Repeatedly critical voices within the arts declare that the legend of St. Cecilia is one of the most famous of all the accounts of the Roman martyrs. In truth, the story of her life is far less known among a non-critical public than is the frequent association of her name with music, an association insisted on by several decades of odes written to celebrate St. Cecilia’s Day. That connection has lasted well past the tradition itself, entering the lore of the “knowing” without the recollection of its impetus. On the other hand, the telling of the story of her life occurs even less than intermittently, so to find the written details of her narrative in a somewhat accessible form, one must hark back to the fourteenth century and Geoffrey Chaucer.

“The Second Nun’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* relates how Cecilia, Roman born and Christian reared, had secretly vowed her virginity to God. The Almighty in turn tendered her a guardian angel committed to helping her keep her vow even when she was constrained by her parents to marry a young pagan named Valerian. On her wedding night she revealed her secret to her new husband, who in return asked to see the angel. Cecilia agreed that that would happen if Valerian would become a Christian. To accomplish that conversion Cecilia sent him—and he agreed to go—to St. Urban, who became the
agent of Valerian’s regeneration. Upon his return to Cecilia he did indeed meet the angel who crowned the pair with halos of roses and lilies that would never rot away or lose their fragrance. Then the angel told him to ask whatever he desired and his sincerest wish would be granted. Valerian, rejoicing in his newfound faith asked that his brother Tiburtius, dearer to him than anyone, might find the grace to know the truth he had just experienced. Tiburtius too was converted and the brothers performed countless good works to the great anger of Almachius, the Roman prefect, who commanded them to bow to Jove. They refused and Almachius ordered them beheaded. Maximus, officer of the prefect, testified that he saw the brothers’ souls glide heavenward in the company of angels to meet the King of Glory. Almachius, hearing Maximus’s testimony had him scourged to death with whips of lead. Cecilia buried all three of the martyrs in her own burial place, an act that caused Almachius to have her brought before him to demand that she honor Jove with incense and adoration. Cecilia stood in his presence with no trepidation and an absoluteness in her Christian belief, attitudes that insulted his authority, scorned his power, and infuriated him until he condemned her to die in a scalding bath. Miraculously she suffered not at all as his henchmen stoked the flames hotter and hotter. Finally Almachius ordered her head to be cut off. The swordsman struck her three times but could not succeed in cutting through her throat. She lived on for three days during which time she bequeathed her house to Urban, now Pope, for a perpetual church. When she finally died Pope Urban buried her “among his saints” and her mansion became the Church of St. Cecilia

If we can justifiably claim a widespread unfamiliarity with these details of St. Cecilia’s legend, Chaucer could—and did—make a like claim. In his Prologue to the Legend of Good Women he said that the Palamon and Arcite, a story of two friends’ love for the same lady that he used as subject for “The Knight’s Tale” in The Canterbury Tales, was little known as was “the lyf also of Seynt Cecile.” He, on the other hand, as one whose literary connections were almost completely continental and who read voraciously among the Latin and Italian authors, in all
probability knew well Cecilia’s Acts, *Passio Caeciliae*, written about 500 C.E., and used it as his source for “The Second Nun’s Tale.”

We have presented all of this information with an absoluteness akin to Cecilia’s own, but the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* argues that the story “is unsupported by any near-contemporary evidence.” Thomas H. Connolly in *Grove’s Dictionary of Music* goes even further saying that there is no firm evidence that St. Cecilia existed at all and that *Passio Caeciliae* is largely a fictitious document. The *Depositio Martyrum* of the fourth century, the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* further says, does not mention Cecilia and neither do the writings of Jerome, Ambrose, Damasus, or Prudentius, all of whom were especially concerned with the martyrs. The inclusion of Ambrose in that list is of particular interest in light of Chaucer’s own lines inserted amidst a dialogue between Valerian and Tiburtius in his telling of the legend. The authorial comment names and quotes St. Ambrose, saying:

(As to the miracle of these crowns of flower,  
St. Ambrose speaks of it to strengthen our  
Belief, commends it solemnly indeed;  
The noble Doctor’s preface, if you read,

Says thus, “To gain the palm of martyrdom,  
Cecilia, being filled with Heaven’s grace,  
Forsook the world, her chamber and her groom,  
Witness Valerian and Tiburtius, in face  
Of whose conversion we may judge her case.  
Which God in bounty honoured with a crown  
Of flowers for each, brought by an angel down.

