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La Cetra Cornuta : the horned lyre of the Christian World

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POSTLUDIUM

My path forward with the cetra in performance will doubtless be an ongoing process of fine tuning both my ideas that have now been forged, and my boxes of wood and string that have been carved and glued together. What seemed like an endlessly long period of collecting, searching, reading, dreaming and making music finally crystallized into a coherent study of one single medieval plucked instrument type.

A retrospective glance from my current position: at the outset of the doctoral study, the trajectory of research could have taken many possible directions. The two mainstream necked-chordophones of the Gothic and Renaissance periods, the gittern and the lute, would both have been logical targets for me and it would have been easy to devote a dissertation to either.

Of these two, the second (lute) seemed almost too familiar. I have played it and given lessons on it as my daily bread for more years than I care to count. Lute practice is by now a kind of meditation exercise, or yoga, for me. It is a familiar landscape of well-worn routine, but such easy familiarity, I felt, might not offer the most stimulating environment to learn something new. I did not wish to become a languishing resident of a lazy academic place, reminding me of an 18th-c. description of a place where nothing gets done:

“A pleasing land of drowsy head it was,
of dreams that wave before the half-shut eye
and of gay castles in the clouds that pass
forever flushing round a summer sky.”

James Thomson, *Castle of Indolence* (1748)

This would have been the path of the lute as a dissertation topic. A second road was that of the gittern, which at one moment seemed to beckon me, then abruptly appeared to be less enticing. While there are certainly opportunities for understanding the history of the gittern more fully, it seemed ultimately to be a pale comparison to the cetra in terms of offering a chance to traverse relatively uncharted research territory.

And then I recollected, faintly at first, the call to arms issued by Emanuel Winternitz so many years ago, to find instrument images, cetra images, with the eyes of an art historian. It was a noble call that, decades later, had gone unanswered. I remembered the obvious joy that this man had in trying to figure out how to read musical instruments as symbols in paintings. I recalled the almost childish rapture that Winternitz wrote of, upon finding his “missing link” 6th-c. mosaic of a shepherd with a long-necked lute with.....WINGS!.... (Pl. 29 in this study). It was indeed an infectious feeling of joining a crusade-like journey to untold mysteries of ancient shapes, tales and sounds, like the brother who joins the League in Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East*. I began to feel a genuine sense of responsibility to respond and take up the banner. If not me, then who?

During the course of the cetra research, I have literally examined thousands and thousands of images. The accessibility to visual material has, in our life-time, become exponentially greater with every passing year thanks to the internet. The resources at our fingertips are more than mind-boggling.

It occurred to me during my study all of this finger-tip access to information resources brings a kind of danger: that the greater the access we have to historical material, the greater the chance that we do not really understand it. We concentrate on superficial levels of historical information and miss the chance to go deeper. We focus on artifacts and ignore the ideas behind the artifacts. And nowhere is there a greater risk of doing this than with the study of music iconography, where, too often, we simply concentrate on the external form of an instrument.

I tried, during my iconographical labors, to be able to account for each visual composition by examining the world view that created it. Gradually my ideas about modern music performance (or better said, performance practice) changed, but not in the way that one might expect. I realized that many modern performers of early music are blissfully unaware of perhaps the central component of any artistic enterprise: the aesthetic behind it.

The reason for this is that historical aesthetic principles are, by and large, not part of early music education today. If students spent half as much time studying art history and literary history as they do music theory and playing scales at the speed of light, they might begin to be able to get inside the mindset of a culture of 500 years ago. There is no better way to do this than to study the visual arts of such a culture, for the saying is true that “a picture is worth 1000 words”.

What I have learned from looking at thousands of pictures of scenes of music-making, is that modern musicians have little sense of different aesthetical principles of different periods. No self-respecting art historian would dare to approach Michelangelo's David with the same set of rules for interpretation as those used to approach the David of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, created more than a century after the work of Michelangelo. Yet music students today are effectively educated to play the music of 15th-c. Italy with the same approach and style as the music of 17 century Italy. There is, sadly, no part of their education devoted to instilling any sense of aesthetic accountability. A one-size-fits-all approach is applied to music created over a period of 500 years. This to me is as depressing and alarming as it is impressive, and in truth I owe this new perspective on performance practice in early music to long hours of study in the realm of art history.

Other than this observation, I cannot say what the research of the last five years has taught me; ask me that question in five or ten years and I will be able, if I am still here, to give an answer with more conviction. I do know that I now have a coherent birds-eye view of an instrument which I had previously been able to view only in fragments. Each higher level

of knowledge that I gained access to was hard-won, with nothing a foregone conclusion, and no revelation a casual one. Nothing came for free.

On Landini's tombstone at San Lorenzo in Florence, the inscription reads, to paraphrase, "His ashes lie here with us, his Soul flies above the stars". The movements of Landini's soul above the stars are surely choreographed to a soundtrack of the cetra, for there is no other private and consoling lyre which is more Italian than this one.

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