

Institution: University of Southampton		
Unit of Assessment: 33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: 33-02 Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens: Reclaiming Renaissance Polyphony for Female Voices		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 – 2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Laurie Stras	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Music	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: January 1994 – July 2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor Laurie Stras's research has changed the public narrative of music history by uncovering new evidence of female music-making, establishing a repertory of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century polyphony for female-voice ensembles, identifying a new female composer, and proposing a new date for the earliest published compositions by a woman. Through practice-based research with her ensembles, Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens, and disseminating results through concerts, recordings, scores, and workshops, Stras has had a worldwide impact on public perception of historic women as musicians. Her research has encouraged amateur, institutional, and professional female groups in Australasia, Africa, South and North America, and Europe to participate in repertoire hitherto reserved for male- and mixed-voice ensembles. Her BBC Radio 3 <i>Composer of the Week</i> series (quarterly listening figures 1.9m) and award-winning recording <i>Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter</i> (no. 2 in UK Classical Charts, and no 24 in US Billboard Classical charts) are evidence of the profile of her impact.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research underpinning the impact was all carried out by Laurie Stras: practice-based research in collaboration with her ensembles Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens. While there is a community of scholars working on early modern convents and convents music, Stras is only one to work directly as an editor, director, and performer as well as publishing in the top academic journals and presses.</p> <p>The key insights/findings of the musicological research relate to convent music in sixteenth-century Italy. They establish a female composer hitherto unknown to historians, Suor Leonora d'Este, daughter of Lucrezia Borgia and Duke Alfonso I of Ferrara; Stras asserts that she is the earliest published female composer (1543), although the pieces are published anonymously and authorship established only through analysis and detailed historical contextualisation [3.3, 3.4, 3.6]. The contextual research for this central finding reveals new evidence of performance practice in 16th-century Italian convents and a significant new body of works associated with convent performance, including complex polyphony and Sistine Chapel repertoire [3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 3.7], demonstrating further how convent music-making was an important element of sixteenth-century culture [3.1-3.4]. Revising previous narratives of an isolated flowering of female music making in late-century courts, Stras shows that convent music-making paved the way for secular women's music-making [3.2]: moreover, techniques hypothesized by Stras in practice-based research published in 2002 are proven to be valid by archival research done a decade later [3.4, 3.5].</p> <p>The research draws on a range of methodologies, including: archival research conducted 1996-2017, in Ferrara, Mantua, Florence, Modena, and published in 2017/2018 [3.1-3.4]; interdisciplinary historical and literary contextual research, from primary and secondary sources, encompassing political, religious, social, and literary history [3.1-3.4]; music analysis – based on contemporaneous music theory, contextualisation in musical repertoire [3.1-3.4]; literary analysis – contextualisation in contemporary sources (inc. liturgical, devotional) [3.1-3.4]. The practice-based research conducted with Musica Secreta (2000-2017) involved a range of individual and collaborative ("performance-editing") activities to understand how women, especially nuns,</p>		

performed polyphony [3.2, 3.6, 3.7]: transcription; editing by correcting clear errors, making decisions about ambiguous passages and text underlay, ornamentation planning or composition; rehearsal to consider issues of vocal timbre, balance, instrumentation, phrasing; revision of editions; rehearsal of some pieces with larger group, to test if decisions still hold; final performance.

3. References to the research

3.1 Stras, 'The *Ricreatione per monache* of Suor Annalena Aldobrandini'. *Renaissance Studies* 26 (2012): 34-59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.2011.00789.x>

3.2 Stras, 'Voci pari motets and convent polyphony in the 1540s: the *materna lingua* complex'. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70/3 (2017): 617-696. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2017.70.3.617>

3.3 Stras, 'The performance of early sixteenth-century polyphony in Italian convents'. *Early Music* 45/2 (2017): 195–215. <https://doi.org/10.1093/em/cax023>

3.4 Stras, *Women and Music in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Available on request.

Quality indicators: Otto Kinkeldey Award, American Musicological Society 2019; American Association of Publishers PROSE Awards, 2019: Finalist; Society for the Study of Early Modern Women Award, 2019: Honorable Mention.

3.5 *Dangerous Graces: Music by Cipriano de Rore and his pupils*. Musica Secreta. Dir. Laurie Stras and Deborah Roberts. Linn Records, CKD169, 2002. Available on request.

Quality indicators: *Diapason*, Diapason Découverte, 2002; AHRC Major Research Grant, £90,000, 1999.

3.6 *Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter: Princess, Nun, Musician*. Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens. Dir. Laurie Stras and Deborah Roberts. Obsidian CD717, 2017. Listed in REF2.

Quality indicators: NCCPE Engage Awards, Best Individually-Led Project (GBP1,000), 2014; Arts Council England (GBP7,000), 2015; Crowdfunding appeal (GBP4,000), 2015; Award, Ambache Charitable Trust (GBP3,000), 2016; Noah Greenberg Award, American Musicological Society (USD2,000), 2016; *Gramophone*, Critic's Choice, 2017

3.7 *From Darkness Into Light: The complete Lamentations of Jeremiah for Good Friday*, Musica Secreta. Dir. Laurie Stras and Deborah Roberts. Obsidian CD719, 2019. Available on request.