“This maiden brought these men to bliss above:  
The world well knows the worth, you may be sure,  
Of a devoted chastity in Love.  
This St. Cecilia showed him, and secure  
In faith he held all idols as impure,  
Vain, dumb and deaf, even as those that make them;  
And so it was she charged him to forsake them.”)
Structurally in this section of “The Second Nun’s Tale” Chaucer is particularly careful to use single quotation marks for the lines spoken by Valerian and Tiburtius in their exchanges, to use parentheses to show that he is interposing his own remarks among the narrative lines, and then to use double quotation marks for St. Ambrose’s words from his preface extolling Cecilia’s personal devotion and her role in converting Valerian. We also know that Chaucer was well read in the writings of the Doctors of the Church, of whom Ambrose was one as Chaucer makes clear in the phrase “the noble Doctor’s preface.” So, if Chaucer is not inventing material in this passage, which he seems not to be doing, these verses contradict the Dictionary’s conclusion that St. Ambrose says nothing of St. Cecilia. Other nay-sayers concerning what they view as a cleverly devised myth say that it arose when Christians saw the tomb of a lady named Cecilia near the burial places of the popes in the catacombs and assumed that only a martyred saint would have been accorded such a hallowed resting place.

Voices countering these “non-existing” and “non-saintly” stances have been raised with reasonable justification and in many quarters given unqualified acceptance. Enrico Josi, for example, in “Cecilia di Roma,” insists on Cecilia’s historicity—even though he admits that nothing certain is known about her—because, he argues, it is highly improbable that an invented saint would have been included in the Canon of the Mass. In the Easter Vigil before the renewal of the baptismal vows the first part of the Litany of the Saints when it turns to the female saints implores: “St. Cecilia, pray for us.” Here she resides with Mary Magdalene, Agnes, Agatha, and Anastasia, hardly the place for a mythical person. It is these various and conflicting views that caused Hyppolyte Delehaye, renowned hagiographer, to adjudge the case of Cecilia as “the most tangled question in Roman hagiography.”

Whether or not the legend is ever determined to be unquestionable fact or fiction the inarguable point is that it is a highly dramatic story with intense human interest encased in miracles. That, with no intent to superficialize its sacred aspect, is the stuff of opera and Licinio Refice, composer-conductor-priest, seized upon it. Refice
WHO’S CECILIA? WHAT IS SHE?

Cecilia (1883–1954) chiefly composed church music for chorus and organ, gaining specific Vatican support for four of his forty masses: Regina Martyrum (1920), In honorem Sancti Eduardi Regis (1933), In honorem Beatae Theresiae (1938), and In honorem Virginis Perdolentis (1940). The Sancti Eduardi Regis mass was dedicated to Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, soon to become Pope Pius XII. Along with his many mysteries, biblical scenes, and oratorios, he wrote a few secular songs and two operas. Cecilia, which is the opera of focus at this point of our discussion, was premiered in Rome in 1934 with Claudia Muzio creating the title role. Ms. Muzio had made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1918 in Tosca when she was at the height of her international fame, and her continued eminent popularity helped bring immediate renown to Refice’s Cecilia. St. Cecilia’s story in the masterful hands of Emidio Mucci as librettist, of Refice as a sensitive and practiced composer of an orchestral-choral-song literature, and of Diva Muzio as the ultimate interpreter of an arresting role written specifically for her became an acclaimed artistic tour de force of mysticism and passion from Rome to Buenos Aires.

