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Author
Minamino, Hiroyuki

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Edification and the Reader of John Donne's Divine Poems

Sean McDowell
Indiana University

In the preface to his Sondry 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 meanes" of his escape, his "presidents" may "not be altogether vnprouitable for otheare 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 vnfeigned affection & earnest desire that the humbled hearts (together with mine) may reap profit and consolasion 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 soul hath wrought" ("The Preface" st. 14). Similarly, Henry Vaughan (1665) 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'sims" (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
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Hiroyuki Minamino
Mission Viejo, California

On the third of March 1591, the Jesuit priest Alessandro Valignano was granted an appointment with the military dictator Taikoh Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the Juraku-no-tei, Hideyoshi’s newly constructed palace in Kyoto. Valignano’s procession was spectacular and exotic. Its sumptuous march even became the talk of the Kyoto people who were quite used to extravagant and elaborate displays of wealth and power. Even some noblemen of the Imperial Court recorded the procession in their diaries. Valignano needed such splendor. While Hideyoshi was away for the siege of the Odawara Castle (the seat of the last turbulent opponents of his authority, the Hōjō clan), doubts about Valignano’s true identity were rumored among Hideyoshi’s chief ministers. Some of the Christian warlords sympathetic to Valignano advised him to bring as large a retinue as possible in order to emphasize the legitimacy of his status as an official ambassador from the West. Valignano mustered four Jesuit missionaries, four Japanese youths, and twenty Portuguese. It was a calculated demonstration of the political and economic strength of Europe and the spiritual power of Christianity, because Hideyoshi, who at first had been tolerant and even protective of the new religion in Japan, began to change his position.

Hideyoshi’s first order to expel all the Jesuits was announced in 1587. Although it was not rigorously enforced, the mission to convert the Japanese and to expand the Christian Church suffered a significant setback. As the Papal Visitor of all Eastern Missions and a deputy Indian ambassador of Portugal, Valignano was carrying an official state paper from the King of Portugal. But his real mission was to persuade Hideyoshi to reverse his decision on the expulsion of the Jesuits, and to revitalize the missionary activities in Japan. ¹

The official protocol in the morning was formal. The letter of the Indian viceroy, written on a decorated parchment, was presented together with its Japanese translation. This was followed by the exchange of gifts, a toast, and a luncheon. The afternoon meeting was informal. Valignano’s retinue included the Tensho-Shonen-Shisetsu, the four Japanese young noblemen who had been sent to Europe several years earlier. His plan was to introduce European culture through these four youths, who were educated in various Western disciplines. They were especially well-versed in music, and it was in this capacity that Valignano wanted them to impress Hideyoshi. The four youths performed a song, accompanying themselves on a harp, a lute, a rebec, and an instrument called “grave cimbalo.” When the musicians stopped after playing a little, fearing that Hideyoshi might not have been interested, the dictator commanded them to continue and repeat the song three more times. According to the Jesuit and translator Luis Frois, who later reported this event to his superiors in Rome, the youths sang and played elegantly and produced a harmonious sound.

After the performance, Hideyoshi took each instrument in his own hands and asked about its structure and playing techniques. Seizing that Hideyoshi was enormously interested in European musical instruments, Valignano also showed him a viola d’arco and a portative organ. It was probably the physical beauty and mechanical peculiarity of the instruments that aroused Hideyoshi’s curiosity. He must particularly have been fascinated by the grave cimbalo. This instrument was likely the one Ascanio Colonna had presented to the Tensho-Shonen-Shisetsu in Alcalá, a “precious clavicembalo all encrusted with mother-of-pearl” that Colonna had specifically ordered from Rome. Hideyoshi was proud of the Japanese for mastering these foreign instruments, which were so different from their own. He was so impressed by the youths’ skill in music that he even hinted at taking them into his service.²

When Valignano met Hideyoshi, almost forty years had passed since the Japanese had first encountered the Western world. The missionaries had brought a religion, and the merchants the arquebus. The Jesuit Francis Xavier came to Japan with the intention of spreading Christianity, and the Portuguese merchants planned to open a lucrative trade with “the Land of Gold.” At the time of their arrival, Japan was in the middle of “Sengoku Jidai,” the “Age of the Country at War.” The declining political and military powers of the Ashikaga shogunate afforded the feudal warlords ample opportunities to gain control of the central government and become dictators of the entire country. The traditional tactics of war were decisively changed after the warlords discovered the destructive power of the arquebus. Immediate access to this weapon and other European technologies became a crucial task for any who had the desire to advance his status or who strove for mere survival. Therefore, it was politically and militarily a necessary strategy for the warlords to court both the Jesuits and the Portuguese merchants. The Europeans unquestionably took advantage of the situation according to their own particular interests. For the Jesuits, the safety of the missionaries and permission to propagate Christianity were at stake.

