

Darja Koter

Univerza v Ljubljani, Akademija za glasbo
University of Ljubljana, Academy of music

Musical Symbols: The Symbiosis of Religious and Secular Themes in Art Heritage

Glasbeni simboli: Sožitje verskih in posvetnih tem v likovni dediščini

Prejeto: 7. januar 2013
Sprejeto: 27. marec 2013

Received: 7th January 2013
Accepted: 27th March 2013

Ključne besede: glasbena ikonografija, simolika, glasbeni instrumenti, likovna dediščina

Keywords: music iconography, symbolism, musical instruments, art heritage

IZVLEČEK

Interpretacija glasbenih simbolov na freskah, slikah in arhitekturnem okrasju lahko prikaže duhovno plat simbolike. Nekaj primerov likovne dediščine slovenskih cerkva in palač iz časa med 16. in 18. stoletjem prikazuje medsebojno povezanost verskih in posvetnih vsebin. S tem kažejo, da je imelo prednost simbolizirano sporočilo, medtem ko je bila izbira teme – ki je bila lahko bolj ali manj duhovna in/ali posvetna – obstranska.

ABSTRACT

The interpretation of musical symbols the frescos, paintings and architectural details could explain the spiritual dimension of the symbolism. Some examples from the Slovenian art heritage of churches and palaces from the 16th to 18th century demonstrate the interplay between religious and secular content, which suggests that the symbolic value of the depictions is a priority, while the selection of themes which could be more or less spiritual or/and secular are not of the greatest significance

Musical themes and their symbols in art heritage, such as oil pictures, wall paintings, architectural elements and many others, are often depicted in classical mythology and represent the nature of religion and cosmic harmony, as well as public and private secular life. They are associated with spiritual and philosophical meanings and concepts, visually representing the harmony of the spheres and human life and drawing our attention to the power of the universe. The mutuality of artistic and musical language has created a colorful line of works of art that serve as valuable witnesses to the history of music, its features, meanings, performance practice, and last but not least,

religious and secular motifs and their symbolic meanings. Spiritual and secular art are often closely linked. The most significant elements within symbolic meanings are musical instruments, which illustrate the numerous spiritual and philosophical themes.¹ They could illustrate the seven liberal arts, the five senses, or function as an allegory for hearing; they might appear as attributes of planets, months and zodiac characters in the personalization of music; they might feature in biblical scenes, in the harmony of the spheres, in love scenes, or they could be a part of the musical practices of the church liturgy and the glorification of God's attributes, alongside the figures of King David, St. Cecilia, Apollo and the Muses, Orpheus, Dionysus... The interdisciplinary study of visual sources with musical motifs can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the symbolic meaning of art and the social and cultural characteristics of civilization. The interweaving of various disciplines, which is indispensable in analyzing art and art and music history, requires a common research platform.²



Figure 1: *Coronation of Mary, c. 1490, Johannes de Castua, Church of the Holy Trinity in Hrastovlje.*

-
- 1 See: Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Ervin Panofsky, *Pomen v likovni umetnosti* (Ljubljana: ŠKUC, Znanstveni inštitut FF, 1994).
- 2 See Tom Philips, *Music in Art – Through the Ages* (Münich/New York: Prestel, 1997). Anđelko Badurina, *Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike zapadnog kršćanstva* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1979).



Figure 2: *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, 1516, Vittore Carpaccio, Cathedral of the Assumption in Capodistria/Koper.



Figure 3: *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, 1516, Vittore Carpaccio, detail: Minstrel and angels with musical instruments.



Figure 5: *Madonna and Child with Piran Town Fathers*, Domenico Tintoretto and co-workers, 1578, Pirano/Piran Municipal Palace.



Figure 4: Last Judgment, detail: angel with a long straight trumpet, beginn. of the 15th c., local artist, Church of St Stephen in Zanigrad/Sanigrado, Istria.