Initially the ecclesiastical community in Rome had misgivings when they learned of an opera based on the life of St. Cecilia and the gravity of their concern caused them to enter into a public debate in the Italian press about the acceptability of any such treatment. Refice himself participated in the discussion; he asserted his role as priestly educator by saying he was reintroducing the ancient sacra rappresentazione, the mystery play, to reach a broad lay audience. No insignificant argument in his behalf was his having employed plainsong countless times throughout the score, either in direct musical quotations or with appropriate adaptations. A sampling of those sacred sources without a complete analysis of the score includes an antiphon from the Corpus Christi liturgy, an antiphon from the vesper service of St. Cecilia’s Day, the fourth psalm tone, the melody of the gradual of the requiem Mass, the Gregorian recitative of pontifical blessings, and on and on.

Surprisingly, the North American premiere of this “azione sacra,”
another Refice description, did not take place until 1976, and then it was a concert performance in Lincoln Center’s Avery Fisher Hall, not a full-scale staging at the Metropolitan Opera or City Center. When Refice visited New York City in 1947 *The New York Times* reported the rumor of a Metropolitan Opera production that proved to be only a rumor. When the concert performance occurred 29 years later it was sponsored by the Sacred Music Society of America and featured Renata Scotto in the title role. Ms. Scotto, as evidenced in a live recording from the 1976 concert that was then excerpted and released by VAI Audio in 1993—incidentally the only recording of Refice’s opera ever produced (and that an abridged version as I just noted)—sang the role with tenderness, warmth, and passion, capturing the human essence of Cecilia as well as her saintliness. Furthermore, Mucci in his libretto had transformed essentially introspective and mystic material into dynamic theater and Ms. Scotto gave everything of her “deep self,” her words, as reported by music critic Andrew Porter, to make *Cecilia* compelling both in concert and on compact disc.5

Emidio Mucci in creating the *Cecilia* libretto followed substantially the legend set forth in the sources that Chaucer used. The differences that appear are ones largely imposed by the theatrical dictates of the opera form and by Mucci’s need for biblical parallels to enfold the sacred stress of a particular scene. For example, in act 2 structurally there is a necessary telescoping of time and place that brings together characters and events that in other tellings are discrete. Cecilia, Valerian, Bishop Urban, and an Old Blind Woman are in the catacombs together when Valerian is converted and baptized. The conversion results from the Old Blind Woman’s having her sight miraculously restored and from the additional miracle of the materializing of the apparition of St. Paul. The Old Woman’s gaining physical sight and the Bishop’s recounting Paul’s having been blinded by excessive light and then converted to gain both physical and spiritual sight equate to Valerian’s conversion. The inclusion of the Old Blind Woman in the scene is perhaps Mucci’s taking note of the possibility that Cecilia’s name stemmed from the Christian cult that arose from
the concern of the Roman Good Goddess for *caecitas*, blindness. Another converting. The drama of all this is then capped by the guardian angel’s appearing with the two garlands of lilies and roses.⁶

Throughout, Mucci’s book carefully describes the richly picturesque settings that must have made the fully-realized stage performances marvelous productions. But even in a reading of the text one is captivated by the imagery of his verse. Act I is filled with flowers, act II with blazes of mystic light, and act III with sweet and heavenly songs. His picturesqueness, as he explicitly states at the end of act II, is anchored in the frescoes of the Italian painter Domenichino (Domenico Zampieri) in the Polet Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, four panels known as the St. Cecilia frescos. One depiction is “St. Cecilia Distributing Alms,” but the other three are direct representations from the legend: “The Angel Crowns St. Cecilia and Valerian,” “St. Cecilia before the Judge,” and “The Martyrdom of St. Cecilia.” The most famous seventeenth-century painting of St. Cecilia is Raphael’s “The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia with Sts. Paul, John the Evangelist, Augustine, and Mary Magdalene.” I will discuss this exquisite work shortly in some detail, but the point here is that Raphael’s art was Domenichino’s point of departure, particularly in his rich palette of colors with finely wrought surfaces. What in the end distinguishes Domenichino’s work and captured Emidio Mucci’s admiration is his intense interest in narrative anecdote; his scenes are crowded with narrative incidents that reveal human passion.

