8 Le mani di Cecilia

Hand Position and Fingering on Keyboards in Italian Iconographical Sources of the Renaissance

Maria Luisa Baldassari

(Musical examples by Maria Luisa Baldassari and Augusta Campagne)

The subject of fingering and hand position in Renaissance and Baroque keyboard music has been debated for many years, and the few extant theoretical and practical sources have been thoroughly studied and discussed. Important contributions came from Mark Lindley,[1] Isolde Ahlgrimm,[2] Maria Boxall,[3] Ludger Lohmann,[4] Bernard Brauchli[5] and others: primarily those scholars who have studied the treatises mentioning fingering, hand movements and position. The iconographical sources, however, are less frequently taken into consideration,

---

1   The contributions of Mark Lindley to this subject are many: among others, the entry Fingering' for keyboard music up to 1750 in Mark Lindley et al., 'Fingering', in: Grove Music Online, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40049> (accessed 24 February 2022); 'Early Fingering: Some Editing Problems and Some New Readings for J.S. Bach and John Bull', in: *EM* 17 (1989), 60–9; *Ars Ludendi: early German keyboard fingerings c. 1525 – c. 1625* (Neuhof, 1993).

2   Isolde Ahlgrimm, *Manuale der Orgel- und Cembalotechnik: Fingerübungen und Etüden, 1571–1760* (Vienna/Munich, 1982).

3   Maria Boxall, 'Incy wincy spider', in: *The English Harpsichord Magazine* 1, no. 4 (April 1975), <https://www.harpsichord.org.uk/ehm-archive/> (accessed 4 December 2021). Lindley and Boxall have published a selection of keyboard compositions with original fingering: *Early keyboard fingerings: A comprehensive guide* (London, s.d.).

4   Ludger Lohmann, *Die Artikulation auf Tasteninstrumenten des 16.–18. Jahrhunderts* (Regensburg, 1990).

5   Bernard Brauchli, 'Hand and finger positions, as seen in early treatises and iconographical documents', in: Bernard Brauchli, *The Clavichord* (Cambridge, 1998), 253–67. In the same volume: 'Appendix 1. A comprehensive list of iconographical documents on the clavichord – Sixteenth century', 283–87.

following the (partially correct) reasoning that the representations rarely focus on music-making and that they are subject to extra-musical criteria such as the pictorial style in different eras and places, the destination of the painting, and the behavioural conventions. Scholars who deal with musical iconography, like Mariagrazia Carlone,[6] clearly state the caveats that one must bear in mind when approaching a representation regarding music: the actual level of verisimilitude, the general context of each representation, the degree of musical knowledge of the painter (if knowable), and so on.

We must, however, not completely discard the information that these pictures give us and that can help us reconstruct the data we lack today: the physical results of fingerings and hand positions and their practical consequences on keyboard technique and interpretation. Iconographical sources present the performer's body and consequently provide us with further suggestions on how to apply the indications of the treatises.[7] The numerous representations of musicians at the keyboard differ in detail and setting: some of the paintings show people in the act of playing where it is even possible to see which fingers are in use. In others, especially the oldest ones, the hands rest on the keyboard in a position that is only suggestive of movement: the musicians seem to have either just stopped playing or are about to begin.[8] All these situations can tell us something about the approach to the keyboard; the most important information regards hand and wrist position.

This field of study is quite vast and includes very diverse eras and styles. I have limited my research to the Italian paintings of the 16th and early 17th centuries, a period when portraits of musicians (and portraits in general) became

---

6   The contributions of Carlone are particularly relevant because of her studies of portraits of musicians and their position in playing: see, for example, the articles 'Portraits of Lutenists', in: *Music in Art* 29 (2004), 64–76; 'Copies, Replicas, and Variations in Paintings with a Musical Subject', in: *Music in Art* 26 (2001), 58–74; 'Tastar de corde', in: *La musica al tempo di Caravaggio. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 29 settembre 2010*, ed. Stefania Macioce and Enrico De Pascale (Rome, 2012), 105–13. A more general survey of research guidelines for musical iconography can be found, for example, in Antonio Baldassarre, 'Music Iconography: What is it all about? Some remarks and considerations with a selected bibliography', in: *Ictus: Periódico do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Música da UFBA* 9, no. 2 (2008), 69–114.

7   Similar research focusing on the early piano was conducted by Anne-Noëlle Bailly, starting from studies by Florence Gétreau. The results were presented in a paper entitled *Piano Postures at the Beginning of the 19th Century in France: Consistency between Instruction and Depiction*, at the conference 'The Musical Body: Gesture, Representation and Ergonomics in Musical Performance', London, Royal College 22–24 April 2009.

8   See Anguissola's later portrait (Fig. 4) and Traballesi's painting (Fig. 2).

increasingly frequent: the new role of music-making in aristocratic culture and practice as explained, for example, by Baldassare Castiglione,[9] allowed painters to pull angelic players down from the sky and transform them into gentlemen and ladies proudly standing in front of a keyboard. My research has taken in consideration around 100 paintings by artists such as Tiziano Vecellio, Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Antiveduto Grammatica, Bernardino Licinio, Carlo Sellitto and others, from both northern and southern Italy.[10] I have mainly selected portraits, since hands and arms are more clearly visible. Representations of musical ensembles, quite a common subject, seldom show enough detail to draw in-depth conclusions.

The theoretical background in keyboard technique required for the analysis of the selected pictures comes from the most important Spanish and Italian treatises and writings dealing with fingering and hand position:[11] *Arte de tañer fantasía* by Santa María, *Il Transilvano* by Diruta, *Conclusioni* by Banchieri, *Regola* by Sabbatini, *Porta Musicale* by Gentile d'Olevano, and *Li primi albori* by Penna.[12]

---

9   Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano* (Venice: Romano e Asola, 1528). Castiglione describes the qualities and knowledge as required of an accomplished courtier: music, both on the theoretical and practical side, is among the most important. For more information on Castiglione and music see Stefano Lorenzetti, 'La parte della musica nella costruzione del gentiluomo', in: *Studi musicali* 25 (1996), 17–40; Stefano Lorenzetti, *Musica e identità nobiliare nell'Italia del Rinascimento: educazione, mentalità, immaginario* (Florence, 2003).

