The History of Musical Iconography and the
Influence of Art History

Pictures as Sources and Interpreters of Musical History

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Introduction

Musical iconography is a prime example of a research field that emerged through
the affiliation of two disciplines from the humanities. Over a period of 150 years,
musicologists had already turned to art works in search of visual evidence to
guide in the reconstruction of musical instruments and historical performance
practices. Understood as being fundamentally representational in nature, pictures
were used as reliable historical sources, by Julius Rühlmann or Hugo Leichten-
tritt, for example. In the twentieth century, under the influence of the Warburg
School, this field of study expanded into an independent research field known as
‘musical iconography’. Aiming at more that the mere reconstruction of historical
instruments, the ideological content of musical representations now came into
focus. Pictures were analyzed as artifacts capable of revealing insights into the
history of ideas, for instance, a period’s understanding of music. With the intro-
duction of iconography and iconology into the discipline, the connection between
musicology and art history became firmly established. The core methods of mu-
sical iconography derive both from musicology (musical theory and organology)
and from art history (iconography and iconology). Musical iconography is hence
founded upon an interdisciplinary relationship between these two humanities
subjects.

This interrelation is emphasized by most definitions for ‘musical iconography’,
the last part of which is composed of grapheín, the Greek term for ‘describing’,
and eikón, meaning ‘picture’. In 1984, Reinhold Hammerstein (1910-2010) defined
musical iconography as a field in which two disciplines merge: musicology and art
history. In his words, it is a sector marked by the ‘relationship between the world
of beholding and that of hearing in general’. In 1997, Tilmann Seebaß (1939-),
editor of the first journal of musical iconography, Imago Musicae, summed up the
difficulties of the field as follows:
Musical iconography requires both art-historical and musicological expertise. Whoever doesn’t possess both will encounter analytical difficulties, be it because he misjudges the idiosyncrasies of the visual medium, or because he lacks the necessary organological, terminological, or socio-historical knowledge.4

Seebaß therefore concluded that one should follow the intrinsic clues of the artwork by applying the methods and expertise of musicology and art history. Otherwise, he warned, the artwork’s meaning could not be fully grasped.

At the time of its emergence, the eventual title of the research field, ‘musical iconography’, had not yet been coined. One of its later subsectors, the reconstruction of musical instruments and historical performance practices with the help of visual representations, in fact evolved within the research field of organology. With the development of the term ‘Musikwissenschaft’ (musicology) and the establishment of the first professorships for music in 1826 in Germany, studies dealing with musical iconography became increasingly common in organology.5 For instance, in Guido Adler’s classification of musicological subdisciplines of 1885, they are listed in the historical block under the section ‘History of Musical Instruments’.6 The introduction of the composite term ‘musical iconography’ signalizes the gradual institutionalization of the subject. It was first used in 1922 by William Barclay Squire in reference to a collection of musicians’ portraits.7 In 1954, Albert G. Hess applied the term to a collection of pictures that was meant to function as an ‘important documentary source’ for performance practice and instrument reconstruction.8 Since 1971, the year in which the Répertoire international d’iconographie musicale was founded as the first institution devoted explicitly to musical iconography, the term has been more broadly defined to also include iconographical and iconological studies.9

Establishment under the umbrella of organology:
Pictures as sources

Julius Rühlmann (1816–1877) devoted himself to the reconstruction of bow instruments with the aim of reacquiring the musical knowledge of a period and performing historical pieces in the original manner.10 In his posthumously published Geschichte der Bogeninstrumente (1882), he depicted bows and bridges of string instruments, which he had copied from historical manuscripts, prints, and paintings. For example, he virtually took the bow of a fiddling angel from Raphael’s Coronation of the Virgin (1502–1504) out of its hand in order to use it as a historical source in his book, where he depicted it in isolation from its original context.
Rühlmann concentrated his efforts strictly on the form and its development. ‘In the second period, we observe that the strongly arched shape of the stick has been maintained, but already shows signs of a frog and a head. The latter begins to develop from the other two forms in the fifteenth century’. By means of this extraction from visual sources, Rühlmann tried to gain insight into the construction of musical instruments in different centuries and to trace their formal development. In doing so, he interpreted pictures as blueprints for his reconstructions.