At the end of act III, which beautifully and emotionally renders both Cecilia’s appearance before Almachius and her martyrdom, Mucci’s stage direction once again relies on the concrete arts. There he says: “She turns her face to the ground and dies, in the position in which Stefano Maderno sculpted her.” Another thrust to the traditional Cecilia story says that in 1599 Cardinal Paolo Sfondrati authorized excavations and restructuring of the Basilica of St. Cecilia and discovered St. Cecilia’s tomb beneath the high altar. When the sarcophagus was opened the body found inside was incorrupt, only to disintegrate almost immediately once struck by air. Among the wit-
nesses to the discovery was the 25-year-old sculptor Stefano Maderno, who created an exact replica of what he saw of the body’s position. His gleaming white sculpture that lies before the high altar in the Church of St. Cecilia in Trastevere shows her “reclining in death, her face turned downward and away from the viewer, and her neck marked with the stroke of the executioner’s sword. The gentle folds of her simple vesture and of the cloth that covers her head are carved with an exquisite verisimilitude. The knees are slightly bent, and the straightened arms, held a little before and away from her body, lead the gaze down to hands that touch but are not joined and to fingers folded in a gesture that is alleged to symbolize her faith in the unity and trinity of God” (see cover). The soprano/actress who recreates this final pose while a song without words drifts down from heaven achieves the definitive ending to the role of Cecilia in Refice’s opera on Mucci’s libretto.

As the drama of the legend unfolded a brief introspective note quietly insinuated itself to take on a significance that over time developed a magnitude that was not foreseen and most certainly not intended by the legend’s creator. The Passio Caeciliae says that at Cecilia’s wedding feast musical instruments played [cantantibus organis] while Cecilia sang “in her heart to God alone” that her heart and body be kept immaculate so that she would not be cast into confusion. But when this particular was transposed to Cecilia’s medieval liturgy, the phrase “in her heart to God alone” was either overlooked or intentionally omitted. The resulting unqualified remark conjoined to a misreading of cantantibus organis then said that Cecilia actually sang to the accompaniment of an organ. A subsequent expansion of the legend added that an angel, attracted by her beautiful musicianship, came down from heaven to visit her. Consequently, when the Academy of Music in Rome was founded in 1584 she was named its patroness. This whole sequence in the absence of any absolutes may well explain how Cecilia became generally known as the patron saint of music.

Fifteen years after the founding of the Academy of Music when
the excavation of the Basilica of St. Cecilia uncovered what was believed to be St. Cecilia’s body, a great festival was held. Charles Burney, intimate friend of Samuel Johnson and the author of *A General History of Music*—sometimes called the most interesting detailed history of music ever written—hints that that festival was the beginning of the St. Cecilia Day celebrations on the continent, even though, he further says, the scholar Jean Mabillon had “proved” in *De Liturgie Gallicana* that the Feast Day of St. Cecilia was observed in France before the time of Charlemagne (742–814). It was in seventeenth-century England, though, that the celebrations took on the nature of “Musick Feasts” that often included a specially composed anthem for a music service, that sometimes had a sermon in defense of music in churches, but that always had an ode from a reputed poet and composer commissioned in advance. A representative sampling of such literary contributors includes the names Sir John Oldham, Nahum Tate, Thomas Shadwell, William Congreve, Thomas D’Urfey, and Christopher Smart. But the most famous of such commissioned poets were John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Joseph Addison, with Dryden’s “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day” (1687) and “Alexander’s Feast” receiving the most artistic acclaim of them all. Dr. Johnson thought that the first was “lost in the splendour of the second” but that it still had “passages which would have dignified any other poet.”