Angel Musicians and Musical Instruments on Wall and Ceiling Paintings

The majority of frescoes that feature heavily throughout medieval and renaissance churches depict angel musicians in the scenes of the Coronation of Mary, the Last Judgment, in the glory of heaven, and individual instruments as part of genre scenes. In a variety of religions, angels are intermediaries between God and the secular life, serving God as messengers, guardians and guides. These roles originated in ancient religions, Persian in particular. The figure of the angel originates in the worldly life from the courtiers and the messenger of the ancient Persian kingdom. In the 5th century AD, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagit divided the hierarchy and created a mystical theory of angels. From several examples, I would like to present the great fresco work (painted in the year 1490 by Janez of Kastav – Johannes de Castua) which covers the entire interior of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Hrastovlje on the west side of Slovenia, in the Istria region. It is distinguished by an all-encompassing and also carefully considered programme of theological content, which includes: Genesis, the Coronation of our Lady, representations of months, Passion of the Christ, and not least the role of the Dance of Death in the Last Judgment. The impressive scenes of the salvation symbolize the spirit of monumental French art of the 13th century.³ In accordance with the spirit of the time religious topics found expression in the depiction of more human figures with various feelings and moods. The scene portraying the *Coronation of Our Lady* (dated c. 1490) in the church of Hrastovlje includes angels playing the portative, fiddle, lute, straight trumpet, rebec and the medieval guitar known as the gittern, which were typical instruments in the 15th century. The portative, a medieval and early Renaissance organ, carried by a strap for playing while standing or walking, was exceptional in that it was the only instrument used in private and religious life; it was in fairly common use for both private music and dancing in noble circles, and also in church processions. The other musical instruments in St. Mary's coronation were usually used in private to accompany singing and dancing or for playing in a small group. The fiddle, rebec and lute were commonly used by troubadours, jugglers, minnensängers and other musicians; their public use stood in contrast to the spiritual life. Depictions of the angelic choir show the ensemble as an example of heavenly music, glorifying a heaven with all their semantic resources, proving that such daily practices neither existed in the church or secular sphere. Nevertheless, all the painted musical instruments, although depicted in a schematic way, represent musical instruments close to the spiritual sphere - we have already mentioned the portative, while the straight trumpet featured in the Last Judgment, and all other string instruments are symbols of heavenly harmonious music. In this respect we could stress that the angelic ensemble is not so far removed from religious practice, although such a group of musical instruments had little in common with church music. An example of this is the oil picture *Coronation of Our Lady* (1537) by Benedetto Carpaccio (b. ca. 1500 in Venice, d. after 1560 in Capodistria/Koper), the son of a well-known painter Vittore Carpaccio, a Venetian who became a resident of Capodistria/Koper in 1560. The painting of Benedetto Carpaccio, originating from Rotunda in

3 Janez Höfler, *Srednjeveške freske v Sloveniji*, vol. II, *Primorska* (Ljubljana: Družina, 1997), 31–32; Marijan Zadnikar, *Hrastovlje. Romanska arhitektura in gotске freske* (Ljubljana: Družina, 2002), 15–25.

Capodistria/Koper, shows six angel musicians, all of them with string instruments, like a symbol of the Glory of Heaven.⁴

A similar symbiosis between the secular and religious world is evident in the Renaissance paintings with the motif of Mary on the throne or Sacred Conversation (St. Anna in Capodistria/Koper, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saint Nicholas and Joseph*), where the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus are depicted amid a group of saints and angels or cherubs musicians. Musical Angels are as a rule placed on the steps under the throne. One of the common elements of the motif as a sign of Mary's glorification was a book (or books) of the Virgin Mary's hymns. Angels or cherubs can be seen as children singing with instrumental accompaniment, as was usual practice during the Renaissance. Alongside the usual musical instruments seen in the motif of the Sacred Conversation, we can recognize the rebec, lute, fiddle and lira da braccio, which were typical in musical practice during the 15th and 16th century and were also symbols of heavenly music. Two of the most outstanding examples of the described motif are the pictures of Girolamo da Santacroce (b. ca. 1480, d. 1556), a Venetian painter from the school of the renowned Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1430-1516). The first one is preserved in the central church in Isola/Izola (*Sacra Conversazione*) and the second in the church of St. Anna in Capodistria/Koper (*Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saint Nicholas and Joseph*), nowadays part of restitution material kept in Italy.⁵ The impact of everyday musical practice confirms that in general there was much more freedom regarding instruments during the Renaissance period, while the earlier Christian world had displayed a strong antagonism to musical instruments as representative objects of paganism.

