The Dangers of Mediæval Iconography

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Most of what we know about the mediæval musical instruments comes from the iconography of the period. There are texts that name instruments, there are even some descriptive texts, and even fewer texts with illustrations, but the bulk of our information is iconographical. However, iconography can be a dangerous tool, especially in the early Mediæval period. The early iconography, most of which dates from the ninth century onwards, tells us much about the history of instruments, for example with the organ, from the hydraulis of the Utrecht Psalter through the gradual development of the pneumatic organ. Another example is the fiddle and its bow, appearing in Byzantium and, less recognisably, in Mozarabic Spain, and thus revealing its route into Europe. But almost everything in this period, up to about the eleventh century, is very sketchy and some of it, especially the Mozarabic manuscripts, looks to be improbable.

Much is dangerous, too, because a great deal of the early iconography that we have is liturgical. What we see is King David with his musicians, Nebuchadrezzar's band in Daniel, illustrations of the Psalms, and a few other biblical events. Yes, we see the instruments of each artists's own period (we can ignore the imaginative efforts of Pseudo-Jerome, none of which bears the slightest resemblance to anything of biblical times), and these may be useful, but we see them grouped according to biblical texts, which are unlikely to bear any resemblance to any use in the Middle Ages. We see David's musicians playing loud and soft (*haut et bas*) together, and we have good literary evidence that this didn't happen in the Mediæval period. We see the instruments in Psalms, especially Ps. 150, again *haut et bas* together, and the same literary evidence applies. We see David taking the Ark to Zion, and we have little evidence that such large groups of players ever played together in the Middle Ages. We also have many secular scenes showing multiple groups, often illustrating imagi-

nary stories such as the Romance of Alexander. Almost all such iconography can mislead us into the way that music was actually played in the Middle Ages.

Another problem is the common use in this period of copy books that were passed from hand to hand for artists to reproduce, and many of these were not very accurate. Many of the iconographers had only a limited knowledge of the instruments they were portraying. And because the copy books were passed from one iconographer to another we can be misled by what was played in different places, and probably also at different periods.

One of our major problems is that many of the images were small, or were made in intractable materials such as stone, and therefore could show only limited details. Even when details are apparent, we can see only one side of an instrument, and – and to this we shall return below – we can never see the inside of any instrument.

Therefore we need to be somewhat sceptical about what we see.

Even when we do see what appear to be realistic portrayals, accompanied by confirmation from other very similar portrayals, we are, as Laurence Libin has pointed out at Professor Margaret Bent's recent seminar at All Souls College in Oxford, very far from being able to make realistic reconstructions of any of the instruments. We can know nothing whatsoever from the iconography, of any realistic constructional details. What was the wood or other materials? How thick was it? Was it seasoned? Were bodies monoxyle or box-made? Did string instruments have sound-posts? Were bellies barred underneath? What shape or diameter were woodwind bores? Were fingerholes undercut? What species of animal did skins come from? How were they secured and tensioned? Were strings of gut or of what other materials? What sort of twist were they? And there are many, many other such questions. Even what size were the instruments and can we trust comparison with the player's body size or the interocular width? What size is an angel? How many could dance on the head of a pin? Any reconstruction can be based only on guess-work and the modern maker's experience of the fundamentals of how one makes instruments.

Even if we try to reconstruct them, what do we know about how to play them? Lutes, yes, to a great extent, partly because we have instruction books, for the lute had a long life, from the thirteenth century into the eighteenth, and they are still played in the Near East and North Africa. But others are more problematic. Were other plucked instruments and the bowed instruments fingered on to the neck? Some we see had a fingerboard, but others had not. Were the string pressed to the bare neck? Were they stopped lightly by the finger on the string? Were they stopped by the fingernails on the side of the string? Did players ever shift position on the neck? We cannot know. Were plectra soft or hard? Many look like slips of wood or other materials, though many were obviously quills, which can be more flexible.

Woodwinds produce many problems. We know how we would play them, but did they play them in the same ways? We have surviving instruments right back to the Neolithic period, thousands of years ago, for bone instruments will survive burial in the earth, where wood and reed will not, and people today will confidently tell us their scales and pitches. But peoples around the world use all sorts of different fingering systems, different from those we use today. Did they lift their fingers, one by one from the lowest hole like we do? Some don't, some lift fingers in pairs. Did they cross-finger? Did they half-hole? Did they vary their breath-pressure? Did the instruments in the mediæval iconography have undercut fingerholes? For that matter, what sort of scales did they have? Heptatonic? Pentatonic? Modal?