In the 1687 ode Dryden, after an introductory narrative of the role music played in the Creation, celebrates the affective qualities of music by sounding the virtues of the trumpet, drum, flute, lute, violin, and organ with a mild effort to recreate the instruments’ sounds, “the double, double, double beat” of the drum, for example. Not until five stanzas later and just three lines before the final Grand Chorus does he name Cecilia in a comparison to Orpheus, whom she surpasses because her music brought an angel down, “mistaking earth for heaven.” “Alexander’s Feast,” which John Hollander convincingly argues must be considered a true libretto, only has St. Cecilia appear in a cadential climactic way in the seventh and final strophe of the
work. Both of Dryden’s poems, eventually set by George Frederick Handel in settings so superb that they completely obscured the original settings by G. B. Draghi and Jeremiah Clarke respectively, are creations that “overflow the boundaries of their openly occasional purpose” of celebrating St. Cecilia. Addison’s commemorative poem, two years after “Alexander’s Feast,” reverted to an elaborate treatment of the traditional St. Cecilia legend.

Despite the fact that that legend was predicated on Cecilia’s deep religious devotion, evidenced by her sustained vow of virginity, her life of charity, and her ultimate martyrdom, it shows no concern for her profoundly contemplative nature. That dimension of her being, however—pursued by Thomas Connolly in his exemplary book *Mourning Into Joy*—may well be what provides the true connection of Cecilia to music. The foremost evidence that Connolly cites is in the liturgical texts for the station-day at the church built by Pope Urban over Cecilia’s house, the building that preceded the present day ninth-century basilica called Santa Cecilia in Trastevere. Trastevere is the *rione* XIII of Rome, what we would call the 13th ward of Rome. It lies on the west bank of the Tiber River and south of Vatican City.

“Station-day” requires a bit more explanation. The early Christians established the practice of meeting in one place to celebrate the Eucharist together—people, clergy, bishop—as a sign of unity. As the size of the community increased, however, it became impossible for them all to assemble in one place, so they instituted several masses on the same day at various places throughout the city. The pope would say Mass at each of these meeting places in turn in accordance with a list that developed over time. Where the pope said Mass was the official eucharistic worship of the Roman Church, but to show that the priestly Eucharists elsewhere were one with the bishop’s an acolyte would carry some of the bread consecrated by the pope to the other masses where the priest would place it in the chalice as he intoned: “The peace of the Lord be always with you.” On the day of the pope’s presence at the designated meeting place he was said to keep the sta-
tion at that church. The station-day at Santa Cecilia in Trastevere was the Wednesday after the second Sunday of Lent, not to be confused in any way with St. Cecilia’s feast day, November 22.¹¹

Before turning to the specific features of the stational liturgy that can enlighten us concerning Cecilia and music, we once again consult the Passio, for even though, as I have already suggested, that work’s authenticity as an historical statement may be suspect, it is nonetheless particularly consequential because it has played such a formative role in the established accounts of Cecilia’s actions. The statement of particular note that reveals her contemplative habit says: “The holy and illustrious virgin Cecilia carried the gospel of Christ always hidden in her breast and never ceased by day or night from her divine colloquies and prayers.” Add the already-cited mention of her “singing in her heart” and the node for a Cecilia-music connection is in place. If to these lines of character definition we further add the historical fact that the exact site of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere was where the little shrine of the Bona Dea stood, Bona Dea being the Roman Good Goddess whom we introduced as we discussed Mucci’s libretto for Refice’s opera—the Roman deity whose particular powers were said to be dedicated to healing the blind—then we begin to replace the long-held suppositions about her musicality with more concrete evidence and a far more plausible explanation.

In the first instance the liturgy used on St. Cecilia’s station-day in Trastevere had an oration that referred to God as “restorer.” This usage in all probability was a conscious transference from the Roman cult’s habit of referring to Bona Dea as “restitutrix” because in healing blindness she restored light, and the early Christians’ naming God as “restorer” took heed of the pagan cult’s belief to establish a continuity of the healing function. Now, though, it had a Christian foundation. The already-mentioned derivation of Cecilia’s name from caecitas, blindness, and the ancient wedding of blindness and music all together hint—if not more—that they formed the first step in the Cecilia-music linkage.

