

**Barbara Strozzi's Feminine Influence on the Cantata  
in 17th-Century Venice  
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**Abstract**

In this paper, I will be discussing how Venetian composer Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677) achieved success in the seventeenth century through publication. She is recognized today as one of the earliest composers to write and publish cantatas in such high quantities, though her accomplishments were not met without difficulty. Attaining recognition in the male-dominated musical culture of the Baroque era was a massive undertaking for a woman and required Strozzi to manipulate resources granted to her by her father's social status. However, it was her own relentless ambition that ultimately propelled her to fame. As such, she paved the way for female composers and continues to inspire with her legacy. Analysis of her piece, *Lagrime mie* from *Diporti di Euterpe*, published in 1659, reveals a highly refined use of expressive techniques to convey the powers of song and sorrow. Her affinity for emotional expression combined with her sophisticated understanding of the human voice create a powerful yet sensitive tone in this piece. Given the physical evidence, Strozzi's success through publication is undeniable, though it was her bold pursuit for recognition that allowed her to break gender stereotypes, making her feats all the more impressive.

### **Introduction**

Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677) was both a highly praised composer and vocal performer of the seventeenth century. She made significant contributions to Venetian arias and ariettas but is most widely recognized as one of the earliest composers, male or female, to write cantatas in such high numbers (Timms). From 1644 to 1664, Strozzi published eight volumes of music containing over 100 works, with particular emphasis on the soprano voice. From the seventh collection, *Diporti di Euterpe* (“Euterpe’s Recreations”), also known as *Amusements of Euterpe* or *Cantatas and Ariettas for Solo Voice*, published in 1659, comes *Lagrima mie*, or *My tears* (Robin 347). Analysis of this piece reveals a highly cultivated understanding of expression that she explored through the subject of unrequited love, homing in on the power of both song and sorrow. Strozzi’s music as presented in this piece has the unique capacity to “shock the reader...with a raw evocation of emotion” (Beer 68-69). While her successes as both vocalist and composer are appropriately acknowledged today, one must consider that her gender, given the time and place, makes these feats all the more impressive. Not to mention, it was through her exploration of the secular cantata in a musical culture primarily dominated by opera that she achieved her success. She left a lasting impact on composers and musicians, particularly female, in the generations that followed, leaving her a distinguished legacy as “one of the first secular female composers in Western Europe” (Robin 346).

### **Strozzi’s childhood and privileged upbringing**

Strozzi’s success was inarguably catalyzed by her father, renowned poet and librettist Giulio Strozzi. He is recognized for having provided libretti (text for extended vocal works) for noteworthy figures like Claudio

Monteverdi and Francesco Cavalli, esteemed composers of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. Giulio began to cultivate Barbara's vocal talent when she was very young, arranging for her to study under Cavalli, who composed forty-one operas in his lifetime (Jezic 26). It appears, however, that Barbara never explored opera through composition or performance, which is peculiar given her relationship to Cavalli and her father's specialization in libretti for opera (Pendle 105). Having attained the title "virtuosissima cantatrice" [most virtuosic singer] by the age of 17, it is certain that she had the proper training and vocal agility to succeed in a genre as demanding as opera (Rosand 242).

Strozzi was exposed to intellectual elites primarily through her father's Accademia degli Unisoni (Academy of the Like-Minded), which was created as a subset of the Accademia degli Incogniti (Academy of the Unknowns) (Pendle 106). Until this point, Strozzi had primarily performed and studied in private, as was typical for female musicians in the Baroque era. As her skills became more advanced, however, her father sought to create an appropriate environment in which to share her talent.

It appears that Giulio Strozzi had a progressive view of women and their societal role in general. During the sixteenth century, women were expected to be proficient in instrumental and vocal music, though they were discouraged from performing in the presence of others (with the exception of nuns and those born to professional musical families) (Pappano). By the following century, it was much more common for women to perform and compose, though to become a *published* female composer was less likely. Giulio's "forward-thinking" stance on women and his efforts to further his daughter's success likely played a part in her bold pursuit

of compositional fame. It should be noted early on, however, that without Barbara's own spirit and wit, she may have never reached such great heights, even with her father's support.