In principle, the Jesuits prohibited the excessive use of music in the liturgy and were reluctant to use music as a means of attracting converts. But the missionaries were in competition with the Buddhists, who used elaborate rituals that made great use of chanting and accompanying instruments, and the
Jesuits soon realized the effectiveness of European music and musical instruments when spreading Christianity in Japan. Indeed, after having been persuaded by his predecessors, it was Valignano, during his first stay in Japan between 1579 and 1582, who shifted his position to support the use of musical instruments in both liturgical and non-liturgical situations. This change of policy prompted the importation of European music (such as Gregorian chants and secular vocal and instrumental music) in a steady flow for the next fifty years, until all the foreign missions and most of the merchants were expelled for security reasons.

In addition to Gregorian chant and musical instruments, the Jesuits also imported religious paintings, not only to adorn the altars of newly built churches and the walls of the seminaries, but also to show them to new and prospective Christian converts. The paintings served as a rudimentary way of explaining the Christian doctrines that had met with some difficulty in comprehension among the less educated classes because of the language barrier. The demand for such paintings increased after successful attempts at converting a substantial number of the populace and the opening of more churches and seminaries. To help fill this demand, the Jesuits trained converts in the European style of painting, so that they themselves could produce the much-needed religious paintings. Around 1600, there were about twenty Japanese artists who contributed to the production of watercolor paintings, oil paintings, and copperplate prints.

The demand for paintings of secular subjects also increased, as the Jesuit missionaries realized the usefulness of paintings as gifts to the non-Christian warlords who showed enormous interest in all aspects of European culture - political systems, landscapes, everyday customs, and, most important of all, the tactics of warfare and the newest technologies. Particularly popular among the warlords were depictions of European scenery and towns, war scenes, world maps, and portraits of princes and soldiers in armor.

Several paintings made around 1600 by Japanese painters depict various kinds of European musical instruments. Most of them appear in the “Byobu-e,” the panel-screen painting. The subjects were usually pastoral, depicting European landscape and everyday life in panoramic view. The instruments depicted are mostly stringed instruments popular in the sixteenth century, such as viola, lutes, harps, and vihuelas de mano. Although various kinds of European musical instruments had been imported and played by the time Japanese artists were learning the European style of painting, there is no evidence that the musical instruments they depicted were based on those actually present in Japan. In fact, the inaccuracies and discrepancies found in the Japanese paintings suggest that the Japanese painters had no first-hand experience of the structures and performance practices of the instruments they depicted. The lute, for instance, is depicted with a rectangular peg-box which bends slightly backward, with the pegs inserted from the back of the peg-box. But the European lute had a triangular peg-box set back almost 90 degrees, with the pegs inserted from the sides. These structural peculiarities are also found in the vihuela de mano depicted in the Japanese paintings, and it is likely that the Japanese artists created a hybrid instrument by transferring some of the structural features of the vihuela de mano to the lute.

When the members of the Tensho-Shonen-Shiesetsu performed for Hideyoshi, they had had many years of training and education in music. At schools attached to the seminaries, the Jesuits taught the children of converts how to assist at mass in both Latin and Japanese (often with organ accompaniment), and how to play bowed stringed instruments and keyboard instruments, perhaps supplemented with rudimentary instructions on theory and notation. The members of the Tensho-Shonen-Shiesetsu were further trained in music during their two-and-a-half-year stay in Europe. Their journey through Portugal, Spain, and Italy for a year and nine months gave them ample opportunities to encounter the composers and instrumentalists of the late Renaissance, among them perhaps Victoria and Guerrero in Spain; Palestrina and Cavaliere in Rome; Gabrieli, Merulo, and Diruta in Venice; Gastoldi in Mantua; Ingegnoli in Cremona; and Christofano Malvezzi in Florence.

