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Images for the music: drawings and secular cantatas

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CONCLUSION

This dissertation has undertaken a systematic examination of the decorative elements found in Roman secular cantata manuscripts from the 17th and 18th centuries. Through detailed case studies — including the works of the Master of the Roman Songbook from the circle of Domenico Jacovacci, the graphic experiments of Filippo Juvarra, the disassembled volumes once owned by Sir John Symmons, and the intricate visual contributions of Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti — it has illuminated a complex visual culture that has long remained peripheral in both art historical and musicological scholarship.

Central to this study is the premise that these decorations are not mere ornamental flourishes but integral components of the manuscripts. They reveal networks of artists and patrons, copyists and performers, composers and collectors, reflecting personal ambition, social exchange, institutional affiliation, iconographic preferences, and artistic aspirations. Whether created as tokens of friendship, displays of technical virtuosity, or instruments of cultural diplomacy, these drawings demand consideration as historical sources in their own right.

Methodologically, this work proposes a replicable model for approaching manuscript illustrations in the absence of traditional documentation, such as signed works or payment records. By combining visual and technical analysis, iconographic comparison, and contextual reconstruction, it is possible to formulate plausible attributions and reconstruct artistic identities, as demonstrated in the cases of the circle of Jacovacci and Juvarra. The development of the *Myntha* database further strengthens this model, offering a structured tool for cataloguing, comparing, and referencing manuscript decorations across institutions and collections.

The case studies presented share several recurring themes. Each involves a creator — whether an amateur or a professional artist — who

employs visual strategies to communicate status, affiliation, or sentiment. Each centers on cantata manuscripts, a repertoire often associated with intimacy, refinement, and ephemerality. Each brings to light works that are fragmentary, overlooked, or previously misunderstood.

Moreover, across several case studies, the enduring visual legacy of Stefano della Bella emerges. Initially credited with the Ashmolean drawings, Della Bella's style — marked by clarity, fluency, and graphic richness — proves to be a foundational model for Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti's early work. Della Bella's imagery, often copied or evoked, served as a visual *lingua franca* for decorators and patrons alike. Whether the series of prints were owned by the decorator of the Symmons manuscripts or by the commissioner who requested their replication remains unresolved; their very presence, however, signals a form of visual quotation, an aesthetic of citation that reinforces the manuscripts' cultural ambitions.

These manuscripts, in their decorated state, evoke not only music but place. Their imagery resonates with the visual fabric of Rome, mirroring the city's architecture, theatricality, and symbolic vocabulary. In this sense, the cantata manuscript becomes not just a musical repository but a "Voyage pittoresque" in miniature — where ruins, allegories, and idealized views align with a learned, erudite gaze. The decorations thus operate as both reflections and reframings of Rome itself, inscribing the music into a broader topography of cultural memory.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that manuscript decoration is not a passive embellishment but an active mode of signification. The physical page of a cantata can function as a self-promoting visitation card, a gift, a dedication, or a coded message. These artefacts offer a visual rhetoric that complements, facilitates or even complicates the sung text. To study music manuscripts without their images is to read only half the story.

The contributions of this dissertation are manifold. The present work recovers previously unknown or misattributed material; expands the known oeuvre of artists like Juvarra and Buffagnotti; introduces Jacovacci as a relevant witness to Roman musical culture; proposes a methodological toolkit for analyzing decorated cantatas; and highlights the semiotic richness of these often-dismissed artefacts. It also presents a digital infrastructure for future research. The Myntha database allows for the classification, comparison, and analysis of these images on a scale previously impossible. Comparative research across collections, supported by computational methods, could shed further light on evident visual patterns in decorations.

Naturally, many conclusions are necessarily provisional. The very nature of this material — often detached from its original context, unsigned, and undocumented — demands an interpretive approach based on circumstantial evidence, patterns of repetition, and contextual echoes. Some attributions remain open to debate. The effect of these images on performance practice, or on their reception by patrons, also remains speculative. Yet these challenges also point to future avenues of inquiry.

Among the open questions that continue to animate this research is the identity of the commissioner and the decorator of I-Rc MS 2478, as well as the motivations behind the inclusion of that heraldic emblem in the portrait of Girolamo Frescobaldi. These features point to layers of intentionality — musical homage, visual anchoring, social signaling — that await further archival and iconographic clarification.

This work has also taught me to look differently at objects, to return to them with renewed eyes over time. I now see manuscript decorations not as marginalia but as dense, intentional, and revealing. Personally, it has confirmed a belief in the value of cross-disciplinary methods and of collaborative, slow, archival research. Going forward, I hope to apply these methods to a broader corpus of

manuscripts and to continue exploring the dialogues between image, music, and text in early modern Europe.

In conclusion, if manuscript decoration is a form of authorship, then these cantatas are performances in their own right — staged encounters between image and sound, identity and audience. This dissertation seeks to restore visibility to these artefacts and argue for their critical inclusion in the study of early modern music and visual culture. By bringing these neglected images to light, it contributes to a broader understanding of how drawing and cantatas, and paper and performance, were intimately entangled in the artistic life of 17th- and 18th- century Italy.

