



## Cappella Artemisia

Saturday, November 17, 2012 | 8 PM

Convocation Hall | University of Alberta

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*“Nearly all the nunneries practice music, both playing numerous sorts of musical instruments, and singing. And in some convents there are such rare voices that they seem angelic, and like sirens entice the nobility of Milan to go and hear them.” (1595)*

Descriptions like this provide images of a fabulous musical world inhabited by women — singers, players and even composers. And yet draconian restrictions governed virtually every aspect of these women's lives, and especially on their music. Moreover, a veil of mystery surrounds this repertoire: the music written for and by these cloistered nuns often includes parts for tenors and basses. How was this music performed? This concert will attempt to provide some answers to this fascinating question.

Convent life represented virtually the only honourable choice for women outside of marriage, and many young Italian girls inhabited the monasteries. Music was practiced there every day, for it literally represented their voice in the outside world, and its excellent quality drew hoards of listeners from throughout Europe.

Church authorities took a dim view of these blasphemous “tourist attractions”, considering music to be one of the most impelling dangers to the spiritual well-being of the nuns. Rules strictly limited or even prohibited certain types of music, the use of most musical instruments, and instruction by outside music teachers. Yet an enormous wealth of music was either dedicated to, written by, or referred to nuns.

The nuns resorted to various solutions to supplant the absence of men's voices. Despite all official restrictions, musical instruments were widely used in the convents (including the trombone), to play the bass lines. Singers are also described with "singular and amazing" bass voices, and bass and tenor lines or even entire pieces could be transposed upward to fit a woman's vocal range.

In Milan, the convent most renowned for its music was undoubtedly Santa Radegonda, home to Chiara Margarita Cozzolani. She, like other composers in and out of the convent, set many of her pieces to verse from the *Song of Songs*, which despite being biblical, were considered to "racy" for some church authorities.

The most prolific of all women composers in the 17th century was the Ursuline nun Isabella Leonarda, who published more than 100 works. It is interesting to note that the Ursulines were the only nuns who did not have to be cloistered. Who knows if their relative freedom allowed them more artistic freedom as well?

Finally, in Bologna, many composers dedicated their works to the nuns of Santa Cristina, which was also home to the only nun there to have published her music: Donna Lucretia Orsina Vizzana. The nuns of this convent openly rebelled against the rules restricting their music, but were finally forced to surrender under pain of excommunication. Tragically, Vizzana herself went mad, and died after 65 years in the convent.