Characteristic of the interweaving of some sacral and secular motifs are angels depicted as Minstrels—seen in the Renaissance religious paintings with images of the Virgin Mary, such as Sacred Conversation. One of the typical examples is the oil picture *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, kept by the Cathedral of the Assumption in Capodistria/Koper. It was painted by the famous Venetian artist Vittore Carpaccio (around 1465–1525/26) in 1516. The picture was commissioned by members of the noble families of Capodistria/Koper Capello and Contarini, as demonstrated by the coat of arms painted on the pillars. The painting exhibits a minstrel with a lute and cherubs with a harp and crumhorn. The minstrel is a secular figure, a medieval bard who performed songs about existing or imaginary historical events; they were often retained by noblemen and many become wandering minstrels who performed in the streets. However, they also symbolize a sophisticated sphere that is emphasized with aureole, seen in the mentioned picture, and the two books of scores as a symbol of hymns. The figure with the lute is taken from Carpaccio's work the *Presentation in the Temple*, held by the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice, where we can also see an angel with a crumhorn and lyre da braccio. The lutenist in both pictures is modeled on real instruments that were typical for musical instruments makers in Bologna in the early 16th c., and in use during the whole century. The artist is sitting cross-legged, leaning the lute on his left knee, his chin resting on the edge of the resonant (resonant body is ok) body, while

4 Darja Koter, *Musica coelestis et musica profana. Glasbeni motivi v likovni dediščini od severne Istre do Vremske doline* (Koper: Pokrajinski muzej, 2008), 45–46.

5 Koter, *Musica coelestis et musica profana*, 38–39.

his face looks towards his left hand, with which he is strumming. He is using the thumb of his right hand to play, which points to a modern method of playing that replaced the plectrum at the end of the 15th century. As a rule, realistic depictions of the musicians' pose and manner of play are uncommon in pictures with a religious motif. The majority of depicted musical instruments have a schematic body lacking in detail, while the way they are played is largely non-realistic (it seems as though the figure is simply holding the instrument rather than actually playing it). The harp depicted in the cherub's hand reminds us of a small medieval instrument, familiar to wandering musicians or clerics, and used to accompany songs and dance. It is the harp that unites the sky and the earth; its sound symbolizes the pursuit of happiness. The third musical instrument, the crumhorn, is depicted as a typical soprano instrument of the 16th c., with no similar depictions having been found in pictorial sources.⁶ While the harp could be a symbol of celestial or secular music, the crumhorn is a distinctly secular element. Furthermore, since ancient times, woodwind instruments have been synonymous with the orgiastic cult of Dionysian music, which carried overwhelmingly negative connotations in the Christian world. In spite of all this, they become increasingly popular during medieval and Renaissance times, which influenced the development of diverse shapes and types of musical instruments, such as recorders, crumhorns, cornets or shawms and others. The crumhorn was essentially an instrument played by professional musicians at court to provide dance music and in the town wind bands which played on the streets, from the church or town towers etc., in common use especially during the 16th and 17th century.⁷

Instruments are also featured on the wall painting *Adoration of the Magi*, which features an equestrian procession of the kings, accompanied by an aristocratic suite and musicians depicted above genre scenes with hunters, animals and grotesque figures. The illustration of the knight procession, placed on a landscape of medieval towns and castles with contemporary dressed figures, is an imitation of the period without religious objects and symbols. The symbolization of the scene is a pronouncement of regal power.⁸ All of these characteristics can be seen in the examples from the end of the 15th century preserved in the Church in Hrastovlje and in the Church of St Helen in Gradišče near Divača. On the first fresco, we can see two riders carrying a straight and an S-shaped trumpet, while one has a small drum and a necklace of sleigh bells around his neck. The performance practice of trumpeters or trombone players and kettledrums (in this case replaced by a small drum and sleigh bells) originate from the Arabic World, and become a part of the noble processions during the crusades. Until around 1300, trumpet players were travelling musicians, but during the next two centuries they become city musicians or part of the nobleman trumpet corps, performing improvised harmonies of various sounds. The medieval straight trumpet (1 to 2 meters long) of wood, bronze or silver consisted generally of four sections, with a mouthpiece (a simple widening of the tube), cylindrical bore and slight bell, and were usually sounded in pairs as signals. Around 1400, instrument

