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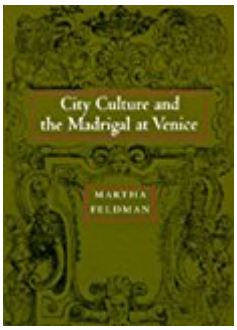
Martha Feldman. *City Culture and the Madrigal at Venice.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995. xxxi + 473 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-08314-1.



Reviewed by David Schoenbaum

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Measured by where it had been, and where it was going, Venice on the threshold of the sixteenth century was already on the slippery slope. Yet, as Martha Feldman's book is keen to explain, even its madrigal culture tells us how relative, even creative, the long slide could be. The city remained a great place to visit, and a remarkable place to live. It was also home to a cultural scene that should still make us think, and might even make us envious, nearly five hundred years later.

Among the city's distinguishing features were lots of money, adventurous tastes, a mobile, dynamic and minimally hierarchical society, a passion for Petrarch, and a critical mass of talent and role models that included Adrian Willaert, chapelmaster of San Marco, and the most admired composer of his day. There was also a bull market in the arts, plus a flair for conspicuous consumption, in both the public and the private sectors.

In such a place at such a time, as Feldman notes in her preface, even threshold anxiety could be a comparative advantage. Increasingly unsure who they were, Venetians devoted more and more of their energy, cash, and imagination to cultivating their collective image. Paradox again, they also had no problem attracting and hiring outsiders like the Dutch-born Willaert to help.

In public, Venice declared itself a community of sober-sided republicans, while indulging a growing weakness for civic self-display. In private, it became a happy hunting ground for entrepreneurial music publishers, uncommonly versatile courtesans, and church organists on the make.

Jacopo Sansovino's heavily muscled statues of Mercury and Neptune at the head of the Giant's Staircase of the Palazzo Ducale are just one set of the visible results in a cityscape that still captures the imagination as do few other places on earth. But Vivaldi's "Seasons," long familiar even to those left listening to it on "hold" while waiting for airline information, is proof that there were audible results too.

What distinguished the madrigal, and understandably fascinates Feldman, is the compost heap of money and power, taste and style, high and popular culture that allowed it to grow and flourish. A unique conjunction of Italian words and Flemish polyphony, it could be sung by ama-

teurs and professionals, men and women, with or without instrumental accompaniment, in private or in public.

It was a natural vehicle for the sublime and the virtuous. But it was equally congenial to the raunchy and ironic. Depending on taste and occasion, it could even accommodate several messages at once. For practical examples, Feldman cites a bawdy Neapolitan dialect song tucked discreetly away in a tenor line and a verbal bouquet to the singer, served up in the lyrics as a pun on her name. Yet it was also an El Dorado for theorizers, whose cogitations on rhetoric, harmony, counterpoint, and the rank-order of vowels only a Doktorvater could love.

Perhaps most impressive is the way Feldman connects the history of the madrigal to one of the great breakthroughs in information technology. On the one hand, the invention of printing made madrigals commodities. On the other, the considerable costs of publication made subsidies a necessity. The same conjunction of market and technology thereby made songbooks hot properties, but also monuments to patrons willing to pay top *scudo* to be remembered on the title page. Unsurprisingly, the need for, and pursuit of, patronage assured that dedications too became an art form only a little less artful than the madrigals themselves.

It is fun to imagine what Feldman's poets, composers, publishers, patrons, and courtesans might think of her monograph, were they still around to read it. Itself heavily subsidized, and replete with the references to "cultural heteroglossia," "dialogic genres," "multivocal plurality," et al., that help make American cultural studies what they are today, her product is as typical of her world and our times as the madrigals she writes about were representative of sixteenth-century Venice.

Yet for all her concern for the little picture, there is a big picture too for the reader willing to look for it. From the *Biedermeier* glories of Schubert, the frontier virtues of Stephen Foster, the birth of the blues, and the urban masterpieces of the Gershwin brothers and Cole Porter, the critical mass she writes about has generated successor generations of words and music from the Piazza San Marco of Willaert's day to the MTV of our own.

Among current heirs to the *barzelette*, *canzoni villanesche*, and madrigals on Feldman's mind are Hootie and the Blowfish, Soundgarden, and the Velvet Underground. None of us can tell whether there will still be assistant professors, university presses, not to mention tenure, as we know them today in another five hundred years. But if there are, it should be very interesting to see how the Martha Feldmans of the late twenty-fifth century deal with Snoop Doggy Dogg, Smashing Pumpkins, and the artist formerly known as Prince.

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