

that the object's status as a work of art was foremost. The argument, however, is based on the use of a few exceptional Florentine examples and does not furnish sufficient evidence for a generalization. Most sixteenth-century commissions were still directed by the patron.

The final essay, by Michelangelo Muraro, adds to our understanding of the business context of altarpiece production. Drawing on the extensive records left by the Bassano workshop, Muraro retraces in great detail the series of steps followed in the production of Bassano altarpieces.

Marred only by the poor quality of the reproductions, this book is a valuable addition to the steadily growing number of scholarly works on the altarpiece in early modern Europe.

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Laude. Medieval Italian Spiritual Songs. Musicians of the Early Music Institute. Thomas Binkley, Director. Early Music Institute, Indiana University School of Music, 1991. Focus 912.

We should all give serious thought to adding this excellent compact disc to our libraries for it brings to life spiritual songs belonging to the lauda repertoire which was of integral importance to Italian confraternities and, more generally, to Italian society. The four laude on this recording are taken from two manuscripts: *Laude novella* to the Virgin Mary and the Passion lauda *Plangiamo quel crudel basciare* from the thirteenth-century laudario, Cortona, Biblioteca del Comune, MS.91; the Easter lauda *Laudate la surrectione* and *Peccatrice nominata* to Mary Magdalene from the early fourteenth-century laudario, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. II I 122. Each is realized with imagination by the musicians of the Early Music Institute, under the expert direction of Thomas Binkley.

With no more than the text and its melody in early notation, and guided by general notions as to appropriate performance practice, the ensemble has created inspired performances ranging in mood from the exuberant *Laude novella*, to the sorrowful *Plangiamo quel crudel basciare*, the lyrical *Laudate la surrectione*, and the ultimately triumphant *Peccatrice nominata*. Through careful declamation and contrast, not only of solo and choral singing, but also of song and speech, the sense of the texts is ably communicated. Further, the variety of techniques used

to accompany the songs further enhances the performances. Particularly fascinating is the skilful ornamentation and elaboration of melodies in instrumental preludes and interludes, and the contrasting colours of winds, strings (bowed and plucked), and percussion.

The quality of the performance (dating from 1988) is well preserved in the AAD recording and attractively packaged with texts and translations. The notes by Blake Wilson are useful and, for the more ambitious reader, are nicely complimented by chapter 4 of his book, *Music and Merchants: The Laudesi Companies of Republican Florence* (Oxford, 1992).

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Niccolai, Foresto. *Le più antiche Misericordie d'Italia. 1244-1899*. Firenze: Confederazione Nazionale Misericordie d'Italia, 1993. xxii, 239 pp., illustrations.

The confraternities of the Misericordia enjoy a long tradition in Italy. As Foresto Niccolai reports, they date from the thirteenth-century struggle between the Guelfs and Ghibellines. The first Misericordia was founded by St. Peter Martyr in 1244 in Florence to turn men's minds away from internecine warfare and towards the charity of God. The Florentine Misericordia is thus the first of over five hundred such confraternities to be established over the course of the following centuries. The aim of these organizations was to offer social assistance to their communities, especially by way of the traditional Works of Spiritual and Corporal Mercy. As Niccolai points out, the confraternities assisted the old and the poor, buried the dead, looked after the sick, and collected those afflicted with infectious diseases. *Confratelli* visited prisoners, paid for the release of prisoners for debt, comforted the condemned, managed dowry funds for poor girls, and rescued abandoned children. Because service was to be carried out anonymously, members wore hooded habits that concealed their identity.

This book is a pleasant general introduction to the subject of the Confraternities of Mercy. It notes important details about the Misericordie—date of foundation, location within the city/town, dates when they moved locations, links with other organizations, etc. It does not try, however, to explore the nature of membership or the broader social implications of these organizations. Instead, it outlines the particular