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*The Gonzagas: Artistic Patronage in the Mantua Region During the Italian Renaissance*

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### Abstract

The Mantua region of Italy is one that was controlled by the Gonzaga family for centuries. They dominated political and cultural aspects of life. This paper displays evidence that illustrates the power and structure behind Italian patronage during the Renaissance era. It showcases the Gonzaga family's power in the Mantua region as well as their reaching influences on the greater Italian society. Specific examples of the family patronage are explored in depth, along with the ways that their patronage affected others. Overall, this paper serves as an array of information that ties in with the overarching themes of patronage both within the Gonzaga family and with the Italian citizenry during the Renaissance.

The Gonzaga family of Mantua Italy was one of extreme wealth, acclaim, and political prowess. For centuries this family controlled all aspects of politics, religion, art, culture, and economy throughout the region. They had their own working governance separate from other Italian cities. They had complete dominance in the region, which was used to proliferate the importance of the arts in a variety of ways. Many cases would lead to famous commissions such as Mantegna's *Madonna della vittoria* and Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. This was what patronage was in Italian society; the artist's primary focus was to create for the patron. The powers of the Gonzagas and their contemporaries during the Italian Renaissance made them not only as patrons of the arts, but allowed them to influence the very history of the works. Italian patronage and the Gonzaga family also used their patronage to improve educational systems in their region. With their vast affluence, the Gonzagas were able to provide education for those who would otherwise go without, thus improving the wellbeing of their citizenry. Another factor of improving the wellbeing of people was to provide their populace with access to beautiful representations of the arts. They paid incredible sums of money to a wide selection of musicians, painters, and poets. The Gonzagas also improved the lives of the people with the development of beautiful religious works. These factors of patronage through the Gonzaga family exemplify concepts of developed political policy and control, social change, and an increased appreciation and access to the arts for the populace of the Mantua region. Their patronage affected all aspects of the Mantuan society.

The prominent patron families of Italy during the Renaissance period and beyond (the 1500s through 1700s) had a widespread influence on the arts and culture of the society. For example, in 1495, Francisco Gonzaga led an army in the battle of Fornovo. Historical sources from the time claim that Gonzaga was not victorious in the battle. However, in his home region of Mantua, Gonzaga refused to let this defeat be known to his populace. To show his people a sign of victory, Gonzaga commissioned the painter Andrea Mantegna to create a new altarpiece for his church. The work was entitled *Madonna Della Vittoria*, and depicted a heavenly scene between Francisco Gonzaga, and the Mother Mary. This lavish mural at the altar shows Gonzaga kneeling at the feet of the Virgin Mother, thus claiming that his victory at Fornovo was achieved with her divine blessing. Mantegna's work was part of a grand marketing scheme put on by the Gonzaga family in order to solidify ruling power and dominance in the

region. The aim of this campaign was to also transform the public eye of the weak and seemingly incompetent Francisco Gonzaga into thoughts of pride, respect, and admiration.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, the reason Gonzaga was initially remembered throughout the ages was because of a battle that he did not win, and an art piece commending his alleged victory. Without this campaign of propaganda and creative thinking, the Gonzaga family would have been remembered originally as faulty rulers with no control over their territories. This concept of controlling the masses' opinions through propaganda is nothing new to our society, but at the time, this was an uncommon concept. The Gonzagas used the arts to take back full control of the Mantua region. If they had not done this campaign, it is likely that they would have lost political favor in the region, due to the populace's negative opinions on the strength of leadership.

Due to these initial acts of political deceit, the Gonzaga family would come to rule the Mantua region of Italy for more centuries to come. They not only controlled the political climate of the region but the artistic and educational climates as well. This was as a display of dominance that brought a variety of effects to the citizens of Mantua. Although the Gonzaga family might have begun their rule on a politically manipulated footing, their control over the region brought positive impacts to their society.