The most compelling lesson in the stational liturgy came from
the Vulgate version of the Old Testament Book of Esther. The Vulgate was the Latin translation of the most celebrated and oldest complete Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint that Christ and his apostles used frequently. All of this matters because the stational lesson was taken from the verses in the Book of Esther that set forth the prayer for deliverance of the Jews from Haman’s threatened pogrom, a passage that was omitted from other Bible versions as apocryphal. The Jews were rescued from the wicked Haman, who by extension came to represent all enemies who rose up to destroy the Jews. In celebration the story was retold in drama, song, and parody and merrymaking became the order of the day following the form ordained in the Book of Esther 9:22: “Because in those days the Jews revenged themselves of their enemies, and their mourning and sorrow were turned into mirth and joy. And that these should be days of feasting and gladness, in which they should send one to another portions of meats, and should give gifts to the poor.” This is the feast of Purim.¹²

The station-day of St. Cecilia coincided with the beginning of Purim, and the lesson from Esther read on that day—drawn from chapter 13, specifically verse 17: “Hear my supplication, and be merciful to thy lot and inheritance. And turn our mourning into joy, that we may live and praise thy name, O Lord. And shut not the mouths of them that sing to thee.”—provided an even further connection to the Jewish feast featuring readings in the synagogue from the Book of Esther. The Jews have always regarded the Book of Esther, the last of the historical books of the Old Testament, with special honor. Christian views, on the other hand, have been divided on its merits, largely, some have argued, because in the Hebrew the name of God does not occur in it even once, though its great lesson is the overruling power of Providence.¹³ Moreover, since the end of the Roman Republic Trastevere was the center of an important Jewish community, a fact that further cements the connection of Purim and the station-day of St. Cecilia. These parallels offer a strong probability that St. Cecilia was a Jewish Christian. If she were, that fact would
go far, as Connolly points out, in helping to explain the long silence about her in the Gentile-Christian community.

The theme of mourning turned to joy goes well beyond the unbridled merrymaking of Purim, however. Ancient thought, still prevalent in the Middle Ages, held that all change in the universe is accounted for in the constant shifting of the two Aristotelian emotions of sadness and joy that operate in accordance with musical principles. Christians found sanction for such a concept in biblical passages like Job 30:31: “My harp is turned to mourning and my organ into the voice of those that weep,” and Lamentations 5:15–16: “The joy of our heart is ceased: our dancing is turned into mourning. The crown is fallen from our head. Woe to us, because we have sinned.” Also because of sin “the mirth of timbrels has ceased: the noise of them that rejoice is ended; the melody of the harp is silent” (Is 24:8). Such verses spawned many sermons and spiritual writings that addressed the inconstancy of the human soul.

Even though the hard-core devotee of Cecilia as the patron saint of music may be fully aware of the frequent occurrence of the just-cited and equivalent texts in the liturgy of St. Cecilia, it is Raphael’s painting “The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia with Sts. Paul, John the Evangelist, Augustine, and Mary Magdalene” that is the ne plus ultra statement of music abandoned as a result of sin—joy turned to mourning—and then restored through the contemplative heart of Cecilia—mourning turned to joy. Thus, a rather complete description of Raphael’s painting is in order here for the reader to understand what that painting is “about,” even though “aboutness” is in the end speculative and elusive. Most certainly verbal description can in no way reproduce the painting’s value as a work of art, but even with these serious limitations a description has both purpose and merit.

At first glance, the viewer is struck by the five figures so distinctly different from one another in attitude and pose. Cecilia as the focal center of the group quickly forces the viewer’s gaze to shift skyward to follow her own gaze toward a break in the clouds that exposes heavenly choristers. But then just as quickly the eye is drawn down-
ward, directed by the upside-down portative organ slipping from Cecilia’s hand toward the ground that is already cluttered with abandoned musical instruments: a viola da gamba with missing strings and its bow lying across the da gamba’s broken belly; three recorders; two tambourines; two small drums—one with its skin pierced—and their drumsticks; a triangle and a pair of cymbals.