10   I consulted two main repositories in tracking down the pictures: the photo collection at the Fondazione Federico Zeri, <https://fondazionezeri.unibo.it/it/fototeca/archivio-fotografico/il-database-online> (accessed 21 January 2022) and the RIdIM, <https://ridim.org/> (accessed 24 December 2021). But simple research on the internet has brought to light other images, such as paintings appearing at auctions or on the art market, without a permanent location in a collection.

11   In the 17th century southern Italy, as well as parts of the North, were under the political influence and/or control of different reigns: the Roman Empire held by the Habsburgs, France and, for the longest period, the Spanish kingdom. Spanish musicians travelled to Naples and southern Italy and their works were sometimes published there, as in the case of Diego Ortiz's *Tratado de glosas* (Rome: Valerio & Luigi Dorico, 1553), printed in both Spanish and Italian. It is assumed that Ascanio Mayone, whose *Ancidetemi pur* is presented in the videos, was likely of Spanish ancestry (Dinko Fabris, 'Ascanio Majone', in: Dizionario biografico degli italiani, vol. 67 [Roma, 2006]; <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ascanio-majone_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/> [accessed 21 January 2022]). There are many studies on fingering in Spanish sources: a general survey is in Robert Parkins, 'Keyboard Fingering in Early Spanish Sources', in: *EM* 11 (1983), 323–31.

12   Tomás de Santa María, *Libro llamado arte de tañer fantasía* (Valladolid: Francisco Fernández de Cordova, 1565), 37–45, online: <http://bdh.bne.es/bnesearch/detalle/bdh0000158382>; Girolamo Diruta, *Il Transilvano Dialogo sopra il vero*

The techniques proposed by these writers are quite different: some of them base a correct fingering on the concept of 'good fingers', to be used on 'good' notes (identified according to the rules of counterpoint). This principle differs greatly from the modern technique for the piano, which aims to attain a perfect equality in strength and function for all the fingers. Two main systems are in use: Diruta, for example, proposes even fingers, 2nd and 4th, as good; on the contrary, Banchieri a few years later suggests using the 3rd finger on good notes. Santa María and, generally speaking, the Spanish writers agree on a 'good' 3rd finger but have a more varied approach. The book that dedicates the most pages to technique, the *Arte de tañer fantasía*, goes into detail showing different musical figures and solutions for all of them, at times using three or four consecutive fingers and thus disregarding a regular connection between notes and fingers.

Some treatises also offer hints concerning hand and arm position and the way the fingers should press the keys. Taking into consideration both the books and the portraits, three main types of approach seem to emerge:[13]

a. 'Santa María' position: low wrist, fingers higher than the hand, bent at the tip and with a hollow between fingers and hand: the so called 'cat's paw'. Fingers should hit (*herir*) the keys and should not be held too far

modo di sonar organi, & istromenti da penna / Seconda parte del Transilvano (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti 1593 and 1609), 10–4, online (book of 1593): <https://www.loc.gov/resource/muspre1800.100422/?st=gallery> (book of 1609:) <http://www.bibliotecamusica.it/cmbm/viewschedatwbca.asp?path=/cmbm/images/ripro/gaspari/_D/D019/> (accessed 5 September 2022); Adriano Banchieri, *Conclusioni nel suono dell'organo* (Bologna: Heredi di Giovanni Rossi, 1609), see the appendix *Copia d'una lettera di D. Adriano Banchieri, che risponde a un Giovane Virtuoso Organista* [...], 61–3, online: <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/115414> (accessed 5 September 2022); *L'organo suonarino* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1611), 42, online: <https://vmirror.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/6/67/IMSLP408196-PMLP248070-banchieri_organo_suona-rino_1611.pdf> (accessed 21 July 2023); Galeazzo Sabbatini, *Regola facile e breve per sonare sopra il basso continuo* (Venice: Salvadori, 1628),10–1, online: <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/759421> (accessed 5 September 2022); Giovanni Gentile d'Olevano, *Porta musicale* (I-Rc, ms. 2491), fol. 106ᵛ–112ʳ; Gentile was working in Rome around 1640. Lorenzo Penna, *Li primi albori musicali per li principianti della musica figurata* (Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1672), 152 and 197, online (edition of 1679): <https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb10527657>. These last three books deal mainly with playing consonances.

13 The main features and fingerings of each book are summarized in the Appendix.

away from them. The instructions refer to all the *instrumentos de tecla* and to the vihuela.[14]

b. 'Diruta' position: hand and wrist at the same height, fingers rounded (*incoppate*); the fingers should rest on the keys and press them without too much strength. Diruta criticizes a conduct of the hand similar to the one described by Santa María, as unsuitable for the organ and its repertoire. However, he says that when playing dance music on the harpsichord the fingers must actually hit the keys, thus establishing a distinction between the technique for the harpsichord and the organ.[15]

c. 'Cecilia' position: high or very high wrist, straight fingers. Quite common in St. Cecilia depictions from the late 16th century until the end of the 17th,[16] this position finds theoretical confirmation around 1670 in the treatise by Lorenzo Penna that speaks of *dita distese* (straight fingers).[17] Penna suggests one should avoid keeping the wrist low and the fingers high (possibly a reference to a practice born in an earlier period). The paintings show the same position for both the organ and for different quilled instruments.

The choice of focusing on Italian music and paintings of the Renaissance and early Baroque reflects my personal musical interests but also aims towards a different perspective on early fingering and hand position. The best known studies on early keyboard technique often have the French and German literature of the 18th century as a point of departure, especially C.Ph.E. Bach's description of his father's way of playing,[18] and sometimes performers try to adapt their hand to this description even when using a fingering chart from an earlier period or a different country. Hand position and fingering must be considered together for a better understanding of the treatises' instructions. This is where portraits and paintings can provide us with relevant information, even when what they show us seems unlikely to modern eyes.

