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Images for the music: drawings and secular cantatas

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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the visual culture of 17th- and early 18th-century secular cantata manuscripts through the study of their decorated initials and vignettes. Traditionally overlooked by both art historians and musicologists, these images—often pen-and-ink drawings integrated into musical manuscripts—emerge here as complex artifacts that reflect elite taste, patronage networks, and the interplay between music and the graphic arts.

Through a series of case studies, the thesis reconstructs the artistic contributions of three key figures: Domenico Jacovacci, a Roman nobleman and patron; Filippo Juvarra, better known as an architect and scenographer; and Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti, a Bolognese composer, graphic artist, and printer. The research combines archival work, stylistic analysis, and iconographic comparison to identify previously unattributed drawings, trace their provenance, and situate them within broader cultural contexts.

Central to the study is the manuscript I-Rc MS 2478, preserved at the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome. Its 28 vignettes are attributed here to Jacovacci and interpreted as visual reflections of his civic identity, artistic ambitions, and network of relations. Other chapters focus on cantata volumes housed in the British Library and the Ashmolean Museum, highlighting how these decorated manuscripts were often gifted, collected, and repurposed across geographical and temporal boundaries.

In shedding light on the visual dimension of cantata manuscripts, this dissertation proposes a new methodology for their analysis and calls for a reconsideration of the boundaries between text, music, and image. Far from being mere embellishments, these drawings functioned as instruments of self-fashioning, vehicles of prestige, and traces of intellectual and artistic exchange in Baroque Europe.

[256 words]