Of the four other persons present, St. Paul at the left margin is dominant, a figure of some bulk standing a bit forward, pensively contemplating the broken instruments on the ground. His apparel provides the painting’s splash of color. His right hand supports his bearded chin while his left holds two slips of paper and the handle of a long sword whose point sits inside the musical triangle at his feet. Mary Magdalene at the far right edge of the depiction provides a sense of motion among the static poses of the other persons. Her left knee is bent and the folds of her elegant garment leave the impression that she has just moved into the scene carrying her traditional vessel of perfume. The viewer is fixed by her straight-on, unblinking eye contact. St. John, standing just behind Cecilia’s right shoulder and between her and Paul, is drawn as a beautiful youth, ostensibly looking across to St. Augustine who is turned in profile at Cecilia’s left shoulder and partly hidden by Mary Magdalene. Augustine is a balding middle-aged man of vigor who holds a crozier in one hand while slightly raising the other as if emphasizing a point in discourse. He wears a cope embroidered with human figures and returns John’s gaze.

Thomas Connolly’s scholarship has revealed that Raphael was thoroughly familiar with the teachings of Pietro da Lucca, a member of the Lateran Canons of Saint Fredonia and an influential preacher, spiritual director, and author. At the head of Pietro’s declared truths was the postulation of three operations of the soul: cogitation, meditation, and contemplation. Cogitation is thinking about the things of this world. In Pietro’s scheme of the spiritual life this is what Psalm 93:11 speaks of: “The Lord knows the thoughts of men, that they are vain.” In meditation the person wipes away vain thoughts, although with difficulty, and grasps the burning flame of divine love.
Psalm 38:4 declares: “When I meditated, a fire flamed out.” In contemplation the soul arrives at a union with the divine with an ease and delight not experienced in meditation. Contemplation carries a sweetness beyond thinking, a state that far exceeds ordinary human sensation. Raphael’s altarpiece has supremely captured Cecilia in contemplation. Then from Pietro rise the three zones of music with direct correlation to the three operations of the soul: the song of sadness, the song of joy, and the mixed song that is a blend of the other two. In “The Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia” the broken and discarded secular instruments on the ground depict the songs of sadness, and the heavenly choir bursting through the clouds overhead unequivocally represents the songs of joy. The organetto, or the portative organ, is the painting’s device to indicate mixed song. Traditionally that set of pipes is the instrument of church music, establishing the obvious connection to the songs of joy. The connection to the songs of sadness is in the organ’s positioning in the painting; it is upside down and backwards with the real possibility of slipping from Cecilia’s grasp. Nonetheless, Cecilia does hold it and can still right it. The struggle between the capabilities for sadness and joy conveys the mixed song. The organetto bridges heaven and earth.

Raphael’s selection of Cecilia’s companions in “The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia,” almost certainly influenced once again by Pietro, was a carefully considered one. St. Paul, historically named by many the foremost figure in the formative line of contemplatives, was extolled for his mystical experiences, his conversion, mentioned earlier, as well as his being taken up to the third heaven where God revealed to him “secret words that man may not repeat” (2 Cor 12:24). What he could and did repeat were profound teachings on charity, humility, and ecstasy. He likewise urged “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord” (Eph 5:19). Here we recognize in Paul’s phrase the words that found a central place in Cecilia’s legend. St. Augustine, traditionally called the founder of theology and heralded as the epitome of the penitential mood, joins the other persons in
the painting as an exemplar of contemplation, although in Raphael’s rendering he seems to be exhorting. It would not be far-fetched to speculate that he might be declaring his own deep affinity with music, for he made known that songs of the Church had moved him to such an abundance of tears that they furrowed his cheeks, an admission reported by Giovanni Gerson, author of *The Mount of Contemplation* and a most influential voice in Piotr’s appreciation of Raphael.