In 1637, Giulio "designed at least in part, to exhibit her talents to a wider audience," the Accademia degli Unisoni—a unique group of male intellectuals who gathered to discuss relevant topics (Rosand 244). The members of the academy were important figures in Venice, including distinguished writers, poets, and philosophers (Jezic). Discussions usually focused on politics, academic and social discourse, history, philosophy, poetry and literature. Strozzi's access to the academy granted her significant exposure when her presence was permitted (Rosand 245). Music was often a point of reference during these meetings, or was simply a form of entertainment. In these cases, musicians like Strozzi were invited to perform, though this opportunity was still a great honor. Women were not usually permitted into the academy, but given her father's status, exceptions were made for her.

It also should be mentioned that her impressive vocal talent and intellectual contributions helped her gain respect among the members, which certainly contributed to the events that followed. Eventually, she became a respected source of insight and wisdom, though she never became an official member of the academy (Rosand 242). While this was an important stepping stone for Strozzi and a comparatively large feat for a woman, it still limited her to a very small group of people in the public sphere (Jezic). Her biggest outreach by far was accomplished through the mass publication of her compositions.

Since her childhood was handled by her father in what appears to be a highly structured manner, Strozzi's upbringing afforded her the resources that ultimately led to her success. It was due to his "high stature among the Venetian intellectual elite that assured Barbara connections and opportunities for patronage" (Robin 346). This gave Strozzi an edge over her female peers, who had a significantly harder time making the same headway.

During Strozzi's time with the academy, she was busy composing her own works. She was aware of the strides she had already made, but was not nearly finished. She was determined to take the next step and publish her works despite her "feminine weaknesses" (Rosand 256). Strozzi knew that she could take advantage of her father's connections and resources and began to perform her own compositions in the academy. This is perhaps why the genre in which she composed was so limited, because the pieces needed to suit the "elite in a seventeenth-century Venetian drawing room" (Jezic). This is also arguably why so many of her pieces are well suited for the soprano voice: she was composing them for herself to sing. These opportunities, though slightly manipulated, allowed her to move towards a professional career as a published composer, about which there were few female success stories at the time.

#### **Strozzi's forge into new territory: publication**

In Strozzi's early works, such as opuses one through three, Giulio Strozzi provided the libretti for Barbara's compositions as a tool for enhancing their worth in the realm of music publishing. With his name on them, the compositions were likelier to be appreciated. However, this deal did not last long and seemed to have little to no effect on the outcome of Strozzi's success in publishing.

She quickly developed her own style of expression by utilizing text with topics centering around love and sorrow from other poets. The seven collections composed from 1651 to 1664, of which three used Giulio's text before his death in 1652, "went far beyond the achievements of her opus 1" (Beer 65). These compositions were more vocally challenging, impressive in their virtuosity, and highly dramatic, illustrating Strozzi's "ever-growing ambition" (Beer 65).

Most of Strozzi's surviving works are ariettas, arias and cantatas for solo voice (mainly soprano) and continuo (Glixon). While she was afforded significant opportunity for exposure, she was still limited to smaller works, unable to make strides in the realm of opera (though it is unclear if she ever tried). Strozzi was a notable contributor to the cantata, a comparatively neglected genre at the time in which poetic texts and lyric monologues are explored (Timms). The cantata in particular was seen in Italian vocal chamber music from the early seventeenth-late eighteenth centuries, but was largely outshined by Venetian opera (Timms). Over time, the parameters of the seventeenth-century cantata changed, ranging from strophic arias of pre-1620s Venice to the secular cantata of the mid-1600s that were divided into sections. Characteristically, Strozzi's works consisted of a type of refrain, sections of recitative, arioso, and aria, and long melismatic sections with repetition, which makes sense for the time of their conception relative to the evolution of the cantata. All of these traits were especially well suited for the lyric soprano. Strozzi took advantage of her own success as a vocalist by featuring the soprano voice in her work, though she did "[experiment] with musical forms" (Robin 347). This allowed her to perform her own compositions within the academy and other elite groups where her

talent was sought after, granting her works a higher rate of success. The long, melismatic passages in the upper register also lent themselves to the highly emotional themes that Strozzi was exploring.