Quality indicators: Arts Council England (GBP13,000), 2019; Golsoncott Foundation (GBP500), 2019; *Gramophone*, Shortlisted Gramophone Awards, 2020.

4. Details of the impact

Tom Service, Guardian music critic and BBC broadcaster, introduced Stras as an academic and musician "whose work on the cultures of female composers of earlier centuries has given new life to repertoires that the patriarchies of posterity have otherwise forgotten," *Music Matters*, 15 December 2018 [5.1]. Stras's primary findings – evidence of female composition, ownership, and performance of Renaissance sacred polyphony, and an extensive repertoire of works for equal voices made accessible through practice-based research and dissemination – have permanently changed the public landscape of early music history and performance practice. Helen Wallace, artistic director of the central London venue, King's Place, publicly acknowledged Stras's input into her 2019 year-long series of music by women composers, *Venus Unwrapped*, both at the opening reception and by tweeting, "I can never finish thanking you for your work, your inspiration and your quiet truthfulness. You do change the world" (27 April 2019, after the King's Place study day, "The Complete Guide to the History of Women Composers") [5.7].

The two strands of research and output, historical and practical, of Stras's research have had separate but overlapping spheres of impact on a range of beneficiaries, individual and institutional. Impacts also range from personal benefit (economic, social) to broader social and cultural benefits as a result of new knowledge and perspective. Professional musicians have derived new and audience-attractive programming with new performance demands, therefore developing new skills, and the music-loving public have gained appreciation of insight and new knowledge through broadcast programmes. Economic benefit has derived to musicians (concert fees, royalties, scores); record companies (CD sales). Amateur singers have enjoyed the

experience of participating in performance research, and feelings of well-being and self-esteem; other creatives.

The identification of Suor Leonora d'Este as the earliest published female composer has caught the imagination of public curators of cultural knowledge in the UK, Europe, USA, and Australia. Broadcast programmers have incorporated Musica Secreta's recording into their playlists as well as formulating features on Suor Leonora for online and on-air distribution [5.1]. Printed and online media have commissioned articles on Stras and her work [5.3]: notable among these are those appearing in popular religious media, reassessing the position of nuns in religious culture, including features by Michael White of the *New York Times* (for the *Catholic Herald*: "The unwrapping [referring to *Venus Unwrapped*] that Stras has been engaged in is already quite remarkable.") and Joanna Moorhead of the *Telegraph* (for the *Tablet*: "time is running out for the chance to restore this ancient music to its original setting. And it really matters. ... the talented nuns of old can have a powerful influence on the women musicians of today and on generations to come, reshaping their heritage for an affirmed and recognised future").

Professional and amateur musicians around the world have included d'Este's compositions into their concert and recording repertoire (the most high-profile of these being the Monteverdi Choir and Stile Antico) [5.2]. Stras has made scores available from the Musica Secreta website, both free (an assortment of scores prepared for Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens – 583 downloads) and for sale (the performance editions for *Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter* – 58 orders) [5.8]. These scores have been downloaded and purchased by amateur and professional choirs in North and South America, Africa, Europe, Australia, and are beginning to be assimilated back into liturgical use, via the choirs of, e.g. St Paul's Cathedral and Selwyn College, Cambridge [5.2].

The direct economic benefit of Stras's research to other artists can be measured first by the annual turnover of Musica Secreta, which has risen from GBP5,000 in 2017/18 to GBP18,000 to date in 2019/20 (income derived from sales of CDs and scores, grants, and performance fees) [5.8]. Musica Secreta is also now a Charitable Incorporated Association: the Charities Commission are convinced that the ensemble's work creates a public benefit sufficient to warrant the financial benefits of charitable status [5.9]. Sales of CDs and scores are classed as "primary trading," in as much as they support the CIO's charitable objects of "advanc[ing] education, for the public benefit, in the knowledge and appreciation of music primarily but not exclusively for female voices." Direct economic benefit is also derived by Obsidian Records, who take a 90% share of worldwide sales and streaming royalties on CD717: to August 2018, sales include 1,444 physical and 450 downloaded albums, 5,322 downloaded tracks, and 120,062 streaming and digital broadcasts.

Stras's research has continued to inspire other creatives [5.4]: for example, scenes in Sarah Dunant's 2017 novel *In the Name of the Family* (*Times* Best Historical Fiction Book of the Year; *Cosmopolitan* Best Book of the Year; *History Today* Book of the Year), about the Borgia family, are informed by the matter in the first chapter of Stras's monograph (2018). Dunant gives Stras credit for helping her shape the cultural atmosphere of the Ferrarese court. Dunant and Musica Secreta collaborated in a presentation to commemorate the unveiling of a newly restored painting by a sixteenth-century Florentine nun, Plautilla Nelli. The event was commissioned by the Advancing Women Artists Foundation and took place in the Museo di San Salvi in Florence, with approx. 250 invited guests, including the US Consul General. AWA also included a feature on Musica Secreta in its October 2018 magazine, which is distributed in hard copy and freely online to its followers worldwide (11,000 on Facebook; 5,000 on Instagram), and a report on the event in the April 2019 issue ("accomplished musicianship... a satisfying complement to Nelli's expressive art").