Valignano well knew that Hideyoshi was not the only non-Christian warlord who would have been fascinated by European music and musical instruments. Their attractiveness had been proven as early as 1551 when François Xavier made a gift of a keyboard instrument to Ohuchi Yoshihisa, the warlord of Yamaguchi, in exchange for permission to propagate Christianity in his feudal territory. Valignano himself had first-hand knowledge of how useful exotic music and musical instruments could be in demonstrating the cultural
Married Love

Donn Taylor
The Woodlands, TX

Outside the house a steady rain falls cold
On frigid myrtles; rooted in shale and sand,
In burgeoning brambie’s fierce embrace.
On slate, the pelting raindrops tick like clocks,
Dissolve in sand and dissipate in streams
To merge in many a torpid pool. Cold rain
Holds all dominion here, though there are times
When geyser’s flaunt and fade, or tremors tell
Of dull volcanic muttering under earth.
Rain-glazed, the windows of the house reflect
A glittering horizontal leaden light,
Mirror mirages, mystify, perplex
Perspectives so that all beyond the glass
Seems insubstantial shadow. Dwellers here
Ponder upon this prospect—but with minds
Unpenetrating, pensively bemused
In bent reflections, wander once again
Their land of rain and sand and shale and rain.

Inside the house, frescoed above the hearth
With cherubim to bless his sacrament,
Triumphant Hymnæus wields his torch
Radiant with warmth and light; within his kerchief
Borders of blue surround a crimson field—
Crimson contained in blue. Behind him rest
Three children sheltered beneath green olive trees.
Facing the heart, but well within its warmth,
A fountain’s waters fed from a refreshing spring
Scatter in pattering eddies, endlessly varied
Crystalline cascades, fusing at last to flow
Deep to a single cistern. Near the hearth
Hang tapestries of blue with gold enwoven
Spinning wheels and pomegranates rich with seeds.
In window boxes blossoms burgeon. Light
Through windows many-primed by the rain—
Light from beyond the clouds, beyond the skies—
Transforms the rain, the house and all within,
Transfigures whitened walls to blossoming gems
In infinite combination, shimmering tones
Of sardius, sapphire, emerald, beryl, topaz,
Amethyst, amber and onyx—laved in light,
The house becomes a jewel. Pondering here
On mystery’s meaning, questing couples claim,
Secure, their sacramental diamond,
Height of this life, earnest of that beyond.
Taikoh (from page 5)

composition is a creation, and the essence of music is harmony: "some notes are high, others low, others in the middle range, and they sound simultaneously and produce an admirable concord." For an unusual technique which produces notes higher than the normal range, there is "the so-called falsetto voice." Miguel says in summary that "such variety of notes and such manifold modulations represent a perfected form of art created by men of genius with a particular gift for selecting component sounds in well-tuned harmony." Also important are the Europeans' ability to formulate the theory of counterpoint, to manufacture a variety of instruments by skilful master craftsmen, to train a great number of musicians, and to apply an abundant amount of ornaments with admirable skill. The Japanese music, Miguel laments, lacks all these.

"Sounds like roars and screams from Hell" — thus Brother Luis Almeida commented on the performance of chanting and instrumental playing for the Kagura to which he listened at the Kinoshita-Taisha Shrine in Nara. This sentiment about Japanese music was consensual among the Jesuits. Lorenzo Mexia reported that he did not have enough patience to listen to Japanese music for more than fifteen minutes, because it sounded so "dissonant." Skilllessness and monotony were the factors that Luis Frois disliked in Japanese music. Miguel criticized the "deficiency" in Japanese music thus: "There is no variety of tone but always the same way of producing the voice, there is no art nor any theory of art containing the rules of polyphony." As a person who was acting as a defender of European music, Miguel felt that Japanese music did not make use of the concepts of harmony and form to make a coherent musical composition, the two most important compositional ingredients in late sixteenth-century European music. But these compositional techniques were foreign to Japanese music, and to use them as criteria in judging that music was to engage in a circular argument.

All these questions of aesthetics and accuracy, however, were soon to become immaterial. Hideyoshi grew suspicious of the Europeans' intentions after the Jesuits and Portuguese began imposing their rules in the territories where they had established power. Moreover, the usefulness of the Christians as a counterbalance to the powerful Buddhist sects waned when Hideyoshi succeeded in controlling the country. By then, the Japanese had sufficient knowledge and experience in producing the arquebus, the single most important European importation as far as the majority of warlords were concerned. Consequently, all the foreign missionaries were expelled, and the Japanese converts were persecuted. Japan closed its gates, except for a depot in Nagasaki, for the next two hundred years. As the "Christian Century" ended, so did the first cultivation of European music, musical instruments, and paintings in Japan.

Notes


7 The translations from the Dialogue on the Mission of the Japanese Legates are taken from Schneider, "Renaissance Europe," 23-24. All other translations are mine.