6 Koter, *Musica coelestis et musica profana*, 40–41.

7 Barra R. Boydell, "Crumhorn", *The New Grove, Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, ed. by Stanley Sadie, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 519–523.

8 Höfler, *Srednjeveške freske v Sloveniji, Primorska*, vol. II, 95.

makers learned how to bend the tube to make an S-shaped trumpet.⁹ Another depiction that represents profane musicians with brass and percussion instruments can be found in the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Church of St Helen in Gradišče near Divača. Its similarity to the image in Hrastovlje suggests it could have been painted by the same master around the same time (1490). The procession depicts three trumpeters with straight trumpets performing music in a manner typical of knight processions. The trumpets even have hanging banners – in this case without the blazon that defined a nobleman's family. The genre scene includes animals, beaters and hunters, with two of them carrying hunting horns, depicting an everyday country life.

The straight trumpet could be seen as playing the role of uniting heaven and earth, as seen on the fresco depicting the Last Judgment. Another eloquent example is the Church of St Stephen in Sanigrado/Zanigrad, Istria, from the beginning of the 15th century: there is an angel with a long straight trumpet announcing the resurrection of the dead and two angels with straight trumpets surrounding Christ in a mandorla, similar to the sound of God. The fresco was reportedly painted by local artists from the Friuli region or Istria.¹⁰ All of these instruments bear a schematic shape that point to their symbolic meaning.

One of the prominent functions of trumpeters was the announcement and praise of solemn ceremonies, as seen in the painting *Madonna and Child with Piran Town Fathers* (1578), preserved in the main hall of Piran Municipal Palace. It was reportedly painted by Domenico Tintoretto and painters working for his famous father Jacopo (dated to 1578).¹¹ The picture is a votive painting with symbols of secular and religious worship-connected with *Sacra Conversazione*. The iconography of the Virgin and Child with the patrons St Marko and St George is supplemented with figures of the city dignitaries of Pirano/Piran, who are pledging themselves to divine figures. The devout contents are supplemented with a secular motive. At the forefront are municipal notabilities accompanying a young man who is committing himself to God. The figure with a hat may have been the municipal judge between 1600 and 1602, Giovanni Battista Baseggia, the father of the kneeling young man. The identity of the person could be proven by the banner with a coat-of-arms, a symbol of the family, fastened at the trumpet on the right. The picture shows a trumpeter with a baroque style natural trumpet which was most probably added later, presumably in the second half of the 18th c. The trumpeter, possible as a portrait, is a secular figure who served nobleman, municipal and church authorities, well known during the 16th and 17th century. The trumpet has a brilliant sound, created for the purpose of rallying military forces and sounding signals associated with religious and secular ceremonies for playing outdoors, in churches and palaces. In the ancient testaments it is mentioned as a sacred instrument, a symbol of angels and/or the godly voice.¹²

In fine arts heritage, musical elements also appear in architectural ornamentation: on stucco ceilings, plastically sculptured friezes, reliefs, stone ornaments on steps and facades of imposing buildings and palaces, walls around organ lofts in churches ... Their

9 Edward H. Tarr, "Trumpet", *The New Grove, Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, ed. by Stanley Sadie, vol. 3 (London: Macmillian Press, 1995), 641–649.

10 Höfler, *Srednjeveške freske v Sloveniji, Primorska*, vol. II, 151–154.

11 Duška Žitko, *La grande tela del Domenico Tintoretto dedicata alla Vergine Maria con bambino ed i padri cittadini nuovamente eposta nel palazzo del comune di Pirano, Lasa pur dir* (Pirano: Trillo, 1997), 132–135.

