that brings together social history, art history, and material culture to evoke and define cultural and political contexts in the early modern period. Displaying the craft of an accomplished art historian, González Tornel evinces an eye for detail and recovers long neglected sources while providing his readers with an overarching narrative steeped in cultural history. Scholars who work on early modern Rome will be grateful for this intricate portrait of the city and the papal court and its ceremonies. It is a welcome addition to the work of Maria Antonietta Visceglia and Martine Boiteux; it also complements recent scholarship on the Spanish presence in Rome in the period, joining the ranks of works by scholars such as Thomas Dandeleet, Manuel Vaquero Piñeiro, Alessandra Anselmi, Diana Carrio Invernizzi, Máximo Barrio Gozalo, David García Cueto, and Piers Baker Bates.

The book treats its readers to a fascinating and well-documented overview of how the Spanish crown used festive culture, ephemeral art, ceremony, and its political weight to display its power and influence in the court of Rome and, from that vantage point, the world. Divided into six chapters, the book chronicles Spanish festive culture in Rome from its apogee in the seventeenth century to its decline in the nineteenth. Tellingly, the author situates the final curtain at the 1819 funeral for María Luisa of Parma, the mother of Fernando VII and exile in the Eternal City for some years. Throughout, he painstakingly chronicles multiple examples of the Spanish presence in the city—basing his work on abundant research in Italian and Spanish libraries, on primary sources in many cases understudied and unconsidered for centuries, as well as on