

**Novellara: music and culture  
at a 'minor' Italian Renaissance court**

**Iain Fenlon**

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Knowledge of the career of the Flemish composer, Giaches de Wert (1535-96), has been transformed in recent years by Dr. Fenlon's discovery of his correspondence in the Gonzaga archives at Novellara. The letters have been published by him in a scholarly edition issued by the Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance in 1999. He used these documents to consider the place of de Wert in the Gonzaga household at Novellara, one of the more obscure Italian courts of the period. As he pointed out, there was nothing unusual in a musician from northern Europe pursuing a career in Italy at this time. De Wert married a second cousin by an illegitimate descent of his employer, Alfonso I Gonzaga (1529-89), and he and Alfonso became close friends. The usual assumption has been that Novellara was little more than a satellite of Mantua, and indeed de Wert moved on to become the choirmaster at the larger court. However, Fenlon argued that, in musical terms, that assumption is too simplistic; de Wert was a major composer while still at Novellara. Fenlon also stressed the extent to which music-making at court remained as much an activity for amateur performers as for the professionals. Distinctions were blurred, with courtiers acting as musicians and the senior musicians being themselves courtiers. **AB**