16th-century Italian portraits follow new and specific principles governing proportions for the human body, they present a certain amount of realism, and they reflect the physical bearing of the subject, as suggested in writings like

---

14 Tomás de Santa María, *Libro llamado arte de tañer fantasía. Primera parte*, fol. 37ʳ–38ʳ.

15 Diruta, *Il Transilvano* (1593) (see n. 12).

16 Later examples of 'Cecilia position' can be seen in Francesco Guarino's *Santa Cecilia al cembalo* (c. 1640–45), Geneva, Valerio Collection, and in Lorenzo Pasinelli's *Santa Cecilia* (c. 1650–99), Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale.

17 Penna, *Li primi albori* (see n. 12), 197.

18 Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen*, part 1 (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Henning, 1753), 15–50, see in particular 17.

Il Cortegiano. People in the portraits of musicians are depicted in an upright, open and relaxed position, arms and elbows are close to the body, the angle between them almost 90° with the hand in a relaxed position on the keyboard: an image of grace and simplicity which is a far cry from late gothic models. This new idea of the dignity and gracefulness of the human body had consequences affecting the representation of musicians and their hands.[19]

The connection between technique and beauty is summarized in the words *leggiadria e bellezza* (gracefulness and beauty) that occur frequently in treatises dealing with keyboard playing: Diruta praises the *gravità e leggiadria* (composure and gracefulness) in an organist,[20] Penna, more specifically, the *bella mano* (the lovely hand),[21] a position deriving from correct fingering that makes the hand beautiful to see for the audience. Musicians in the Renaissance and Baroque were required to show a mixture of musical ability and grace, and this same idea guided the way they were portrayed, although this idea changed according to the different concepts of beauty in each era. This also means that grace in playing was not a characteristic separate and independent from technique, but rather a part of it and an integral component of being a musician.

It is uncommon to find representations in early Renaissance Italy of players turning their hands in the direction of the musical line as suggested by Santa María, and I wonder if this depends on the Renaissance ideals of composure and dignity that required the avoidance of inelegant movements. There are no Italian representations that resemble the famous engraving of St. Cecilia by Hendrick Goltzius that inspired the front page of *Parthenia*[22], where the saint's fingers 'jump' in every direction.

<div align="center">***</div>

The detailed representation of a keyboard player, together with a singer and a viola player, in Tiziano Vecellio's so-called *Concerto* or *The three ages* (painted c. 1507/08) presents us with a substantial amount of information (Fig. 1).[23]

---

19   The representation of the human body and the significance of body position and gestures are described in the famous *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* by Giovan Paolo Lomazzo (Milan: P.G. Pontio, 1584). See also an interesting study written by Francesca Gualandri, *Affetti, passioni, vizi e virtù. La retorica del gesto nel teatro del '600* (Milan, 2001).

20   Diruta, *Il Transilvano* (1593) (see n. 12), 11.

21   Penna, *Li primi albori* (see n. 12), 197.

22   Parthenia, *or the Maydenhead of the first music that ever was printed for the Virginalls* (London: William Hole, [1613]) (RISM 1646[13]), online: <https://imslp.org/wiki/Parthenia_(Various)> (accessed 25 February 2022). See the modern edition of *Parthenia* by John Baxendale and Francis Knights in the Lyrebird edition (Tynset, 2021) for a detailed description of the frontispiece.

23   On the significance of musical groups that represent men of different ages, see Patricia Egan, '"Concert" Scenes in Musical Paintings of the Italian Renaissance',

Fig. 1: Tiziano Vecellio, *Concerto o le tre età* (c. 1507/08), Florence, Galleria Palatina, inv. Palatina n. 185, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

The man at the spinet has his hands on the keyboard and seems to be about to play (or maybe has just played some notes) when the viola player stops him by putting a hand on his shoulder.[24] The player's hand position is reminiscent of the description by Tomás de Santa María: the hands are parallel to the keys, with low wrists, high fingers (even if the player is apparently standing) with a hollow between hand and fingers, the right thumb slightly bent inside.

Angels in Flemish paintings playing the portative organ with a very low wrist are often considered as the perfect representation of the Santa María technique.[25] In my opinion, the hand and wrist position in this portrait, where the hand is not hanging as in Flemish pictures, but rather rests on the keys, are closer to the instructions of Santa María, who had in mind not only (positive) organs and quilled instruments but also the clavichord; in my experience, such a position is particularly effective when playing such an instrument.

---

in: JAMS 14 (1961) 183–95, and Jane Hatter, '*Col tempo*: musical time, aging and sexuality in 16th-century Venetian paintings', in: EM 39 (2011), 3–14.

24 A similar situation is also represented in *Venere e il musicista* (Venus and the musician), a subject that Tiziano painted several times with minor differences: three times including a keyboard player and twice a lute player. What distracts the player in these paintings is, understandably, the sight of Venus.

25 See Boxall, 'Incy wincy spider' (see n. 3), 3.

Fig. 2: Francesco Traballesi (attr.), *Uomo alla spinetta* (c. 1570), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Inv. n. KS-a-503, CC0 1.0, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001. COLLECT.6605> (accessed 17 July 2023).