Because of the amount of wealth that the Gonzaga family had, they also had an influence on the way society functioned in Mantua. The Gonzagas also had a great amount of influence on the societal aspects of the rest of northern Italy, by extension. In this period of history, the wealthy Italian families often had more power than the government officials--or, the government officials were members of the powerful Italian families. The amount of control that they had over all aspects of life gave them the power to have society function the way they wanted it to.

The Gonzaga family was able to use their power to improve the Mantua region because of their influence over the area. There is evidence that shows that the Gonzagas supported education and innovation, especially among the parts of the population that would never be able to receive educational benefits without sponsorship from someone with a substantial amount of wealth. One initiative that was put in place to promote the education of Mantuan citizens was the patronage of homeless children. The Gonzagas would send them to schools so that they

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan K. Nelson and Richard J. Zeckhauser, *The Patrons Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 167-183.

could become educated--an otherwise impossible feat for children of that social class. The family believed that they had a responsibility to preserve Mantua and ensure that it would always be seen as a respectable community.

Another benign action was to severely cut back the taxes on the poor members of society<sup>2</sup>. The Gonzagas, after all, did not need the tax money from people who made very little in the first place. They certainly had enough wealth all on their own. With more money circulating in the pockets of the lower class citizens, the economy rose. Society was able to thrive because of these benevolent gestures.

The Gonzaga's court musicians were also affected by the family's patronage and positive changes to the region, including Claudio Monteverdi. Monteverdi served for twenty-two years at the Gonzaga court. Giaches de Wert, Benedetto Pallavicino, and Carlo Berti were among the other composers of the court. Together with Monteverdi, they composed masses, psalms, hymns and motets for use during household liturgical services. It is most likely that Monteverdi's piety was the source of his motivation, as composing church music was his highest priority.<sup>3</sup> The court musicians under Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga composed an extensive amount of religious works of various genres. They were asked to produce a new work every Friday for the entertainment of the Duke.<sup>4</sup> Gonzaga would have his weekly concerts at the ducal palace, which included the performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and other works commissioned by the Gonzaga family.

Due to the constant stream of commissions any composer serving a noble family would have amassed hundreds of works by the end of their career. In his time serving the court, Monteverdi wrote many works. the family could show off their wealth and power through this work<sup>5</sup>. He wrote mostly madrigals while he was employed by the court. However, the piece that he is most well-known for during this period of his life is the opera *Orfeo*, which was commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga. Francesco, who was the son of Duke Vincenzo, was a great patron of the arts in Mantua. He loved the opera and was a member of the aristocratic Academia at the time. Theater was an important part of aristocratic life in the sixteenth century. Kate Simon states it best, saying "the court itself was theater, surrounded by the dramas of mythology."<sup>6</sup> It is Francesco that *Orfeo* is dedicated to, and it was in his

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<sup>2</sup>Kate Simon. *A Renaissance Tapestry: The Gonzaga of Mantua*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 202.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Bower. *Claudio Monteverdi and Sacred Music in The Household of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua*. (Oxford: University Press, August 2009), 350.

<sup>4</sup>Claudio Gallico. *Mantua*. (January 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Louise Bordua. *The Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late Medieval Italy*. (Cambridge: 2004), 15.

<sup>6</sup>Simon, *Renaissance Tapestry*, 212.

performance space that the work was first executed. The opera was very well-received by the public, which increased the reputation of Francesco Gonzaga and his family<sup>7</sup>.

Because *Orfeo* was so well-regarded, the Gonzaga family was able to display their power in a new way. It was not necessarily Monteverdi's name that would be attached to the work, but rather the name of the Mantuan family for being his patron. They printed the libretto to be sold and distributed en masse<sup>8</sup>. The opera was repeated multiple times in the court, so more people were able to see it. As they saw the elaborate costumes, the virtuosity of the singers, the mastery of the musicians, and the majesty of the ducal palace, they were able to associate all of those things with the great wealth and power of the Gonzaga family. The composition and performance of this opera was another way for the family to compete with the other powerful Italian families and establish themselves as an authority figure in aristocratic society<sup>9</sup>.

