

Flesh, strings and feminine body in Medieval musical thought, with a background of music-making angels

Josemi Lorenzo Arribas

SIBE Women's Studies in Music Research Group¹

josemi20@hotmail.com

Abstract

The dichotomy “body/intellect” is an old traditional taxonomy used in patriarchal social systems to establish a hierarchic division between human beings. In the musical field, this dichotomy is reformulated as a distinction between chordophones/aerophones. In the Middle Ages, this relationship is clearly resignified in the representations of the Virgin Mary surrounded by music-making angels who are depicted playing string instruments (fiddles, harps, lutes...). There are different biologicist, physiologic, mythical, cultural, social and symbolical reasons that justify this arbitrary division of musical abilities between men and women, a distinction not completely resolved even in the 20th century. It seems that in fact the first iconographical example is found in a decorated 13th-14th century tympanum from the Spanish monastery of Carracedo (León, Spain).

Key words: Body politics, Medieval music, music-making angels, Carracedo Monastery

The pop or rock singers often show a guitar, rather than as a musical instrument as an iconic identifier. Also educated ladies of romantic rooms play guitars, as her sisters in the neoclassical bedrooms, inheritors of the baroque inners in the tradition of young aristocrats playing Renaissance lute, who was the successor of the late medieval women in love with fiddles and harps represented inside the *hortus conclusus*. All of them inherit a strongly patriarchal iconography that is rooted in the High Middle Ages, whose explanation dedicate these pages. It is at that time the birth of a new iconogram: the Virgin accompanied by angels who play *música baja*, “low music”, which has survived many centuries later

¹ Sociedad de Etnomusicología-SIBE (Spain), Women's Studies in Music Research Group, official web site: <http://www.sibetrans.com/grupos.php>

with little variations. A new audiotopia, the angelic concert, to add to former apocalyptic representation of the 24 musicians Elders, present since the 10th century in Beatos manuscripts. But now is Mary who is surrounded and identified by the musical sound, not Christ neither God the Father, but a woman, model and mirror of all others.

1.Six interpretations

There are many reasons for this preference in “low music”/women’s association, particularly stringed instruments, which I summarize very briefly from six interpretations that make up a cultural network of meanings that produce results and operating synergies from both popular and erudite symbolical traditions (arguments developed at length in my Ph.D.: Lorenzo Arribas 2004). Already in the denomination (“low music” vs “high music”, *música baja* vs *música alta*) serves the universal symbolism of the level, according to which, by definition, the top is more important than bottom, operates a hierarchy. Thus, low music, in which string instruments are included, starts at a disadvantage in symbolic struggle. Although the appearance of many of the interpretations set is from the learned culture, we must not lose sight of the same mind that calling traditional culture, often the ultimate origin of the above.

1.1. Biological or biologist interpretation

Wind instruments are defined by the column of air that feeds them. The stringed instruments emit their sound with strings, made with animal gut (flesh). With this we have a dichotomy of many that the Patriarchy has been manipulated to belittle women: the opposition between the ethereal, which symbolizes the spiritual principle, and the tangible, which refers to the material principle. Women are thus necessarily linked with the carnal principle that identifies the patriarchal mentality². In summary, double syllogism is expressed as follows:

CORDOPHONES = FLESH, ergo WOMEN

AEROFONES = LOGOS, ergo MEN

² To prove this hypothesis may also explain why women have traditionally identified with round and square frame drums, instruments which function and timbre does not seem to respond to the archetype of the feminine, but whose resounding matter, the patch, is flesh too.

1.2. Physiological interpretation

The medieval medical theory of bodily humors were the explanation of the characters of individuals and, according to it, even it can determine the same birth sex. The traditional explanation, from Hippocratic roots, considered that women were wet and cold, compared to men, dry and warm. This may be one of the origins of the unexpressed prohibition on playing aerophones, as in the air is dichotomous coding agrees better with the humidity and coolness characteristic of female biology, and earth with male characteristics. The conclusion of this argument is that playing wind instruments would add air to the wet, air to air, and enhance the biological female principle that culture try to avoid.

