Edification and the Reader of John Donne’s Divine Poems

Sean McDowell
Indiana University

In the preface to his Sundry Christian Passions Contained in two hundred Sonnets (1593), Henry Lok takes pains to justify the composition and publication of his religious verse. He wrote his poems, he claims, for himself and for the public: because life is a pilgrimage fraught with perils, he decided to record his spiritual affections so he might remember them when faced with future ones. He wishes to publish his “witnesses of the impediments” he faced because as “testimonies of the means” of his escape, his “presidents” may “not be altogether unprofitable for others to imitate” (Lok preface). Throughout the seventeenth century, English poets and literary critics accepted the idea that the souls of Christian readers could be edified by religious poetry. Repeatedly, they attested to the value of religious poetry in capturing spiritual affections, rendering them in vivid terms, and instructing readers in ways of coping with them.

This belief manifests itself in different contexts and in slightly different ways but is remarkably consistent. For instance, William Leighton (1613) reports that he wrote his hymns not to show off his talents, “but only in an unfeigned affection & earnest desire that the humbled hearts (together with mine) may reapet profit and consolation by singing or reading of them” (Leighton 1). An Collins (1653) believes that religious poetry serves to communicate divine truth and that as part of her duty to God, she must “tell what God still for my soule hath wrought” (“The Preface” st. 14). Similarly, Henry Vaughan (1655) considers the edification of readers the poet’s primary function and consequently resolves to lend his “poor Talent to the Church,” as George Herbert did before him (Vaughan 392). Because these and other writers thought verse more efficacious than prose, they believed with Herbert that “A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,” and they wrote and published to “finde” larger audiences of Christians (Herbert 33).

While affirmations of edification abound in the religious lyric tradition, the precise meaning of what should be edified is unclear, and so are the means by which edification was thought to be induced, particularly in the case of Donne, whose opinions about poetry at times appear contradictory, and who during his lifetime avoided publishing his religious verse. The problem of what Donne expected his religious poems to accomplish is complicated and thus easy to oversimplify. The answer to the problem lies in Donne’s rhetorical assumptions, which some critics misinterpret. P. M. Oliver, for example, argues that on the “evidence of the poems themselves—witty, individualistic performances which can have appealed only to those who had, or wished to acquire, a taste for this kind of verse—we would have to say that edification did not figure among Donne’s aims” (Oliver 9). In contrast to the “presidents” Lok mentions, Oliver claims Donne more likely “wished to shock his readers, as when his persona calls on God to ravish him.” Thus, Oliver believes Lok’s (and Leighton’s, Collins’, and Vaughan’s) views ultimately do not apply to Donne because of the passionate nature of his verse.

Oliver’s argument rests on two suspect assumptions. The first, that Donne is somehow separate from the religious lyric tradition, stems from the same cultish
Designing a Renaissance Concert Hall

Hiroyuki Minamino
Mission Viejo, California

The name of Paolo Cortesi does not ring well to the students of architecture. This man was an apostolic secretary and apostolic protonotary to Pope Julius II and Pope Alexander VI. Then what on earth does he have to do with designing a concert hall in the Renaissance?

Cortesi wrote a treatise, titled De cardinalatu and published posthumously in 1510. In it he discusses the rules of behavior and manners for Cardinals, both established and aspiring prelates, and investigates their needs and problems in encyclopedic manner. He dared not omit how to design the Cardinal’s palace, because this was the time when Popes and Cardinals were building and renovating their sumptuous residences. The great artists of the High Renaissance were available to provide paintings and sculptures to decorate their dream houses. Cortesi was not an architect, but he was versed in both classic and contemporary architecture, being familiar with the writings of Hippocrates, Vitruvius, Filarete, Francesco di Giorgio, and Leon Battista Alberti. As to the design of the concert hall, Cortesi probably got his idea from his long presence at the papal court, where musical performances were an important part of ecclesiastical and civic activities as well as private entertainment. The Cardinals could not function or live well without virtuoso display of singers and instrumentalists. Therefore, having a concert hall, called cubilium musicae, was a must in the Cardinal’s ideal palace.

Although Cortesi probably did not have much training in music, his advice is practical and well informed, and not based simply on aesthetic design. He recommends locating the music room in the northern part of a palace. The idea is to avoid the strong sun coming into the room during the summer months (remember, this is Rome). The heat accumulates during the day, and instrumentalists know the danger of heat very well: the gut strings are susceptible to heat and prone to go out of tune in it, and sweaty hands easily invite mistakes. Most of all, it is not pleasant to be trapped in an over-heated room full of people, where listening becomes torture rather than pleasure.

Acoustics is the most important issue for the design of a music room. If the sound does not travel well, the music room loses the purpose of its existence. Cortesi advises that the music room must have a round vaulted ceiling, to avoid the sound’s wandering or being lost. When the sound reaches the vaulted ceiling, it bounces back to every corner of the room, so that the audience can hear the performance wherever they are seated. Cortesi also recommends placing bronze or earthenware jars in niches in the walls of the music room, so that the sound coming from the middle of a room will strike against the vessels; these acoustic devices will make both singing and playing much “sweeter.”

Admittedly, Cortesi’s technical knowledge of architecture was too rudimentary for anyone to dare building a concert hall solely on his advice. But what Cortesi gives us is a rough sketch, an idea—and the idea is a sound one. He covers all the important issues in designing a concert hall: floor plan, interior design, and acoustic engineering.

We can meet this man, who discussed how to design a concert hall almost five hundred years ago, not in person but in a portrait. Soon after Pope Alexander VI’s accession, the Pope hired the painter Bernardino Pinturicchio to decorate the walls of the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican. Pinturicchio asked Cortesi to be his adviser for the selection of the antique figures, for the artist was depicting the personification of the Seven Liberal Arts. The Roman orator Cicero was the one traditionally chosen as the personification of Rhetoric, and Cortesi undoubtedly advised Pinturicchio to follow the tradition. But Pinturicchio chose Cortesi instead, as a humanist well-versed in the discipline of rhetoric, and in an act of gratitude for Cortesi’s help.

Cortesi’s portrait appears in the Sala delle Arti Liberali, which later Popes and Cardinals used for entertainment, often with musical performances. So the man who discussed so well how to design a concert hall has found his lasting place in a music room.

References