Taking an approach similar to Rühlmann’s, Hugo Leichtentritt (1874-1951) attempted to reconstruct historical performance practices. In his article ‘Was lehren uns die Bildwerke des 14.-17. Jahrhunderts über die Instrumentalmusik ihrer Zeit?’ (1906), he analyzed paintings, prints, and manuscripts. Leichtentritt lists a large number of artworks and comments on them. For instance, he describes the depiction of St. Cecilia on the Bartholomew Altar (around 1501-1503). With her right hand, she plays a portative, while she presses the bellow with her left to elicit a sound from the organ pipes [Fig. 14]. According to Leichtentritt, the painting proves the existence of a transitional period between the solo song performances of the twelfth century and the accompanied songs of the seventeenth century.” Leichtentritt interpreted the picture as a reliable historical source, just
like Rühlmann had done, using the artwork as a blueprint for a historical performance practice.

However, in Rühlmann’s as well as in Leichtentritt’s publications, the strength of the image shimmers through. A double page in Rühlmann’s book shows bridges of various string instruments [Fig. 15 below]. Rühlmann identified a series of stylistic periods and categorized the bridge shapes according to their alleged developmental stages. The climax of this evolution in form is Stradivari’s bridge [Fig. 15, lower right].

The final perfection is only achieved in a seventh period of the bridge, at the beginning of the seventeenth century [...]. [T]he high point, which could not be superseded, is [reached] with Ant. Stradivari [...]. The latter has hence remained the exemplary [style] and is still in use today.13

Rühlmann’s study of the different shapes of musical instruments was guided by the assumption that paintings, prints, and manuscripts depicted them naturalistically. The musical instruments themselves he considered independent works of art belonging to certain styles. Rühlmann established a sequence that allegedly revealed the evolutionary development of form and thereby historically confirmed the unique sound of a Stradivari. The instrument makers became artists designing instrument shapes. In Leichtentritt’s essay, a first iconographical approach appears rather incidentally. He surmises that the depictions of St. Cecilia result from a misinterpretation of the biblical text. Despite the sound of the roaring organ, ‘she sang a song in her heart, a song to God’.14 Leichtentritt points to the possibility that the text was understood as if she [St. Cecilia] [indeed] sang to the sound of the organ.15 Thus Leichtentritt offered a first reading of the painting that transcended a mere reconstruction of performance practice and understood the painting itself as an interpreter.