The importance of Stras's research for the re-imagining of early modern culture, from both aesthetic and religious standpoints, has been recognised by her participation in specialist and interdisciplinary fora, such as her series for BBC Radio 3's *Composer of the Week* (broadcast 2017; repeated 2018); and BBC Radio 4's *Start the Week* on faith and doubt (Easter 2018): The Radio 3 forum had high praise for the former ("All a bit superlative this thread, but rightly so. I thought this week's CotW was absolutely brilliant, and I really loved the

performances of all the music played;" "All five programmes have represented R3 - and the BBC - at its very considerable best." Social media reaction to the latter included, "That was one of the best STW I have heard in ages," "#StartTheWeek an absolute joy this morning. @amolrajanBBC presided over lovely natural conversation." [5.2]

The practical development and dissemination of Stras's research through Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens has been achieved through a collective effort that shows economic and emotional investment of participants and backers. Initially, practical research was undertaken with Arts Council England funding, which allowed for meticulous preparation and rehearsal, together with workshops for secondary-school-age participants in the Brighton Youth Choir, which culminated in a concert with all three groups in October 2015. The recording *Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter* was partially financed through a crowdfunding appeal, which attracted over 100 backers in the six weeks before Christmas 2015, raising more than GBP4,000. The project attracted further funding from the Ambache Charitable Trust, which supports performance and recording of music by female composers, and the Noah Greenberg Award from the American Musicological Society, which honours excellence in projects that bring together musicologists and performers. The recording in 2016 took place in a convent chapel, with both professional and amateur musicians, ages ranging from 18 (recruited from the Brighton Youth Choir) to 67. A survey after the recording asked participants about their involvement, what impact they felt the project had had on them, and what impact they felt it would have on audiences [5.5]. One responded, "I have a moderate hearing loss which started in my 30s and I remember well getting back to singing in a choir in 2004 not knowing if I would be capable of doing it with hearing aids. Therefore, taking part in projects like this where I am singing such wonderful polyphony with skilled singers is very special for me personally." Another said, "Nothing has been heard like this before. It will divide [audiences], I think, but that is all for the good as it will make them think. And it will stay with them forever."

The recording was reviewed widely in the UK, Europe, USA, and Australia, and garnered many plaudits from both general and specialist publications ("Stras explains that they adopted approaches that reflect the realities of convent performance... This variety not only makes musical/historical sense, but it enhances and enriches the listening experience... Highly recommended"; *Classics Today*). It was also widely shared on social media, particularly the *Guardian* blog, which was shared over 23,000 times directly from the *Guardian* website. It was in the Official Classical Charts Top 20 for over six weeks (highest position, No. 2), and reached No. 24 on the Billboard Classical Charts in the USA; it also received a Gramophone Critic's Choice award for 2017 [5.6].

Stras has also disseminated her research through concerts, workshops and courses for female singers/musicians in the UK and Europe, with participants from North America, UK, Europe, and Australasia [5.7]. All workshops included an informal lecture from Stras as well as musical coaching. Workshops typically had an attendance of 12 to 24 singers, and were held over a weekend or a full week. Participants had the opportunity to engage with both the process and outcomes of research: in 2017, singers on a week-long course in Triora (Italy) worked through the first stages of performance-editing an anonymous mass from a 16th-century convent manuscript; on a weekend course in Cambridge 2019, participants experimented with singing around a choirbook stand. 100% of feedback responses said they would attend another workshop; free form responses include appreciation for the scholarly historical context, "Thanks so much for opening our eyes to the cultural/emotional background to this wonderful music," the active research element, "It was wonderful to be a 'lab rat' and to learn so much new music as well as so much about its context and its technical importance"; and express the continued need for this type of event, "Women outnumber men in almost every mixed choir but there are few opportunities for them to perform polyphony ... together in women only groups. More opportunities please!"

Postgraduate bursaries allowed four young North American women to attend the 2019 course in Triora, two of whom direct their own female-voice ensembles, Sub Rosa (Toronto) and the Korrigan Consort (Oxford). The mentorship they received has resulted in a collaboration between the two directors, the first iteration of which will take the Korrigan Consort to the Tolosa

Choral Contest in northern Spain in November 2019. The Korrigan Consort are also sponsoring the composition of an opera based on stories found in Stras's monograph.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact**5.1** Music Broadcaster Links**5.2** Use of Stras's research by other musicians (sample)**5.3** Online media features**5.4** Work with creative industries**5.5** Material related to *Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter* development**5.6** *Lucrezia Borgia's Daughter* reviews and social media**5.7** Workshop dissemination and feedback**5.8** d'Este compositions - Downloads and orders**5.9** Musica Secreta financial reports, charity status and Obsidian royalties