A weak line of argument, though possibly effective for basing an interpretation of this type, assumes that women do not have enough strength in his shoulders to carry certain instruments, usually the family that we call brass instruments (Rieger 1986: 176; Franco-Lao 1980: 33). Finally, other theories also question the lung power needed to blow wind instruments that require a powerful column of air to power them. Women, as the weaker sex, they are considered unsuitable for such a requirement.

1.3. Mythical-Existential interpretation

According to Genesis, God created Adam by the breath, infusing His *halitus* (Gen. 2.7). Subsequently, the Gospel of John (from 1.1-3) stated that the Word, the Word understood as *flatus vocis*, was God Himself. Eva comes by referral from a carnal principle, the rib of the first man. Eve was born of the flesh, as the strings of musical instruments. On the other hand, if the form *informs*, as was believed in the Middle Ages, the morphology of musical instruments (the phallic wind round the stringed instruments) could also reinforce this view.

1.4. Cultural interpretation

This interpretation deals about what is prescriptively recommended for some and prohibited to others, and vice versa, establishing imperatives and cultural taboos. Patriarchy in its western form has always placed great emphasis on

controlling the attitude of the feminine body when it is displayed in public. Musical activity involves bodily action, obvious to dance, sing and also necessary for accurate to play music. Thus, instruments will not be recommended to women because they involve action on a range of attitudes to the body that are considered inappropriate.

The same explanation extends to the organ, commonly used instrument in the Marian iconography with music-making angels, because with it, as Hernando de Cabezón (s. XVI), said, does not break the “voice, gesture, or bobbing while piped, but [musician] is sat with calm and composed, authority and service...” (Cabezón 1982: 21), bias current to our days³ .

1.5. Symbolical interpretation

Another patriarchal dichotomies of the Western culture has been the association of women with the domestic sphere and men with the public. The soft instruments, defined by its quiet sound level, meets its standards of excellence inside the domestic space, which and for which is intended. From this it follows that the “low music” is identified with the domestic music, typical of enclosed spaces (later called *musica da camera*, ie room music). *Sensu contrario*, the male instruments was identified with the loud music itself, ideal for public space for their timbre and power.

In addition, “low instruments” during the Middle Ages had a function more accompanist than soloist. In fact all medieval instrumental music was subject to singing, true musical star, but with the development of polyphony the instruments capable of musical autonomy had been reduced to the stringed instruments and organ, but yet until the 15th century knew no repertoire for themselves. The features of the monodic instruments (all wind instruments) made them retain their prominence timbre and individuality within the musical ensemble. Not so the chordophones, which remained in the background (like

³ At the end of a concert by Annie Whitehead, trombonist rock, pop and jazzwoman, she was said it was a shame that she plays the trombone because he hid her face. An American conductor also thought in 1904: “Nature never intended that the fair sex to become cornetist, trombonist and brass performers. First, they are not strong enough to play them as men (...) Another point against this practice is that women can not play instruments and show pretty, and why would you ruin your good look?” Similarly Castiglione manifested itself in 1528 (Pugh, Aelwyn 1991: 7).

the Baroque continuo), accompanying and offering the contrapuntal framework, but without a clear role, because of limited timbre. This subordinate role could be a reason to allow the access to certain women such instruments, own of them and of their gregarious role in the patriarchal mentality, whereas the males monopolized high instruments which individualized melodic line. Once when polyphonic instruments such as (handle or bowed) violas or the lute become independent and they acquired a solo repertoire, the now professionalized instrument execution was in male hands, repeating another constant feature in Western history: the ban on women of certain practices that they made before if such activities were becoming professional practices.

1.6. Symbolic interpretation

With the gendering of stringed instruments, they were pejoratively connoted in its metaphorical readings. The music played intramural home echoed the sentiments of common, ordinary: joy, sorrow, love, heartbreak... The music own the public space, the market or the battlefield, is the heraldry and commemorative music, which records the major achievements, the extraordinary events. In Rodríguez Suso's happy expression, the high instrumentalists were, rather than musicians, "sonorous warriors" (Rodríguez Suso 1988: 28). There was no space for women.