The other two figures, John and Mary Magdalene, are also established pillars of contemplation in Christian thought and are particularly praised for their intense devotion to Christ. They were a pair linked to each other in their own legend, a narrative that is highly suspect in the minds of many authorities but one that bears retelling because it is cognate to Cecilia’s own. That legend says that Mary Magdalene and John were the bride and groom at the wedding at Cana. At the wedding feast Jesus called John to leave all and follow him and by so doing desert his wife on their wedding day. Some versions of the story say that Magdalene’s being abandoned by John was what induced her to turn to the life of carnal pleasure repeatedly claimed to have been her erstwhile role. That life of sinfulness, however, dwindled to insignificance in the face of her great penitence demonstrated as she bathed Jesus’s feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the oil from her alabaster jar. She who loved much was unqualifiedly forgiven and received Jesus’s reciprocal love, particularly shown in his casting out seven demons from her and raising her to the position of the most loved of his women followers. John, Scripture remarks, was the disciple whom Jesus especially loved (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24), so Christ’s love for them transformed their onetime earthly love into a shared divine love. This legend reverberates in the story of Cecilia and Valerian. It may also inform the interpretation of Raphael’s painting by those who argue that John is glancing at Mary Magdalene rather than returning Augustine’s gaze.14

Looking back on what has been presented here, one is struck by the number of persons and the range of artistic expression cited to affirm
a Cecilian reality. When Professor Hollander, talking of Cecilia, said that it is idle to expect to extract history from romance he was speaking with limited definitions of both “history” and “romance.” He was saying that the narrative of Cecilia’s life is probably more fiction than fact, a fiction both fanciful and exaggerated whose scene and incidents are remote from those of ordinary life. To address that conclusion we point out that even though there are without question persons whose impact on human history is apparent to everyone at the time of their existence, there are others whose significance seems to grow in retrospect as it becomes clear that the consequences of their lives, actual or embellished, are felt in later times. For St. Cecilia that impact has been as inspiration for innumerable works of art that do not float free of the inspiration but invite one to immerse him or herself in the spiritual legacy of the contemplation that prompted them. Even though theimmersers might be relatively few in the broad scope of things there is a marvelous aspect to the simple gesture of folding the divine into daily life. This is what the opera-goer experienced when Renata Scotto delivered so committedly Emidio Mucci’s exquisitely crafted words for Licinio Refice’s supreme music that breathes in every bar a Schubertian yearning, wistfulness, lyric tenderness, fervent beauty, or charm as its expressive movement demanded. All of that was spawned by the miraculous life and being of Cecilia. This ordinary-life experience, at once sacramental and a lot of fun, embraces the historical and the romantic in the divine gifts of all the collaborators.

If this late achievement had been the only product of Cecilian inspiration it might still have been sufficient to declare her the patron saint of music, if such declarations were being offered in its time. But it was not the only one. Across centuries countless paintings, sculptures, architectural constructs, poems, and songs from Cecilia’s inspiration commend themselves as they eclipse nature but still retain nature’s truth, softness, warmth, radiance, tautened vibrations or explosive force of life. As Percy Bysshe Shelley said of Raphael’s “Ecstasy of St. Cecilia,” Cecilia’s inspiration provides art with a “unity and perfection of an incommunicable kind.”
Franz Schubert, the greatest of all song writers, using Shakespeare’s text wrote, “Who is Sylvia? What is she?” a song that itself partakes of the miraculous. With only the slightest emendation we could to good purpose adapt it to “Who’s Cecilia? What is she?” Its own yearning, wistful, personal note of lyric tenderness and fervor would help us answer: “One who cannot be smothered under the ashes of legend.”

Notes

11. Connolly, 47. For the factual details in our discussion of Cecilia’s contemplative nature as the source of her connection to music, I have relied heavily on Connolly’s thorough and extensive scholarship.