This painting comes from the Veneto, the region where Venice is located, and we can see it as proof that Diruta (who lived in Venice) criticized a way of playing that was actually in use. The wrist and hand positions are similar in a later portrait of an anonymous player attributed to Francesco Traballesi (Fig. 2), and also (for the wrist position) in the frontispiece of Andrea Antico's *Frottole intabulate* (Fig. 3).[26]
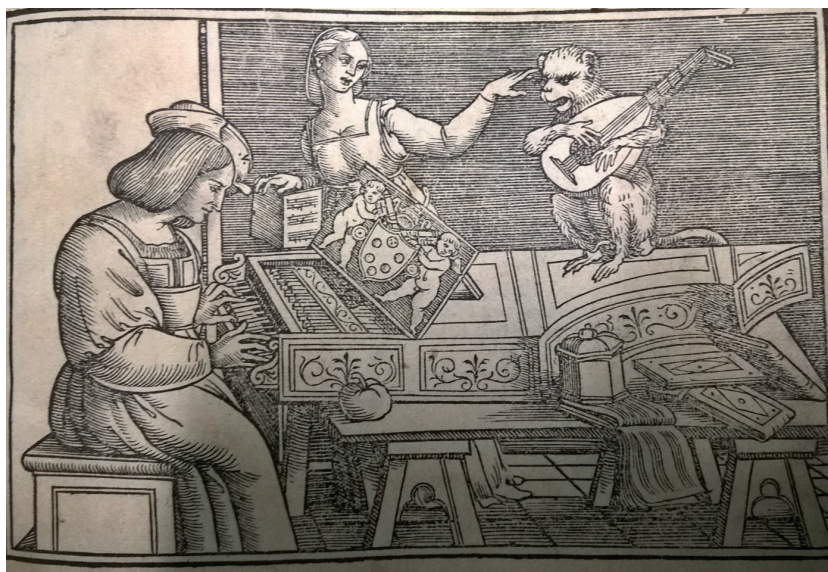

Fig. 3: Andrea Antico, *Frottole intabulate per sonare organi*, Frontispiece (Rome, 1517), personal picture, with permission of the National Library of Prag (Národní knihovna České republiky).

It's difficult to say which sort of fingering is in use in these three representations: there is no sign of turning of the hand in the paintings, and it is unclear in Antico, even if in this woodcut Antico's hands are shown in full movement (maybe less composure was required from an artisan such as Andrea Antico?).

***

Four pictures showing women at the keyboard present a somewhat different position of the hand; three of them are self-portraits by two famous painters, Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana (Figs. 4, 6, 7). Anguissola and Fontana

---

26 *Frottole intabulate da sonare organi, libro primo* (Rome: Andrea Antico, 1517). Antico was a musician, but his main job was to prepare the woodcuts for the print. He is responsible for both the music and the printing in the *Frottole intabulate*.

were both proud of their profession and their self-portraits show their proficiency in various arts.[27] Fontana was probably inspired by the older artist for her depiction at the spinet, where we can also see a painter's easel in the distance: this, a wedding portrait, summarizes the artistic qualities and the domestic virtues of the cultivated bride.[28]

The general composition and the player's position are similar in all pictures: a woman standing (or seated, in the case of Fontana) in front of the spinet. The hands are relaxed in at least two of the pictures, but the wrist is higher than in the ones considered before; the position more closely recalls Diruta's description, where he suggests keeping the hand at the same height as the wrist. We can guess which fingers are playing: in Anguissola's later portrait (c. 1559) (Fig. 4) the left hand plays a fifth or a sixth on diatonic keys with 5th and 2nd finger, the right hand probably a single key with 3rd, with the thumb off the keyboard. The unknown woman in the painting by an unidentified artist, probably from the Venetian mainland, the *terraferma*, (c. 1545) (Fig. 5)[29] seems to be playing two notes with 3rd (or maybe 5th) and 1st finger of the left hand while she bends the 2nd inwards in a funny position: the video examples will show that this position is actually possible and even useful in some circumstances. The right hand has the three last fingers on the keyboard and the thumb off.

27 The three self-portraits mentioned above are not the only ones we have by these painters: Anguissola painted three, two playing and one painting, and Fontana painted two, one whilst playing and another with a pen in her hand. Marietta Robusti, painter, musician and daughter of Tintoretto, represented herself in front of a spinet with music in her hand. On the self-portraits of Anguissola and Fontana see Linda Phyllis Austern, 'Portrait of the Artist as (Female) Musician', in: *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women*, ed. Thomasin LaMay (Ashgate, 2007), 15–59.

28 On this portrait and its social and artistic *milieu* see Katherine A. McIver, 'Lavinia Fontana's Self-Portrait Making Music', in: *Woman's Art Journal* 19 (1998), 3–8. Babette Bohn, 'Female self-portraiture in early modern Bologna', in: *Renaissance Studies* 18 (2004), 239–86; Stefano Lorenzetti, 'Public behavior, music and the construction of feminine identity in the Italian Renaissance', in: *Recercare* 23 (2011), 7–34.

29 My thanks to Isabella Chiappara, teacher of History of Fashion and Costume at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome for identifying period and provenance of this painting.

Fig. 4: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Autoritratto alla spinetta* (c. 1559), Althorp, Earl of Spencer Collection, CC0 1.0, Wikimedia Commons, photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France (accessed 12 February 2022).

Fig. 5: Anonymous, 16th century, *Portrait of a Lady Playing the Harpsichord*, location unknown, Courtesy of the Frick Art Reference Library, Frick Digital Collections (accessed 29 July 2023). I thank Max Bergmann of mdwPress for directing me to the source of this picture.

A reference to Diruta's described (but not recommended) harpsichord technique comes from the older portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola (1554/55) (Fig. 6) and the one by Lavinia Fontana (1577) (Fig. 7): the right hand fingers of Anguissola are not relaxed, but raised and bent as if they were about to 'hit' the keys, just as in Diruta's description of the way the *sonatori da balli* play on quilled instruments. A similar position can be seen in the left hand in Lavinia Fontana. This portrait mirrors the preceding picture: left hand active, right hand relaxed. In both situations the right hand thumb is not on the keyboard.

Fig. 6: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Autoritratto alla spinetta* (1554/55), Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, Inv. n. Q358, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

Fig. 7: Lavinia Fontana, *Autoritratto alla spinetta* (1577), Rome, Accademia di S. Luca, Inv. n. 743, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

Traballesi's portrait (Fig. 2) shows a finger position that is very similar to the one in Anguissola's later portrait, even if the hand position is quite different. This portrait belongs to the same period as Fontana and Anguissola, though it might have been painted a bit later: proof that many different hand positions coexisted at the same time. Images of players with low wrists are still to be found at the beginning of the 17th century and even later, as can be seen in the St. Cecilia by Antiveduto Grammatica (Fig. 8). A big change in hand position will only take place in the 18th century with the gradual introduction of the passage of the thumb under the other fingers and the great flowering of keyboard

technique manuals that prescribe a position similar to the one approved of by C.Ph.E. Bach.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The painting by Grammatica introduces a new important pictorial subject emerging between the late 16th and the beginning of the 17th century: Saint Cecilia. This saint had been increasingly associated with music, but the 'discovery' of her body in Rome in 1599 led to an outburst of representations of Cecilias, usually playing an instrument that is, in most cases (but not always), an organ or sometimes a harpsichord. The saint's figure sums up many ideals, allegorical figures and actual practices: music as praise to the Lord, 'lady music' as incarnation of musical art, women making music at home, and so on.[30] The representations of Cecilia at the keyboard, more or less faithful and precise, are a great repository for images of keyboard players.

