

Institution: University of Southampton
Unit of Assessment: 35 Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
Title of case study: 35-01 Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The University of Southampton's Dr Laurie Stras co-directs the ensemble Musica Secreta and its amateur choir, Celestial Sirens. Stras's research informs their performances, specialising in music associated with women in Renaissance courts and convents. Through her collaboration with author Sarah Dunant, Stras's activities have had an international impact on artists and non-academic audiences. Perceptions of women in Renaissance musical culture have been profoundly changed for a broad constituency, and the performance practice of early music groups (professional and amateur) has altered as a result of Stras's work. Amateur choir members and workshop participants express long-term personal benefits ranging from intellectual satisfaction to positive feelings related to community and wellbeing.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>In her research, Stras (Senior Lecturer in Music; at Southampton since 1994) aims to rehabilitate women's musical creativity into the stories told about music of the past, specifically in repertoires in which women's participation has been questioned in terms of its appropriateness or aesthetic value [3.1-6].</p> <p>There is an enduring perception among many early music scholars, performers and audiences that most vocal music (particularly sacred polyphony) written before 1600 was intended for all-male performance, with a corollary that women singers' participation in early music performance today is at best a compromise. Stras's research has successfully contested these perceptions by providing evidence for widespread adaptive performance practices that allowed female ensembles to sing repertoire that is ostensibly unperformable without male voices. Practical investigation is essential to the historical research; moreover, without demonstration in the marketplace, the dominant narratives holding sway over promoter and audience attitudes are difficult to shift.</p> <p>In 1999, after a successful pilot project [3.1, 3.7], Stras and Musica Secreta were awarded an AHRB Major Research Grant [3.8] for an investigation into performance practice relating to late-sixteenth-century Italian female court musicians. The <i>Dangerous Graces</i> project combined archival research, musical preparation in workshop sessions, and finally recording and live performance of the repertoire [3.2, 3.4]. The project's methodology is still core to Stras's approach: music is first transcribed from source, prepared in scores, and then adapted in rehearsal until the ensemble arrives at a comfortable performance mode. The method is informed by ongoing archival research into historical context, and study of contemporary texts for evidence of performance practice.</p> <p>In 2006, Stras received an ACE grant to develop a multimedia event, <i>Fallen</i>, a specially commissioned play about characters buried in a Ferrara convent. It was filmed and then projected alongside a staged musical performance, in which Musica Secreta was joined by Celestial Sirens, an amateur choir formed in 2002 by Stras and her co-director Deborah Roberts specifically to extend their investigations into the sacred repertoire. <i>Fallen</i> was produced in Brighton and London in 2006/7, and a related CD was released [3.5, 3.9].</p> <p>As a result of <i>Fallen</i>'s success, in 2007 the writer Sarah Dunant approached Stras to act as consultant for her novel, <i>Sacred Hearts</i>, set in a Ferrarese convent in 1570. The research undertaken for this project extended and reinforced the <i>Dangerous Graces</i> project, as it uncovered an important and hitherto unrecognised musical intersection between court and convent music [3.3, 3.6]. Consultation developed into collaboration, with Stras devising a 'soundtrack' of liturgical chants and polyphonic works that was intentionally woven into the novel's storylines; the novel and CD were launched together at the London Literature Festival in 2009. A radio serialisation incorporated the soundtrack; a live event toured the British Isles, sometimes involving local workshop participants in the performance.</p> <p>Stras has worked in the institutional context of other research on similar repertoires by Jeanice Brooks (Professor; 1990-present) and Elizabeth Kenny (Reader in Performance; 2007-present); Kenny also performs with Musica Secreta. Deborah Roberts was a Research Fellow on the AHRB project (1999-2002) and is an Associate Performer at Southampton.</p>

3. References to the research

Peer-reviewed publications

- 3.1** Stras, 'Recording Tarquinia: Imitation, Parody and Reportage in Marc'Antonio Ingegneri's "Hor che 'l ciel e la terra e 'l vento tace"'. *Early Music* 27(1999): 358-77. [declared RAE 2001]
- 3.2** Stras, 'Musical Portraits of Female Musicians at the Northern Italian Courts in the 1570s'. In *Art and Music in the Early Modern Period: Essays in Memory of Franca Trinchieri Camiz*, ed. Katherine McIver, 145-72. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. [peer-reviewed before contract]
- 3.3** Stras, 'The *Ricreatione per monache* of Suor Annalena Aldobrandini'. *Renaissance Studies* 26 (2012): 34-59. [declared REF 2014]

Recordings (all reviewed in national and specialist press/websites; all distinguished by awards)