In general, Strozzi was a proponent of *seconda prattica*, in which the devotion to expressive text took precedence over other contrapuntal standards, as displayed in Strozzi's work by "her faithful adherence to her texts" (Rosand 273). The term *seconda prattica* or "second practice" was developed by Monteverdi in the late 1500s in response to criticisms of the rigid standards of *prima prattica* or "first practice," in which the full potential of the text could not be realized due to the restrictions of traditional contrapuntal rules. "Second practice" is usually homophonic secular music.

#### **Origins of the lament**

One piece that falls into this category comes from Barbara Strozzi's Opus 7, *Diporti di Euterpe* or *Pleasures of Euterpe*. Among the collection, the secular cantata, *Lagrime mie*, borrows text from the Venetian nobleman Pietro Dolfin. It tells the story of a man lamenting his lover, Lidia, who has been imprisoned by her father. The text informs of the main figure's unrelenting anguish, which prevents his tears from flowing as he repeatedly asks, "My tears, why do you hold back?" These rhetorical questions are followed by recollections of his beloved Lidia, and he begs for death if he cannot have her. This piece epitomizes Strozzi's fascination with the power of emotion through song by using an evocative poem combined with expressive techniques. It also hints at the prominence of the Italian dramatic lament in the seventeenth century. The lament, meaning "a passionate expression of grief and sorrow" as defined by Oxford University Press Dictionaries, was quite a popular genre

in seventeenth-century Italy. It was frequently explored through poetry and song (Pappano). Whereas Strozzi was near obsessed with exploring anguish and suffering in her work, she was not alone in this pursuit, following in the footsteps of great composers such as Peri, Monteverdi, Caccini and others.

Many of these notable composers emulated ancient Greek and Roman ideals, particularly those of Aristotle. His theory of catharsis, “the purification of the emotions through art,” later emerged in the Italian lament of the seventeenth century (Pappano). Art’s role was then to move its audience in some extreme emotional way, either to pity or to sorrow (Pappano). An especially popular character of the Italian lament was the “madwoman,” who may have been wronged in love and sings of her fate. These moments in the plot are often accentuated by dissonant harmonies (Pappano). This craft can be referred to as text painting, a common feature of “second practice” in which musical techniques are used to enhance the meaning of the text, sometimes at the expense of traditional musical standards. *Lagrima mie* is full of examples of this.

#### **Mastery in practice**

At the beginning of *Lagrima mie*, “the singer lets rip an astonishingly doleful wail, from the very top of her vocal register, falling down and down, over a stationary harmony” (Beer 68). The tone is evident immediately, with this drawn-out chromatic phrase down the scale on the word “lagrime” (tears), including trills that suggest the falling of tears.



**Figure 1.**

After this opening, the music shifts to a slightly faster tempo, as the translation follows with “why do you hold back?” This entire phrase repeats towards the middle of the piece, with the same emotional intensity and stylistic traits.

As discussed earlier, Strozzi was lucky to have been granted access to great intellectual minds of the seventeenth century through her father’s academy. Although she was not an official member, she was still encouraged to participate in meaningful discussion. It could be argued, then, that one such debate that “concerned whether tears or song be the more potent weapon in love” inspired the fusion of the two in this piece (Rosand 245). Strozzi’s opinion resonated in this argument when the decision was made that song was clearly the most effective. In response to this, Strozzi said “I do not question your decision, gentlemen, in favor of song; for well I know that I would not have received the honor of your presence at our last session had I invited you to see me cry and not to hear me sing” (Rosand 279). Despite her mature and witty response to this debate, Strozzi still “borrow[s] the power of tears” to strengthen her music’s potency (Rosand 279). She believed she could accomplish something magnificent in *Lagrime mie* by combining the powers of song and sorrow, which are so

persuasive individually. These emotions were a source of inspiration in many of her works.