Fig. 8: Antiveduto Grammatica (attr.), S. *Cecilia* (post 1611), Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, Inv. n. P000353, Prado Photographic Archive (© Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado) (accessed 17 July 2023).

---

30 The different meanings attributed to the figure of Cecilia and their transformation over the centuries are described by Nico Staiti in *Le metamorfosi di santa Cecilia. L'immagine e la musica* (Lucca, 2002), and by John A. Rice, *Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance: The Emergence of a Musical Icon* (Chicago/London 2022).

Fig. 9: Ludovico Carracci, S. *Cecilia* (c. 1607), Roma, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Inv. n. PC 257, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

Some of the Cecilia's painted from the end of the 16th century onwards show a peculiar position of the hand: a high wrist (sometimes very high) and hand with straight fingers or a little depression between fingers and hand (Fig. 9).

A similar position of the wrist, quite far from any modern keyboard technique, is suggested and investigated in its practical and artistic consequences by Mark Lindley in his study of German Renaissance technique.[31] The position does not change regardless of whether Cecilia is playing an organ or a quilled instrument, or if she is standing or seated at whatever height. Orazio Gentileschi shows this position in three of his Cecilias (Figs. 10–12).

---

31   Lindley, *Ars Ludendi* (see n. 1).

Fig. 10: Orazio Gentileschi, S. *Cecilia* (1615–20), Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Inv. n. 1083, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023). The so called 'spinetta' might also be a regal.

Fig. 11: Orazio Gentileschi/Giovanni Lanfranco, S. *Cecilia* (1617–27), Washington DC, National Gallery, Accession n. 1961.9.73, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

Fig. 12: Orazio Gentileschi, 'S. Cecilia', detail from *Circoncisione di Gesù* (c. 1607), Ancona, Pinacoteca Civica F. Podesti, Identification n. 1100034669, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

The model for the angel playing the organ in the fresco seems to have been Artemisia, Gentileschi's daughter.[32] Besides being a famous painter, she was also a musician, as we know from her self-portrait with a lute;[33] it is possible, therefore, to suppose that the hand position in these paintings is not something totally invented, but instead an actual manner of playing. A further verification of the likelihood of this position comes from the S. Cecilia by the Neapolitan painter Carlo Sellitto (Fig. 13).

---

32 See *La luce e i silenzi. Orazio Gentileschi e la pittura caravaggesca nelle Marche del Seicento*, [catalogue of an exhibition held at the Pinacoteca civica 'Bruno Molajoli', Fabriano, Italy, 2 August– 8 December 2019], ed. Annamaria Ambrosini Massari and Alessandro Delpriori ([Ancona], 2019).

33 *Self-portrait as a lute player*, c. 1615–17, now in Minneapolis, Curtis Galleries, <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autoritratto_come_suonatrice_di_liuto#/media/File:Artemisia_Gentileschi_-_Self-Portrait_as_a_Lute_Player.JPG> (accessed 20 February 2022). See also *S. Cecilia* (self-portrait), c. 1620 (Rome, Galleria Spada), <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Cecilia_(Artemisia_Gentileschi)#/media/File:Saint_Cecilia_by_Artemisia_Gentileschi.jpg> (accessed 20 February 2022).

Fig. 13: Carlo Sellitto, S. *Cecilia* (1613), Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, Inv. n. Q 313, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 17 July 2023).

This painting was commissioned by the musicians of the Royal Chapel in Naples, that counted the famous organist Giovanni Maria Trabaci among its members at the time. It seems unlikely that the patron saint of music, painted

for a musical chapel by a follower of Caravaggio, would adopt an unreal hand position.[34]

A partial confirmation of this position of the hand, as well as an allusion to a new concept of gracefulness and *bella mano*, comes some years later from Lorenzo Penna: in the treatise cited above he speaks of *dita distese*, straight fingers (the opposite of Diruta's *mano incoppata*, rounded hand), and warns against keeping the hand low.[35]

Fig. 14: Bernardino Campi, *S. Cecilia e S. Caterina d'Alessandria* (1566), Cremona, Chiesa di S. Sigismondo, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons (accessed 24 July 2023).

---

34 *Carlo Sellitto: primo caravaggesco napoletano* [catalogue of the exhibition, Naples, Museo e Gallerie nazionali di Capodimonte, 1977], ed. Ferdinando Bologna and Raffaello Causa (Naples, 1977), 73–6.

35 Penna, *Li primi albori* (see n. 12) 197: 'Tanto la Mano sinistra, quanto la destra non stijno à basso, e le dita ad alto, ad alto, ma stijno, e le Mani, e le Dita, distese, che formino bella Mano' (Do not keep the left and right hands low and fingers high, but have hand and fingers outstretched, so they form a nice hand). The complete phrase appears only in the 1684 edition (Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1684, same pagination): earlier issues stop after 'alto'.

To conclude this discussion of gentlemen, ladies and saints, we go back in time to a Cecilia painted by Anguissola's teacher, Bernardino Campi (Fig. 14). This painting is one of the few that actually shows the movement of the hand: here we can finally see clearly the most common type of finger-crossing in use before the 19th century: 3rd finger over 4th, the right hand turned slightly upward and the left hand visibly turned in the direction of the music, as according to Santa María's instructions.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the most important observations that we can derive from an analysis of the paintings concern the position of the hand and fingers. This element is treated only briefly in theoretical writings, and only in a few cases are the consequences of each position explained. Trying out 'in the field' the different positions observed in the paintings and combining them with different fingering solutions proposed by the theorists can help us to understand the consequences which each position has on performance and artistic results.

