

Celestial sirens in the cloister

Nuns in Renaissance Italy could express themselves, and turn rebellion positive, through music

BY LYNDA GRACE PHILIPPSEN, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JULY 4, 2009

SACRED HEARTS

By Sarah Dunant

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A shocking statistic: In late 16-century Italy, 50 per cent of noblewomen (and possibly as many as 70 per cent) were consigned to convents. In that era, dowries were inflated to the point that marriage for more than one daughter was impossible for most aristocratic families. The rest (especially the unsightly, the malformed, the misbehaved or even the overly educated), as well as hapless orphans, were delivered to the Catholic Church at a significantly reduced price.

Sacred Hearts, Sarah Dunant's latest novel (after *The Birth of Venus* and *In the Company of the Courtesan*) takes readers into such a Renaissance cloister and explores the lives of women given in celestial union (an arranged marriage, like every other one at the time) that could be heaven or, often as not, hell. Not every novice so dispatched was an eager bride of Christ.

Dunant's historically accurate work of fiction begins at Santa Caterina, a Benedictine convent in Ferrara, Italy, in the hours after Compline, before the 2 a.m. call to Matins. This period of enforced silence is disrupted by the screams of the newest arrival, Suora Serafina.

Suora Zuana, the dispensary mistress, who has lived many years "inside God's protection," knows it is time to put an end to the angry howls. Confronting Serafina, laudanum in hand, Zuana reminds her of the vows she spoke earlier that day in chapel.

'Words. I said words, that's all. They came from my mouth but not my heart,' Serafina flings back at her.

Zuana understands this argument against coercion. "In the right court, before a sympathetic judge, this is the defence a wife might use to try to get a desperate marriage annulled, or a novice before her bishop to have her vows dissolved."

Madonna Chiara, the abbess of what is essentially a small state, is an astute administrator who hasn't fallen afoul of the Council of Trent. In this time of Counter-Reformation, Santa Caterina has escaped the harsh restrictions imposed elsewhere largely due to her careful management and the support of a well-placed bishop.

Chiara is not about to jeopardize such privilege or the substantial dowry brought to the convent with this "incandescently angry" novice.

Using the "skills of arbitration required to keep a community of almost a hundred women living together in peace and harmony," she reminds the sisters that their troublesome novice has been given to them as a spiritual challenge.

Gifted with a sublime voice that would draw many to the convent's public services, Serafina stubbornly refuses to sing. Intelligent, indomitable and dogged in her attempts to reunite with Jacopo, her music teacher and her beloved, she watches and waits for her moment.

He has come for her from Milan. He is outside the convent walls imitating a nightingale -- their pre-arranged signal.

There'll be no spoilers here. Not even hints. In clear and direct prose, Dunant spins an engaging tale with numerous compelling characters. She provides an illuminating glimpse of women whom history, with its fixation on men's concerns, largely forgot. The plot is straightforward (though not necessarily predictable) and emotionally gratifying.

However, its themes are deeper than forbidden romance. Dunant's narrative reveals not only the interwoven lives of "women of great faith and compassion," but also the duplicitous machinations of power politics, commerce and hypocrisy wearing the wimple of religiosity.

A nun's life was one of unquestioning obedience, strict observances, self-denial and penance, which often led to neurosis or severe psychological disorders. Christ could be a difficult husband, His chronic absence a particular burden.

However, nuns like Zuana, who "find the wit to turn rebellion into acceptance of what cannot be resisted," often create meaningful work that would have been impossible for women in traditional marriages.

One avenue was through music. In *Sacred Hearts*, Dunant highlights the importance of Renaissance music as performed within convents. Before the Counter-Reformation, convent choirs "drawing citizens to salvation like celestial sirens" were among the cultural treasures of Ferrara.

Only here could female singers, composers and instrumentalists express their gifts and engage in public performance. In addition, music -- with its ineffable ability to offer transcendence to troubled souls -- sometimes provided solace, healing and hope.

In a unique complement to the novel, Dunant has collaborated with *Musica Secreta*, "a group of specialist musicians dedicated to recovering the music of 16th- and 17th-century women." Founded by two members of the Tallis Scholars, it has produced *Sacred Hearts*, *Sacred Music*, "harmonizing historical music with historical fiction." (Watch for the Canadian online release in September on Gillmoremusic.com.)

Readers can experience "chant and polyphony that underscore the novel's key dramatic moments, reconstructing the music as it might have been sung 450 years ago by the nuns of Ferrara." The selections are piercingly ethereal raptures, exquisitely sung.

Local writer Lynda Grace Philippsen is a contributor to *A Verse Map of Vancouver* (edited by George McWhirter).

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