ABOUT MYNTHA

Myntha is a relational database developed in the context of the present research. The database has been designed in collaboration with Dr Chris Handy, who developed the technical infrastructure.

Myntha focuses on the visual dimension of the Italian cantata, documenting, describing, and connecting the decorative drawings found in 17th- and 18th-century cantata manuscripts.

The database allows users to trace relationships between:

- Manuscript decorations (drawings, ornaments, vignettes)
- Their literary-musical context (the cantata texts they accompany)
- Their visual sources (prints, engravings, or other models)

By linking these layers, Myntha highlights the interplay between imagery, poetry, and cultural networks in early modern Europe.

A sister to CLORI

Myntha is conceived as a sister project to CLORI. Archivio della cantata italiana - www.cantataitaliana.it, the major online database devoted to the Italian chamber cantata. CLORI aims to catalogue all extant sources of this genre, from its beginnings around 1620 to its last attestations in the early nineteenth century.

Promoted by the Società Italiana di Musicologia in collaboration with the Centro Studi sulla Cantata Italiana (Università di Roma Tor Vergata, Università di Pavia, Università di Siena), CLORI provides a descriptive repertory that supports in-depth, multidisciplinary research on the cantata.

Myntha extends this perspective to the visual record of cantata manuscripts, offering a complementary tool that makes visible the networks of texts, images, and sources.

Who was Myntha?

In Greek mythology, Myntha (or Minthe) was a nymph associated with the underworld. According to the myth, she was transformed into the mint plant (mentha) after an ill-fated love affair with Hades. Her story embodies metamorphosis, resilience, and the persistence of traces across time, much like the decorated manuscripts that inspired this project, where fragments of imagery continue to resurface, take on new meanings, and connect past with present.

Future development

For the doctoral defense, Myntha will include all the vignettes and decorations discussed in this dissertation. Given the vastness of the repertoire, the corpus will be expanded over time. Myntha will also serve as a platform for cataloguing images intended for future publications—two of which are already in progress.

Structure of the Myntha Database

The Myntha database is structured around a set of interrelated tables that reflect the multifaceted nature of visual documentation in cantata manuscripts. The following entities form the core of the data model:

- **Records:** These are the central entries documenting individual manuscript decorations (e.g., vignettes, ornaments, initials). Each record includes metadata about the image, its location in the manuscript, and its visual characteristics.
- **Record Types:** A controlled vocabulary used to classify the nature of each decoration (e.g., vignette, visual source).
- **Collections:** Groupings of records that belong to the same manuscript or institutional holding.
- **Persons and Person Roles:** These tables document individuals associated with the manuscript or decoration (e.g., composers, scribes, illustrators), along with their roles.
- **Places:** Geographical data related to the origin, provenance, or current location of the manuscript.
- **Professions:** Used to further specify the cultural or artistic roles of individuals (e.g., engraver, poet).
- **Techniques:** Describes the artistic or mechanical processes used to produce the decoration (e.g., engraving, pen drawing).
- **Iconclasses:** A classification system for the iconographic content of the images, allowing thematic indexing.
- **Initials:** A specialized table for decorated initials, referring to their characterization and typology, as specified in the introduction of this thesis.
- **BibEntries:** Bibliographic references linked to the records, supporting scholarly documentation and citation.

This relational structure enables complex queries across visual, textual, and contextual dimensions, facilitating interdisciplinary research on the Italian cantata and its visual culture.

Each record in Myntha documents a specific decorative element found in a cantata manuscript. The metadata structure is designed to capture both visual and contextual dimensions of the item. A typical record includes the following fields:

- **Title:** A descriptive label for the decoration, e.g., *Shepherd and his flock resting by a river*.
- **Custom Name:** Alternative or user-defined titles, including those used in auction catalogues or by current owners.
- **Current Owner/Manager:** Information about the institution or individual currently holding the item, when available.
- **Format:** Physical characteristics of the decoration, such as medium (e.g., oil on canvas), dimensions, and location.
- **Technique:** Artistic methods used in the creation of the image, including brushwork, engraving, or pen drawing.
- **Main Figures:** Iconographic content, including human figures, animals, and landscape elements, with detailed descriptions.
- **Description:** A narrative account of the scene depicted, often including compositional and stylistic observations.
- **Main Concept:** A thematic or iconographic identifier, potentially linked to classification systems like Iconclass.
- **Notes:** Additional commentary, including interpretative remarks or poetic texts associated with the image.
- **CLORI:** link to the relative CLORI record.

- **Cantata:** cantata text and translation.
- **Composer:** When relevant, the musical author connected to the manuscript or decoration.

Records may also include links to related items, such as similar visual motifs, thematic parallels in art history, or other manuscript decorations within the database.