In this practical part of the research I have been assisted by Augusta Campagne, who kindly volunteered to add her experiments to mine: different hands can bring different solutions and this cooperation has led to an enrichment of our knowledge. We confronted fingering, repertoire, impressions and feelings resulting from these experiments, which can be seen in the attached videos.

The common feature in the majority of the portraits is that the right thumb is kept off of the keyboard, while the left one is often on. In the paintings taken in consideration for this study the exceptions to this position are rare, and in those cases the musician is merely resting his hand on the keyboard, not playing. The position matches the indications of the treatises, which usually suggest fingers from 2nd to 5th for the right hand and 4th/3rd to 1st for the left one, at least in *passaggi*. According to the writers the reason for this choice lies in the weakness of the left hand and especially of the 4th finger, but the reasoning behind the use of the thumb in this hand may also be found in Renaissance repertoire, where the left hand often holds chords with octaves while the right hand plays *passaggi* and diminutions. Moreover, one must remember that the keys in Renaissance instruments could be quite short and keeping the thumb on them could be more of a hindrance than a help, especially for scales and *passaggi*.

The position in Anguissola's later portrait, the 'Diruta', is the nearest to the one Augusta Campagne and I grew up with, but we discovered great advantages and interesting results and consequences using the other two. A low wrist (as in Tiziano and Traballesi), gives incredible strength to the fingers and

perfect contact with the keys. In addition, the contact between finger and key involves the pad of the finger more, and this allows for a better control of the pressure, exactly as described by Santa María. This approach gives interesting results on the harpsichord and is a really good technique for the clavichord (see Video 1). Trills, for example, can be played more slowly but with more intensity and direction. The general touch is, however, 'harder', which brings to mind Diruta's remark about the *sonatori da balli*.[36] Anguissola's older portrait shows a relatively low right hand and fingers ready to hit the keys. This technique enhances the rhythm of the dance (see Video 5a).

Video 1: Anonymous, Magnificat (part), ed. in: *Keyboard music at Castell'Arquato*, ed. H. Colin Slim, 3 vols., CMM 37 (Neuhausen/Stuttgart, 1975–1991), ii, 20. Maria Luisa Baldassari, 'Santa María' position, fingerings inspired by Spanish sources.

Click here to play the video.

A very high wrist, on the contrary (Video 2), gives less strength but greater freedom and relaxation to the fingers: the tip of the finger is more involved than the pad, and the contact with the keyboard is a bit less secure in comparison to the preceding technique because of the lack of weight. But this position facilitates the use of Diruta's fingering, with the 2nd and 4th fingers as the good ones, since it makes it easier to pass the 4th finger over the 3rd; it also better suits the attention given to the 3rd finger, the longer one.[37] Quick trills, especially with the 3rd and 4th fingers, and *passaggi* become easier and smoother. The right hand thumb always stays off the keyboard, but this technique may have made its movements easier and thus prepared its shifting under the other fingers in a later period, as is the case with the fingerings written by Alessandro Scarlatti for his toccatas. The high wrist position can also explain why many treatises suggest using the 5th and 2nd fingers for the fifths, and 2nd with 3rd or 3rd with 4th for the thirds: it is easier to use long fingers for these chords instead of moving the thumb inside the keyboard, and straight fingers can stretch better than bent ones. Depending on the repertoire, the wrist of the left hand can be lower than the right one: in pieces like *Chi la dirra* (*Qui la dira*) by Antonio Valente (Video 3) the left hand very often plays chords that include octaves, which are more difficult to play with a high wrist.

---

36 Diruta, *Il Transilvano* (1593) (see n. 12), 11–2.
37 Although Diruta indicates the 2nd and 4th fingers as 'good', he stresses the fact that the 3rd is the most fatigued one, being involved in all figures.

Video 2: Ascanio Mayone (c. 1560–27), 'Ancidetemi pur', in: *Primo Libro di diversi capricci per sonare* (Naples: Costantino Vitale, 1603), ed. in: Ascanio Mayone, *Diversi Capricci per sonare I (Napoli 1603)*, ed. Christopher Stembridge (Padua, 1981), 24–5. Maria Luisa Baldassari, 'Cecilia' position, Diruta fingerings.

▶ Click here to play the video.

Video 3: Antonio Valente, 'Chi la dirra', in: *Intavolatura de cimbalo* […] (Naples: Giuseppe Cacchio dall'Aquila, [1575/76]), ed. in: Valente, *Intavolatura de Cimbalo (Napoli 1576)*, ed. Maria Luisa Baldassari (Bologna, 2021), 44–7. Augusta Campagne, 'Cecilia' position, slightly lower wrist in left hand. Banchieri fingerings.

▶ Click here to play the video.

The 'middle' position is actually midway between the other two in all aspects: strength, weight, freedom of the fingers, control of the keys. According to our experiments, this position works very well with a finger system where the 3rd finger is the good one. However, this position is also recommended by Diruta, who prefers even fingers (Video 4). A system using odd fingers (3rd as the main finger) was used mainly by northern European players, but is also briefly described by Adriano Banchieri[38] and was probably a real alternative to Diruta's fingering in Italy too.

Video 4: Ercole Pasquini (c. 1560–c. 1620), 'Ancor che col partire', ed. in: Ercole Pasquini, *Raccolta completa delle composizioni note per strumento a tastiera*, ed. Marco Ghirotti (Padua, 2012). Maria Luisa Baldassari, 'Diruta' position and fingerings.

▶ Click here to play the video.

The players show different hand positions regardless of whether they are in front of an organ, spinet or harpsichord; players at the clavichord more frequently show a low wrist, but this is not a rule. As suggested before, repertoire could have influenced the choice of hand position: unfortunately, the pictures don't show any readable music. While sitting high or standing helps in adopting the 'Cecilia' position, the portraits also present this position in players sitting relatively low, or show the 'Diruta' and 'Santa María' positions in people standing (Fig. 15–17).