2.The Virgin and the angels who play "low music"

The medieval Western cultural archetype that links women with the stringed instruments focuses on late medieval Marian representations in which the Virgin is surrounded by music-making angels. While this imagery has been studied in three iconograms (Madonna with Child, Triumph and Coronation of the Virgin: Ember 1989: 18-9; Mâle 1986: 239; Cattin 1979: 151)⁴, it has been given to the scene interpretation understanding beyond the expression of happiness and joy that accompany such shows. This profusion of instruments has not only due to

⁴ The most comprehensive study of this aspect is Chapter XI of Emmanuel Winternitz's book (1972: 137-149). The aforementioned section is entitled "On Angel Concerts in the 15th Century: A Critical Approach to Realism and Symbolism in Sacred Painting". The results are a neatly musicological explanation that it ignores gendered considerations that are discussed here.

an expression of *horror vacui* of late medieval plastic arts (as claimed by Cattin 1979: 151, according to Johan Huizinga). In our opinion, the archaic doctrines that asserted the autonomy of music are the original ideological basis, as for the production of feelings and character modeling. Undoubtedly, the music-making angels imitate the heavenly choirs and express joy, *angelorum ministerium*, but the choice of the instruments which they play is affected by these essentialist theories advocating behavioral capacity to identify them, its melodies or rhythms, and its association with certain stereotypes. That is, the old classical music theories attributed a particular ethos to the different types of instrumental music, and they remain larval or dormant until the final revival of the 13th century with a clearly defined iconography (Mary and the music-making angels) that it provided the spur of the cult of the Virgin. The occasion is focused on these two unique scenes that place the characters outside an earthly context, one in the sky and the other in timelessness, thus justifying the angelic presence for its symbolic nature of the heavenly world (Ballester i Gibert 1989-90: 371), which allows the inclusion of music without any possibility of confusion with the pernicious secular music. Without Bible support (as in the case of King David or the musician Elders of the Apocalypse) must ask why the repetitive musical accompaniment on stringed instruments. Only one of the apocryphal gospels, that of Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, recounts with vivid detail, including the angels singing, the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin, but without reference to instrumental music. Neither Santiago de Voragine's *Golden Legend* in his appointment. They are singer beings, not instrumentalist, who are surrounding Mary in her last trance, so the tendency to represent mostly stringed instruments have to respond to other criteria than fidelity to the letter of a text. An update of the pseudo-scriptural message in accordance with the cultural patterns of each period, in this case the medieval ages.

3.The first performance: the monastery of Santa María de Carracedo (León, Spain)

A tympanum of a small doorway (called *Cocina de la reina*, Queen's Kitchen) from a monastic-palatial complex from Carracedo, attached to the eastern

corridor of the cloister, built in the reign of Alfonso IX of León (1188-1230), or maybe at the end of XIIIth century (Martínez Tejera 2002: 279), advances in several decades the timing of the first apparition of music-making angels with Virgin, according to what musical iconography scholars traditionally have maintained⁵.



Dormition of the Virgin, with an archivolt with music-making angels (Monastery of Santa María de Carracedo, León, Spain)

Iconographic composition of archivolt is structured on the framework law. Five music-making angels are arranged symmetrically, one of them occupying the keystone of the small arc, and the rest are flanked symmetrically presiding angel, one for each voussoir. All the them are playing chordophones, fiddles and bowed violas, but the sculptor was more interested to represent the stringed instruments *in genere*, not the strict identification of each of them. Scriptural sources from which it extracts the environment of the Dormition of the

⁵ Kathi Meyer (1917, 1970) states that in the 13th century there were still no making-music angels (quoted in Rodríguez Suso 1988: 14, note 32). *Vid.* also Montagu 1998 and Rodríguez Suso 1987.

Virgin are extracanonical, proceeding from the Apocryphal Gospels. Mary's death, in fact, nothing is said in the New Testament writings, but in the book of St. John the Evangelist, the Theologian (4th century), in John, Archbishop of Thessalonica (ca. 4th century), and in the later story of Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, apocryphal Assumption everyone. The sculptor knew the key elements for the main texts: the Dormition of the Virgin, surrounded by her family and disciples of Jesus, the delivery of the soul with a perfect human form and sexually undifferentiated by hands of the Son to the archangel Michael, the singing of the angels, and the two characters that delimit the bed where he lay Mary, who are, respectively, John and Peter.