And for trumpets. We see them realistically from the thirteenth century onwards. They look identical to those still used in Nigeria and Ghana today – there they just play a couple of notes right at the bottom of the range. What did the mediæval players play? The same as in West Africa? Or did they fanfare? Or did they just blow wild flourishes at the top of the range as in Tribal India or China? Or did they blow like a Boy Scout bugler? Were those whom we see with one hand on the mouthpiece and one lower down blowing draw-trumpets? Many of us believe they were, but some of us believe they weren't.

We know how pipe and tabor players played because they are still played today in southern Europe, but how did they play a pair of nakers? Two pitches?

And if so, how did that match the music that survives – very little of that matches any tonic and dominant patterns, for example. Or were there two tone qualities, one bright and one dull? And if neither, why were there two drums?

And then voices. Some readers will remember the way we sang in Musica Reservata, a hard Balkan- or folk-like sound. Did they sing like that in the Middle Ages or did they sing like the Anglican church hoot? Or, like we did, did they use both styles? Or neither? And if so, what styles or how did they sing?

And what did they play or sing? There is little point in discussing instruments of the earlier period for which no non-texted music survives, unless we believe that instrumental music, other than the organ, was played to accompany chant in church services. This is controversial. There were so many repeated prohibitions of using instrumental music in church services that on the one hand we can say there wasn't any, and on the other hand we can ask why would they keep on forbidding it if it did not happen. One thing that we can say is that all the known music that we have was written specifically for voices up until around the thirteenth century, when we begin to have some music that does not have words written within it, so this period might be where to start.

And the best place to begin is with the Cantigas de Santa Maria, for it is there that we see the instruments of three communities: the Moorish, the Castilian, and the Jewish. It is there, too, that we see a whole series of new instruments coming into Spain, and spreading rapidly and widely across Europe. We see the long trumpet, more credibly than the improbably splayed instrument of the Mozarabic iconography. We see the lute. We see the rebab which became the rebec. We see bagpipes, some more likely than others. We see credible fiddles unlike the Mozarabic spades, with more realistic bows than the Mozarabic semicircles. We see other plucked instruments, including those that became guitars and vihuelas. We see pipe and tabor. We see the symphony. We see the transverse flute. We see reed-blown woodwind. We see horns. We see a carillon. We see the portative organ. We see psalteries of a variety of shapes. We see clappers, precursors of the castanets. We see chime bells. We see harps. And most of these we have never seen before they appeared in this manuscript of the

last quarter of the thirteenth century. There are in fact three manuscripts of the Cantigas. One I do not know; another (T.j.1) has fewer illustrations but includes instruments from Outre-Mer, the Levant, in Lovillo's facsimile; and the third (j.b.2) has all those and many others noted above, in Higinio Anglés's execrably printed facsimile. And there are many, but I think not all, of the illustrations available on the web.

Thereafter illustrations proliferate throughout Europe, church manuscripts: bibles, prayer books, and psalters; astrological treatises; poetic romances; paintings and carvings in churches and houses. We even see some illustrations of playing technique, like the thumb under the lowest string of the fiddle and citole in Lincoln's Angel Choir, obviously plucking the string upwards in a rhythmic drone. But never, ever, do we see the details of construction technique. We have to guess. We have to use our own knowledge of how to make instruments today, as I did when I first made my reconstructions of mediæval percussion instruments.

I know how drums are made. I knew that if there were to be a snare there had to be a snare bed under the skin; otherwise the snare will stand proud of the skin and will not sound. I knew that drum-heads must be tensioned if they are to sound. I knew that if there were no counter-hoops (and no illustration ever shows one), the head had to be tensioned through the flesh-hoop. And so I faked up my drums. And I knew that dance music had to be rhythmically accompanied and that dancers had to know, from the rhythm, which foot went with which beat of the music – Thoinot Arbeau teaches us that. And so I faked the music, too, for no percussion music survives until Arbeau's.

And this is the result of all our work in reconstructing early musical instruments.

We fake them.