**Iconography as the driving force of institutionalization:**

**Pictures as interpreters**

By integrating the iconographical and iconological method of the scholars in the circle around Aby Warburg (1866-1929), musical iconography began to develop into an independent discipline.16 Pictures were understood as interpreters. An analysis in this broader sense investigates the relationship between sound and image, conceived as an entity in the history of thought as related to music. Leo Schrade’s (1903-1964) *Die Darstellung der Töne an den Kapitellen der Abteikirche zu Cluni* (1929) must be considered a milestone in this regard. In the
Cluny Abby, two capitals show figurative representations of the church modes. According to Schrade, this was not only a way of visualizing the modes. He understood them as a symbol of the conception of music prevalent at the time of their origin. For this reason, he not only dealt intensively with musical theory but also with its forms of representation and their symbolic content. The second mode, for example, is depicted as a female figure [Fig. 16]; she is playing the cymbals, while her body is leaning slightly to the left. Schrade claims that this is meant to represent the *vexationes*, which symbolize the *melodia anfracta*. According to contemporary musical theory, this would imply a melody in the second church mode, which, as Guido of Arezzo noted, contains leaps (*anfractis*).17 By applying his expertise in musical theory, Schrade convincingly interpreted the posture of the female figure as a *figura anfracta*. Schrade’s essay revealed the argumentative force of an analysis that unites musicological and art-historical methods. Receiving its impetus from iconography and iconology, his essay gave the impulse for other scholars, like Willibald Gurlitt (1938) or Reinhold Hammerstein (1959),18 which lead to the institutionalization of the research field in 1971 with the foundation of the Répertoire international d’iconographie musicale, and *Imago Musicae*, the first periodical dedicated entirely to music iconography.
One of the first major music-iconographical works to be broadly received in art history, thus achieving a reflux of theory from musicology into art history, was Hammerstein’s 1974 book, *Diabolus in musica*. The climax of the book is his analysis of the *Musicians’ Hell* by Hieronymus Bosch. The right wing of Bosch’s triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (around 1500) shows a gigantic lute with six strings standing on a music book [Fig. 17]. A harp is stuck into the side of the lute and a naked man is hanging in its strings as if crucified. Another man is bound to the neck of the lute, with his hands on his back. Bosch enlarged the musical instruments to use them as instruments of torture. The motif of the *Musicians’ Hell* was commonly ascribed to Bosch’s imagination. Hammerstein, however, was able to relate the motifs to existing models and traditions, while he at the same time succeeded in accentuating Bosch’s personal reinterpretation. The harp, for instance, was at the time considered a heavenly instrument; by misappropriating the harp as an instrument of torture, Bosch not only used contemporary musical concepts as a basis for his painting, but also introduced his own interpretation. According to Hammerstein, Bosch’s musical scenes are ‘accusations and part of a call for penitence in times of deep arousal and skepticism, expressions of a crumbling belief in any kind of prestabilized harmony of the world.’ Hammerstein understood the picture as an independent entity and as an interpreter of the musical conceptions of a historical period. The attempt to introduce the iconography of music [...] as an independent research field into musicology [...] is motivated by the conviction that relevant evidence from the visual arts does not possess a mere accessory, adorning, and illustrative character for the music historian, but that, correctly understood, it conveys essential and novel facts with regard to music and the musical conceptions of a period.

By this time, pictures had become established as idiosyncratic interpreters in the discipline of musicology, thanks to the advances made in musical iconography. Today this field has continued to be a prolific part of the present discussions, like the question about the exchange between cultures. The case history of musical iconography shows that, at the time when the humanities emerged, an exchange between two disciplines produced a new and independent field of study. The immanent strength of pictures was a main driving force behind the research field’s foundation. Musical iconography helped scholars to fruitfully analyze artifacts from a fresh perspective and with a broader horizon, allowing them to describe the pictures more exactly, contextualize them within a certain cultural sphere, and thus produce more substantiated interpretations by means of combining musicological expertise with an art-historical approach.
Fig. 16. From Leo Schrade, *Die Darstellung der Töne an den Kapitellen der Abteikirche zu Cluni* (1929), Fig. 2b

Fig. 17. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1500, oil on panel, 220 x 389 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid (right panel, detail)
Notes


2 Ibid., 1319-1320.


5 The term ‘Musikwissenschaft’ (musicology) was used for the first time by Johann Bernhard Logier. The first professorships for music were established in Bonn (1826, Heinrich Carl Breidenstein) and in Berlin (1830, Adolf Bernhard Marx). Rainer Cadenbach, Andreas Jaschinski, Heinz von Loeesch, and Dorothea Mielke-Gerdes, ‘Musikwissenschaft’, in Ludwig Finscher (ed.), Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, vol. 6: Sachteil (Kassel/Stuttgart: Bärenreiter/Metzler, 1997), 1789-1834, 1801-1802.


9 Seebaß, Musikikonographie, 1322. For information on the founding date: Répertoire international d'iconographie musical, About Association RIDIM, URL: http://www.ridim.org/association.php.

10 Julius Rühlmann, Geschichte der Bogeninstrumente (Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn, 1882), 2, vi.

11 ‘In der zweiten Periode sehen wir die hochgeschwungene Form der Stange beibehalten, aber bereits mit Ansatz zu Frosch und Kopf versehen. Dieselbe beginnt im 15. Jahrhundert aus den zwei anderen Formen sich zu entwickeln’. Ibid., 147.


14 ‘[...] stimmte sie in ihrem Herzen einen Gesang zu Gott an’. Leichtentritt, Bildwerke, 349.

15 ‘[...] als ob sie beim Klang der Orgel sang’. Ibid.

16 Seebaß, Musikikonographie, 1321.