This tympanum is the early case I know of Virgin/music-making angels iconic pair, and it anticipates one century to the others, not just in the Hispanic context, but also in Europe. At the same time, it shows the testimony of an iconogram which was can not be imposed (the Dormition with music-making angels). My hypothesis is that the association from the High Middle Ages of stringed musical instruments to the Virgin and, by extension, women (an archetype and model of the rest of them) answered a reason ideological and unequal system compliant with distribution of roles that patriarchy uses to perpetuate itself through diverse iconographical change over time and fashions (Virgin and Child, Triumph of the Virgin, Coronation of the Virgin ...⁶). The music expresses the imaginarium and inequalities of the society that produces itself. At the same time, this imaginarium feedback music. In many respects, it is still in force.

References

Ballester I Gibert, Jordi (1989-90) "Els goigs marians i la iconografia musical". *Recerca musicològica*, IX-X, 367-372.

⁶ In my PhD I cataloged a total of 226 works from 13th to 16th centuries, for all iconographic representations of Mary with making-music angels. The proportion of stringed instruments (plus organs) showed a 7:1 ratio, not including other low musical instruments or vocal music, neither considerations that make it much more overwhelming proportion, close to ninety percent (Lorenzo Arribas 2004: 713 -739 and 845-857).

Cabezón, Antonio de (1982) *Obras de Música para tecla, arpa y vihuela... recopiladas y puestas en cifra por Hernando de Cabezón su hijo (Madrid 1578)*, vol. I. Higinio Anglés (ed.), Barcelona: CSIC.

Cattin, Giulio (1979) *Historia de la música*, vol 2 (primera parte): 'El medioevo'. Madrid: Turner Música.

Ember, Ildikó (1989) *Music in painting. Music as symbol in European renaissance and baroque painting*, Budapest: Corvina.

Franco-Lao, Meri (1980) *Música bruja. La mujer en la Música*. Barcelona: Icaria.

Lorenzo Arribas, Josemi (2004) *Las mujeres y la música en la Edad Media europea: relaciones y significados*. Ph.D. (unpublished): Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Mâle, Emile (1986) *El gótico. La iconografía de la Edad Media y sus fuentes*. Madrid: Encuentro Ediciones.

Martínez Tejera, Artemio M. (2002) "Santa María de Carracedo", in *Enciclopedia del Románico en Castilla y León, 'León'*, Aguilar de Campoo (Palencia): Fundación Santa María la Real-Centro de Estudios del Románico, 271-287.

Meyer Baer, Kathi (1917) *Der chorische Gesang der Frauen mit besonderer Bezugnahme seiner Betätigung auf geistlichem Gebeit*. Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel.

— (1970) *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death. Studies in Musical Iconology*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Montagu, Jeremy and Montagu, Gwen (1998) *Minstrels and Angels Carvings of Musicians in Medieval English Churches*. Berkeley: Fallen Leaf Press.

Pugh, Aelwyn (1991) *Women in Music*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.

Rieger, Eva (1986): "¿'Dolce semplice'? El papel de las mujeres en la música", in Ecker, Gisela (ed) *Estética feminista*. Barcelona: Icaria, 175-196.

Rodríguez Suso, M^a Carmen (1987) "The Nursing Madonna with Musical Angels in the Iconography of the Kingdom of Aragon". *RldIM Newsletter* 12/1, 11-19.

— (1988) "Un ejemplo de iconología musical: María Lactans y los ángeles en la Cataluña bajomedieval". *Cuadernos de Sección. Música*, 4, 7-34.

Author's biography

Member of SIBE Women's Studies in Music Research Group. He received the Diploma of Professor Superior de Guitarra from High Conservatory of Music in Madrid. Ph.D. in Medieval History from Complutense University (Madrid), with a Thesis entitled *Women and Music in Medieval Europe: Relationships and Meanings*. He won different research awards. He has written six books and close to ninety articles about different topics. Now, he is working as a Historian in Proyecto Cultural *Soria Romanica*.