---

38   Banchieri, *Conclusioni* (see n. 12), 62.

Fig. 15: 'Santa María' position [© photography: Ivan Kitanović].

Fig. 16: 'Diruta' position (with straight wrists) [© photography: Ivan Kitanović].

Fig. 17: 'Cecilia' position [© photography: Ivan Kitanović].

Starting from the idea that many different positions and techniques could coexist at the same time, Augusta Campagne and I decided to present a video of the same piece played in the three different positions in order to make more evident the differences between the different approaches (Video 5a, b, c).

Video 5a, b, c: Marco Facoli (c. 1540–c. 1585), 'Aria della Signora Cinthia', in: *Il secondo libro d'intavolatura, di balli d'arpichordo* [...] (Venice: Angelo Gardano, 1588), transcription from the original by Augusta Campagne. Augusta Campagne,

    a.   'Santa María' position (low hands)

    ▶   Click here to play the video.

    b.   'Cecilia' position (higher hands)

    ▶   Click here to play the video.

    c.   'Diruta' position (middle). 'Diruta' fingerings

    ▶   Click here to play the video.

Portraits can suggest positions that are quite far from our technique: playing a typical 16th-century Italian dance, the *Aria della Comedia* by Marco Facoli, Augusta Campagne has observed that some left-hand chords, like *B flat-f-b flat* (octave with a fifth in the middle) are absolutely not playable on the spinettino due to the shortness of the keys and the position of the balance point. Augusta, however, found an unexpected solution: if one bends the central finger touching the *f* with the third knuckle instead of the fingertip, playing this chord becomes possible (Fig. 18, Video 6).

Fig. 18: Bent second finger [© photography: Ivan Kitanović].

Video 6: Marco Facoli (c. 1540–c. 1585), 'Aria della Comedia', in: *Il secondo libro d'intavolatura, di balli d'arpichordo* […] (Venice: Angelo Gardano, 1588), transcription from the original by Augusta Campagne. Augusta Campagne, 'Diruta' harpsichord position and fingerings.

▶ Click here to play the video.

This 'revolutionary' and totally uncommon position finds confirmation in a picture that had previously puzzled me: the left hand of the unknown woman in the portrait from Venetian *terraferma* (Fig. 5) shows the 2nd finger bent exactly in the position required to play the central *f* according to Augusta's experiment.

Musical portraits can offer the modern performer multiple suggestions, not only in terms of instrumental technique but also regarding the role of music and music performers in society during different periods. Trying to understand and embody the positions depicted in the paintings can help us to deepen our knowledge of the music and its underlying aesthetics.

Appendix

Summary of the treatises:[39]

Tomas Luis de Santa María, *Arte de tañer fantasía*

Rich in suggestions on style and technique, the *Arte* devotes many pages to different possibilities for fingering and to the description of the hand position.

Santa María suggests a hand position with low wrist, middle fingers bent at the tip, thumb and little finger slightly bent inside. Keys must be hit by the fingertip with enough force to obtain a clear pronunciation, fingers should stay near to the keys. When moving up or down, the hand can turn in the direction of the movement. 'Good' finger: 3rd.

Direction	Scales r.h., fingering	Scales l.h., fingering
up	3434	3232
down	3232	3434

Quick notes can be played with consecutive fingers, and in this case the correspondence between good fingers and notes is not observed.

Girolamo Diruta, *Il Transilvano*

Providing one of the most detailed descriptions of fingering and hand position, this treatise gives information on both technique and style of playing. The hand must be kept in the same direction as the arm and be guided by arm and wrist; hand and wrist must be at the same height, fingers slightly bent ('incoppate') and at the same level of the keys.

Diruta suggests that the player avoids keeping the wrist too low and the fingers hooked. He also defines the difference between *musici* that play organ and *sonatori da balli* playing the harpsichord: the former touch the keys with a light and relaxed hand, while the latter must hit them to mark dance rhythms and make the instrument play properly. 'Good' fingers: 2nd and 4th.

Direction	Scales r.h., fingering	Scales l.h., fingering	Scales l.h., not recommended
Up	23434	43232	2121
Down	43232	23234	3434

---

39   See n. 12 for the treatises' bibliographical details.

Adriano Banchieri, *Conclusioni nel suono dell'organo*

This manual gives a few hints regarding the fingers both for scales and chords. 'Good' finger: 3rd.

Direction	Scales r.h., fingering	Scales l.h., fingering
up	3434	3232
down	3232	3434
Chords and intervals	**r.h. fingering**	**l.h. fingering**
Second	2-4	4-2
Third	2-4	4-2
Fourth	2-4	4-2
Fifth	2-5; with a third 2-4-5	5-2, with a third 5-4-2
Sixt	2-5; with a third 2-3-5	5-2, with a third 5-4-2
Seventh	Not in use	5-1 (see trills)
Octave	1-5; with a fifth 1-3-5	5-1; with a fifth 1-2-5

Galeazzo Sabbatini, *Regola facile e breve*

This source only gives information on two-note intervals/chords.

Chords and intervals	r.h. fingering	l.h. fingering
Third	2-4	4-2
Fifth	2-5	4-1
Octave	1-5	5-1

Giovanni Gentile d'Olevano, *Porta musicale*

The main principle of this manuscript seems to be that most notes are to be played with central fingers: it is not clear whether there is a preferred finger, since scales begin with the 3rd finger for the right hand and with the 4th for the left hand.

Gentile devotes a lot of space to the fingers for the chords and intervals in the left hand; his suggestions are similar to those of Banchieri but he gives more possibilities for each chord.

Chords and intervals	r.h. fingering	l.h. fingering
Third	2-4	2-1; 3-2; 4-3; 5-3
Fifth	2-5	5-2; 4-1
Sixt	2-5	4-1; 5-2; 5-1
Octave	1-5	1-5

Lorenzo Penna, *Li primi albori*

The fingers must be extended and not too high, the hand must not be lower than the fingers.
'Good' finger: 3rd.