Although the emotional intensity of the poetry can stand alone, the content is heightened by Strozzi's use of expressive techniques. As is typical of second practice, Strozzi uses text painting to emphasize emotion, creating an intensity that is not exclusive to the words, but seen in the use of bold techniques, like chromaticism, syncopation, and leaps in the melody. The speech-like declamation and homophonic texture throughout the piece elucidate the text's meaning and encourages text painting; for example, the "scalar descent representing downward-flowing tears" (OAWM 321). On negative words like "suffering," "harsh," and "torment," Strozzi uses unsettling harmonies to create a pained listening experience. She cleverly inserts an eighth rest into the middle of the word "respiro," or breath, to stress the meaning of the line, "wash away the pain that takes my breath."



Figure 2.

She conveys “the superior pnce of the naked human instrument” through a series of melismatic passages,

much like the one featured in the opening phrase (Rosand 274).

### **Performance practice**

Achieving a historically informed performance of this piece requires an understanding of Baroque period music (1600-1750s) in combination with textual evidence left for its performers in written scores. The musical score, or the physical document on which the music is notated, reveals information to be interpreted by the performer. The amount of information provided varies depending on the time period. During the Baroque era, the performer's interpretation was deemed as important as the written score, if not more so. The result is a relatively sparse notation of musical practice or nuanced techniques, with little indication of dynamics, tempo, and articulation, leaving a significant amount of creative freedom to the performer (Cyr 23).

While the performer's interpretation of Baroque music results in numerous versions of one piece of music, a few traits remain constant as evidenced by *Lagrime mie*. These qualities include the text's significance as an expressive tool and the use of basso continuo, a form of accompaniment that provides "a foundation or harmonic support" with a prominent bassline and improvised upper harmonies (Cyr 24). The basso continuo can be played by a number of instruments, sometimes indicated in the score but frequently chosen by the performer. Instruments that might be appropriate for the time period are the harpsichord, organ, lute, harp, and viola da gamba (Cyr 24). All of these instruments are capable of providing a strong bassline, which is notated in the score, and improvised chords, which are not notated. Many of these instruments also have modern counterparts, such as the harpsichord, whose keyboard is similar to that of a

piano, or viola da gamba, a moderately sized string instrument that can be plucked or bowed, like the cello. Modern performances of *Lagrima mie* are, as expected, varied in their instrumental accompaniment, though they maintain a distinctly expressive quality. The sparseness of the notation indicates how crucial the performer's interpretation was in conveying the music's meaning. This is particularly relevant to Strozzi, who performed her own pieces and took advantages of opportunities for heightened emotional expression in *Lagrima mie*'s text painting.

### **Strozzi's Legacy**

This piece in particular is a perfect representation of Strozzi's heroic impact. It encompasses everything she stood for, from her ambitious pursuit for success to her affinity for emotional expression. It represents the wisdom and experience she accumulated while performing in the academy, as well as her understanding of the soprano voice, which she displayed in her performances and compositions. While she made significant contributions to the genre of the cantata, especially to the topic of unrequited love, her greatest achievement is arguably the "precedent [she set] for women's careers as published composers" (Rosand 266). She indeed was aided by her father's connections, but her talent was a huge asset to her success. Nevertheless, she managed to create a highly individualized niche for herself in a time when breaking out of the operatic mold was difficult, countering every threat to her progress with relentless determination. *Lagrima mie* epitomizes all of these factors, including Strozzi's grasp of the cantata, the soprano voice, *seconda prattica*, and secular music. Although there were many female musicians at the time, few were able to achieve to the same extent as Strozzi,

making her one of the first women to gain such success in seventeenth-century Venice.

Strozzi may have died nearly 350 years ago, but her legacy certainly has not. She is an inspiration for women battling for equal representation in male dominated fields – an issue that transcends music. Certainly, evidence supports the technicality of her success in the sheer number of her published compositions. More heartening, however, is the fortitude with which she achieved her success and the example she boldly set for women cross-generationally, from the seventeenth century to today.

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