12 Koter, *Musica coelestis et musica profana*, 31.

depictions mostly bear symbolic meanings, with music standing for cosmic harmony and perfection. Sometimes they illustrate the mission of ecclesiastical and secular buildings. The Cathedral of the Assumption in Capodistria/Koper boasts architectural ornamentation on the wall around the organ loft, which was created in the first half of the 18th c. when the cathedral was enlarged. The stylized decoration is made of colored and gilded stucco. Sculptured in gilded bas-reliefs, the stylized instruments are displayed on thirteen panels, with individual panels being structured as still lifes with books of scores and musical instruments and decorated ribbons. The reliefs show various wind (recorder, shawm, oboe), brass (trombone, post horn), string (lute, violin, harp, psaltery) and percussion instruments (triangle, tambourine), as well as a mechanical instrument reminiscent of the barrel organ. The instruments sculpted in the frieze can be interpreted as symbols of heavenly perfection, with music connecting heaven and earth and singing praise to the Lord. Among the depicted instruments are some explicitly secular examples, such as the tambourine, post horn, bagpipe, barrel organ and some others.

The interpretation of musical symbols on the frescos, paintings and architectural details could explain the spiritual dimension of the symbolism. Some examples from the Slovenian art heritage of churches and palaces from the 16th to 18th century demonstrate the interplay between religious and secular content, which suggests that the symbolic value of the depictions is a priority, while the selection of themes which could be more or less spiritual or/and secular are not of the greatest significance. The noblemen who placed orders of art equipment for churches or palaces during the Renaissance and Baroque period were, as a rule, active in academies, well educated in literature, philosophy, science, art and other noble fields, which were the main subjects of the creation of the symbiosis of religious and secular topics.

POVZETEK

Prepletanje sakralnih in posvetnih motivov je v kulturni dediščini stalnica glasbenih tem in njihovih simbolnih pomenov. Najdemo jih na slikah, stenskih poslikavah, arhitekturnih elementih in drugje. Upodobljeni so v klasični mitologiji, posebljajo naravo vere in nebeško harmonijo ter posvetno življenje javnega in intimnega značaja. Glasbene simbole povezujemo tudi z duhovnimi in filozofskimi pomeni ter z miselnimi pojmi, vizualizirajo harmonijo sfer, manifestirajo človekovo življenje ter poudarjajo vsakdanost in moč univerzuma. Vzajemnost likovne in glasbene govornice je ustvarila bogato bero umetniških del in predmetov umetne obrti, ki so dragoceni pričevalci glasbene zgodovine, njenih značilnosti, pomenov, izvajalske prakse in ne nazadnje pričajo o simbolnih pomenih duhovnih in posvetnih razsežnosti, ki so večkrat tesno povezani. Med najpogostejšimi upodobljenimi glasbenimi motivi s

simbolnimi pomeni so glasbila, ki ilustrirajo številne teme. S poglobljeno interpretacijo motivov na freskah, slikah in arhitekturnih elementih lahko spoznamo široke dimenzije simbolov. Posamezni likovni primeri iz dediščine v cerkvah in palačah iz slovenske Istre in obalnih mest, kot so Koper, Izola in Piran, ki datirajo v obdobje med 16. in 18. stoletjem, demonstrirajo simbiozo sakralnih in posvetnih simbolov. Prepoznamo jih na različnih motivih, kot so Marijino kronanje, poslednja soba, nebeška harmonija, sveti razgovor oziroma Sacra Conversazione, pohod in poklon sv. treh kraljev in ne nazadnje na žanrskih prizorih. Prioriteta njihove povednosti je v simbolni vrednosti, kar pomeni, da prihaja tudi do pogostega prepletanja oziroma interakcije med sakralno in posvetno motiviko. To ne preseneča, saj so bili naročniki umetniških del v obravnavanem obdobju večinoma plemiči, sicer praviloma aktivni v akademijah in dobro izobraženi v literaturi, filozofiji, znanosti in umetnosti, kar je tvorilo odlično izhodišče za prepletanje duhovnih in svetnih simbolov.