The Duke commissioned works for weddings, balls, and other special courtly occasions. Gonzaga court musicians were hired to write and perform theatrical music to accompany courtly events.<sup>10</sup> For example, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and Marco da Gagliano's *Dafne* were commissioned to be performed at the wedding of Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy in 1608.<sup>11</sup> As *maestra di cappella*, Monteverdi was tasked with not just composing, but also rehearsing, organizing musical events, and hiring musicians. Due to the amount of musical works performed on a regular basis, the Gonzaga family, had to employ a considerable amount of musicians.

Recruiting efforts by the Gonzaga dukes was widespread throughout Italy. Letters between composers and Francesco Gonzaga reveal an application process for musicians who wished to serve on their court.<sup>12</sup> Pietra Maria Marsolo, *maestra di cappella* at the Ferrara Cathedral, wrote to the Duke requesting a position on the court in 1612 shortly after Monteverdi left the position. Gonzaga documented in his reply to Marsolo that he would be required to write several pieces as a trial. He asked for a motet, a solo, a polyphonic madrigal, and a ballet in four to five sections. He hoped that through this reply Marsolo would understand that there were several composers already competing for Monteverdi's now vacant spot. These letters prompted historians to investigate how noble families

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<sup>7</sup>Stephen Rose. "Music in the market-place." In *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Music*, (Cambridge: 2005): 15.

<sup>8</sup>Simon, *Renaissance Tapestry*, 224.

<sup>9</sup>Rose, "Music in the market-place," 15

<sup>10</sup>Gallico, *Mantua*.

<sup>11</sup>Bonnie Gordon, "Nuptial Voices: The Power of Song in the 1608 Mantuan Wedding Festivities." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 no. 2 (2005): 349.

<sup>12</sup>Susan Parisi. "Acquiring Musicians and Instruments in the Early Baroque: Observations from Mantua." (1996): 118

would recruit musicians. Marsolo's letter is unique because it is the only known instance of a competition in the Gonzaga court to fill a vacant spot<sup>13</sup>. There is no other evidence to suggest that the Gonzagas regularly used a competitive application to fill vacancies. However, was common in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries for noble families to solicit formal applications for vacant positions.

Acquiring musicians proved to be a difficult task for the Gonzagas, as the musicians they sought after were highly skilled and demanded a great deal of payment for their services. Fortunately for these musicians, the family would eagerly give in to most of their demands. The Gonzaga's focused on recruiting two main groups of musicians. The first group being adult instrumentalists and vocalists who were already very skilled and had well-established reputations, and the second being fourteen to fifteen year old boys whose voices had not yet developed so they can be trained and added to their court. Typically these boys were orphans, and the family would offer them shelter, food, clothes, and an education in music. By doing this, the Gonzagas ensured these boys would remain in their court though adulthood. The adult musicians in their courts typically did not stay for more than six years, and in many cases only stayed for one despite receiving large payments. Because the boys would often stay in their court much longer than the musicians who grew up outside their court, this was the preferred method of acquiring musicians.<sup>14</sup>

The Gonzaga family's patronage and impacts on societal functions caused positive change in their region of northern Italy. The amount of artistic works that they commissioned led to an increase in job opportunities, more wealth for the working class, and a richer cultural life for the general public. Monteverdi's *Orfeo* specifically is an example of this patronage. Not only did it enrich the artistic aspects of life in the Mantua region, but it also strengthened the reputation of the family name as a source of power. This reputation and patronage strengthened the citizens of the Mantua region and allowed the Gonzaga family to preserve their land for as long as they had power.

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<sup>13</sup>Parisi, "Acquiring Musicians," 118.

<sup>14</sup>Parisi, "Acquiring Musicians," 121.



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