- 3.4** *Dangerous Graces: music by Cipriano de Rore and his pupils*, Musica Secreta. Linn CKD 169, 2002. [Diapason Découverte, 2003]
- 3.5** *Alessandro Grandi: Motteti a cinque voci (1614) with additional music from Fallen*, Musica Secreta, Divine Arts dda25062, 2007. [Best Arts and Media Project, Society for the Study of Early Modern Women, 2007]
- 3.6** *Sacred Hearts, Secret Music*, Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens. Divine Arts dda25077, 2009. [Gramophone, Editor's Choice, 2009]

Major grants (awarded to Laurie Stras)

- 3.7** British Academy Small Research Grant: 1996 (£800)
- 3.8** ARHB Major Research Grant: 1999-2002 (£89K)
- 3.9** Arts Council of England: 2006 (£6K)

4. Details of the impact

Stras's impact on cultural life and the practice of professional and amateur musicians relies on extensive dissemination of her research insights through performance and its contextual presentation in a variety of media. Musica Secreta feature regularly on the BBC and on local and network classical music radio internationally, i.e. ABC (Australia) and WPRB (US). Stras and Roberts have been guests on BBC R3 and R4: *In Tune* [2009], *The Early Music Show* [2009/10/11/12], *Woman's Hour* [2010/12] [5.1]. Growing acceptance of the model for flexible performance practices in relation to sixteenth-century polyphony can be demonstrated by continued critical acclaim for Musica Secreta's and Celestial Sirens' live and recorded performances [5.2], and by further development of these practices in recordings by other groups (for example, I Fagiolini's 2011 best-selling recording of Alessandro Striggio's *Missa beatam lucem*, directed by Robert Hollingworth). There is a strong history of informal information exchange between Stras and directors of other groups – including Hollingworth, for instance, and Candace Smith, director of the Italian ensemble Cappella Artemisia [5.3].

The awards accrued by the groups' CDs cite the contribution of research to their quality. *Dangerous Graces* received a Diapason Découverte from the European magazine *Diapason*, awarded for significant contributions to the understanding of performance practice through research. In conferring an Editor's Choice on *Sacred Hearts, Secret Music*, *Gramophone* said, 'A sense of scholarship as well as intense musicality runs through the whole: fascinating and lovely' [5.4].

Groups from all over the world (UK; North America; Europe; Australia) have sought guidance from Stras and Roberts, either directly or through the Musica Secreta website. To facilitate this, the *Dangerous Graces* project website allowed the public to download newly edited and otherwise unavailable scores [5.5]. Stras's female-voice editions have been used in Tallis Scholars Summer Schools in the USA and Australia (2009-present; c. 40 attendees at each), and at Compline at Winchester Cathedral on International Women's Day (2013). New ensembles mentored by Stras and Roberts include Ensemble Cortabella in Ferrara, Italy (2012-); Brighton Early Music Festival's BREMF Live participants Galan (2010-), and Virtuosa (2011-) [5.6].

Impact case study (REF3b)

The involvement of amateur singers in research and performance is vital to Celestial Sirens' overall mission: a group of good amateur/ semi-professional singers with a mix of ages from late teens to late sixties is more representative than a professional group of a sixteenth-century convent choir. Since 2002, more than forty singers have participated, although there is a regular core of around 16; there were thirty workshop participants in the *Sacred Hearts* project. These singers are significant beneficiaries; they have expressed benefits ranging from intellectual satisfaction and musical stimulation, to positive feelings related to community and personal wellbeing. Testimonies include: 'Laurie considers things like temperament and pronunciation from a historical point of view rather than focusing only on "making a nice sound". We spend a lot of time talking about the background of the pieces, putting them in context and I feel that this gives the music much more purpose than simply choosing a few "nice" pieces and singing them in a concert'; 'I get a rare opportunity to make stunning and sublime music with a group of talented, inspiring and, above all, warm ladies - many of whom are now firm friends. I suffer from chronic, clinical depression and I cannot overstate the importance that participating in such wonderful projects plays in living with this disorder' [5.7].

Celestial Sirens were voted Choir of the Day and reached the National Selection stage of Choir of the Year 2012. Although amateurs, they performed in elite venues, such as the Royal Festival Hall (2009) and Latitude Festival (2011). Some members also used their experiences with Celestial Sirens to form new female voice choirs: Cantilena in Horsham and the St Pancras Schola in Lewes both now perform repertoire from Stras's research. The choir has also provided a platform for young professionals to develop solo and small ensemble experience, enhancing their resumé.