Direction	Scales r.h., fingering	Scales l.h., fingering
up	3434	3232
down	3232	3434

Bibliography

Isolde Ahlgrimm, *Manuale der Orgel- und Cembalotechnik: Fingerübungen und Etüden, 1571–1760* (Vienna/Munich, 1982)

Andrea Antico, *Frottole intabulate per sonare organi* (Rome: Andrea Antico, 1517)

Linda Phyllis Austern, 'Portrait of the Artist as (Female) Musician', in: *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women*, ed. Thomasin LaMay (Ashgate, 2007), 15–59

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen*, part 1 (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Henning, 1753)

Antonio Baldassarre, 'Music Iconography: What is it all about? Some remarks and considerations with a selected bibliography', in: *Ictus: Periódico do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Música da* UFBA 9, no. 2 (2008), 69–114

Adriano Banchieri, *Conclusioni nel suono dell'organo* (Bologna: Heredi di Giovanni Rossi, 1609), <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/115414>

Adriano Banchieri, L'organo suonarino (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti, 1611), <https://vmirror.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/6/67/IMSLP408196-PMLP248070-banchieri_organo_suonarino_1611.pdf>

Babette Bohn, 'Female self-portraiture in early modern Bologna', in: *Renaissance Studies* 18 (2004), 239–86

Maria Boxall, 'Incy wincy spider', in: *The English Harpsichord Magazine* 1, no. 4 (April 1975), <https://www.harpsichord.org.uk/ehm-archive/>

Maria Boxall and Mark Lindley, *Early keyboard fingerings: A comprehensive guide* (London, s.d.)

Bernard Brauchli, *The Clavichord* (Cambridge, 1998)

Bernard Brauchli, *Carlo Sellitto: primo caravaggesco napoletano* [catalogue of the exhibition, Naples, Museo e Gallerie nazionali di Capodimonte, 1977], ed. Ferdinando Bologna and Raffaello Causa (Naples, 1977)

Mariagrazia Carlone, 'Copies, Replicas, and Variations in Paintings with a Musical Subject', in: *Music in Art* 26 (2001), 58–74

Mariagrazia Carlone, 'Portraits of Lutenists', in: *Music in Art* 29 (2004), 64–76

Mariagrazia Carlone, 'Tastar de corde', in: *La musica al tempo di Caravaggio. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 29 settembre 2010*, ed. Stefania Macioce and Enrico De Pascale (Rome, 2012), 105–13

Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano* (Venice: Romano e Asola, 1528)

Girolamo Diruta, *Il Transilvano Dialogo sopra il vero modo di sonar organi, & istromenti da penna / Seconda parte del Transilvano* (Venice: Giacomo Vincenti 1593 and 1609), 10–4, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mus-pre1800.100422/?st=gallery> (book of 1593), <http://www.bibliotecamusica.it/cmbm/viewschedatwbca.asp?path=/cmbm/images/ripro/gaspari/_D/D019/> (book of 1609)

Patricia Egan, '"Concert" Scenes in Musical Paintings of the Italian Renaissance', in: JAMS 14 (1961) 183–95

Dinko Fabris, 'Ascanio Majone', in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 67 [Roma, 2006], online: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ascanio-majone_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/>

Francesca Gualandri, *Affetti, passioni, vizi e virtù. La retorica del gesto nel teatro del '600* (Milan, 2001)

Jane Hatter, '*Col tempo*: musical time, aging and sexuality in 16th-century Venetian paintings', in: EM 39 (2011), 3–14

Mark Lindley, 'Early Fingering: Some Editing Problems and Some New Readings for J.S. Bach and John Bull', in: EM 17 (1989), 60–9

Mark Lindley, *Ars Ludendi: early German keyboard fingerings c. 1525 – c. 1625* (Neuhof, 1993)

Mark Lindley, et al. 'Fingering', in: Grove Music Online, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40049>

Ludger Lohmann, *Die Artikulation auf Tasteninstrumenten des 16.– 18. Jahrhunderts* (Regensburg, 1990)

Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* (Milan: P.G. Pontio, 1584)

Stefano Lorenzetti, 'La parte della musica nella costruzione del gentiluomo', in: *Studi musicali* 25 (1996), 17–40

Stefano Lorenzetti, *Musica e identità nobiliare nell'Italia del Rinascimento: educazione, mentalità, immaginario* (Florence, 2003)

Stefano Lorenzetti, 'Public behavior, music and the construction of feminine identity in the Italian Renaissance', in: *Recercare* 23 (2011), 7–34

Stefano Lorenzetti, *La luce e i silenzi. Orazio Gentileschi e la pittura caravaggesca nelle Marche del Seicento*, [catalogue of an exhibition held at the Pinacoteca civica 'Bruno Molajoli', Fabriano, Italy, 2 August– 8 December 2019], ed. Annamaria Ambrosini Massari and Alessandro Delpriori ([Ancona], 2019)

Katherine A. McIver, 'Lavinia Fontana's Self-Portrait Making Music', in: *Woman's Art Journal* 19 (1998), 3–8

Giovanni Gentile d'Olevano, *Porta musicale* (I-Rc, ms. 2491)

Robert Parkins, 'Keyboard Fingering in Early Spanish Sources', in: EM 11 (1983), 323–31

Parthenia, or the Maydenhead of the first music that ever was printed for the Virginalls, ed. John Baxendale and Francis Knights (Tynset, 2021)

Lorenzo Penna, *Li primi albori musicali per li principianti della musica figurata* (Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1672), <https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb10527657> (edition of 1679)

John A. Rice, *Saint Cecilia in the Renaissance: The Emergence of a Musical Icon* (Chicago/London 2022)

Galeazzo Sabbatini, *Regola facile e breve per sonare sopra il basso continuo* (Venice: Salvadori, 1628), <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/759421>

Tomás de Santa María, *Libro llamado arte de tañer fantasia* (Valladolid: Francisco Fernandez de Cordova, 1565), 37–45, <http://bdh.bne.es/bnesearch/detalle/bdh0000158382>

Nico Staiti, *Le metamorfosi di santa Cecilia. L'immagine e la musica* (Lucca, 2002)