Creative collaboration with non-musical practitioners is another crucial route for Stras's impact on cultural life and artistic practice. Stras's collaboration with Dunant on *Sacred Hearts* (2007-12) developed into 18 months of providing historical and musical source material, background for plotlines and characters, translation, critical reading of drafts and final proofreading. In turn, this led to further research, collaboration and mutual outputs. The live performances brought Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens together with Niamh Cusack, Claire Cox and Deborah Findlay (actors) and Nicholas Renton (director); it gave Irish actress Molly Lynch her UK debut at Latitude. It was a co-devised script, with the music an integral component. As Dunant says: 'The result of the most creative partnership. Writer and singers, words and music: a collaboration of women worthy of a good convent'. [5.8]

The recording's inclusion in a work of mass-market fiction has brought Stras's research to a public well beyond the usual audience for early music: one Amazon reviewer said, 'Selected by my book club, it was a good read: well researched, moving and insightful of monastic life, drove a good pace and was very appropriate to have the matching CD playing on my iPod'. *Sacred Hearts* was serialised on BBC R4 (2009), was voted Best Book by Channel 4's Book Club (2010) and was shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize (2010). The *Sacred Hearts* project generated international broadcast and print coverage [5.9]: BBC R3/4, CBC (Canada), ABC (Australia), NPR (USA), RTE (Ireland), with CD reviews including *Classic FM*, *Gramophone*, the *Observer*; there was also widespread coverage across the blogosphere. A blogger in Manchester said after the performance in the Cathedral: 'The choir is perfect; their songs echo around the interior, every bit as harmonious as one would hope. Once again, it's time for a long walk home with music having had a significant impact upon us. There's something about music in a holy setting; you can't help but be moved a little, regardless of the genre or the circumstances'. All 10 live performances were to capacity audiences, reaching in excess of 3000 members of the public.

Sacred Hearts's impact is ongoing, through continued sales: book sales in publisher Virago's territories alone have reached 175,000 copies [5.10]; CD sales, physical and downloads, have exceeded 5,000. Dunant and Musica Secreta are writing a second live show based on another of Dunant's novels, *The Company of the Courtesan*.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Selection of broadcast media coverage: *Sacred Hearts* (with soundtrack music from *Sacred Hearts*, *Secret Music*) featured as Woman's Hour Drama, June/July 2009 (BBC R4); *Sacred Hearts*, *Secret Music* featured on *With Great Pleasure* (BBC R3); *Saturday Live* (BBC R4); *Sunday* (BBC R4); *The Sunday Edition* (Canadian Broadcasting Company); *The Spirit of Things* (Australian

Impact case study (REF3b)

Broadcast Company); *Arts & Life* (NPR). Laurie Stras on Woman's Hour, 2010:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sz37d>

5.2 List of performances and recordings during the REF impact period:

Performances: Sacred Hearts project

BBC Radio 4: Serialisation of Sarah Dunant's *Sacred Hearts*, June 22 – July 3, 2009; *Sacred Hearts*, *Secret Music* (semi-dramatised performance with Sarah Dunant, Niamh Cusack, Deborah Findlay, Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens). The London Literature Festival, South Bank Centre, July, 2009; Brighton Festival Fringe, May 2010; East Cork Early Music Festival, September 2010; Leamington Early Music/Warwick Words, October 2010; Shell Chester Literature Festival, October 2010; Latitude Festival, Southwold, July 2011; Manchester Literature Festival, October, 2011; Brighton Early Music Festival, October 2011; Bath Festival, March, 2012.

Performances: Musica Secreta and Celestial Sirens

Four Weddings and a Funeral: Brighton Early Music Festival, October 2010; *Secret Lives of Nuns*: Brighton Festival Fringe, May 2011; *Secret Carnivals*: Brighton Early Music Festival, October 2012; *Ave maris stella* (Sirens only): Knowledge Exchange and Arts and Humanities Research Conference, Southampton, July 2013

5.3 Candace Smith, <http://www.cappella-artemisias.com>

5.4 Prizes and awards: *Sacred Hearts*, *Secret Music* CD: Gramophone, Editor's Choice, 2009; Classic FM "Five Star" recording, 2009. *Sacred Hearts* (novel) voted Best Book for Channel 4's *Book Club* in 2010; nominated for Sir Walter Scott Prize, 2010.

5.5 Collection of critics' reviews: <http://musicasecreta.com/recordings/dangerous-graces/>

5.6 Clare Norburn, Artistic Director, Brighton Early Music Festival, <http://www.bremf.org.uk>

5.7 Dr Catherine Elliott, alto, Celestial Sirens, <http://sciencewithkat.wordpress.com/about/>

5.8 Sarah Dunant, <http://www.sarahdunant.com>

5.9 Collection of reviews of recordings and live performances in national newspapers and international music press (eg *Observer*, *International Record Review*, *Early Music Today*, *Irish Times*, *The Times*, *Vancouver Sun*, *OzArts Review*) <http://musicasecreta.com/recordings/sacred-hearts-secret-music/>

5.10 Zoë Hood, Publicity Manager, Little Brown/Virago