

## The Original Instrumentation of the Penitential Psalms

The Mielich painting of the Munich court chapel represents a unique source for musical practice during the 16th century. What it illustrates appears clearly visible to the observer at first glance: 15 musicians, playing from part-books on various instruments, are gathered together round a table together with other persons. Samuel Quickelberg, in his commentary on the magnificent manuscript, tells us that these are the “excellent musicians” of Prince Albrecht V who serve him “in order to recover from governing”. But what exactly are we really seeing? Which instruments are shown? Do the persons without instruments represent singers? Which one of them is Lasso, and which piece of music is being played presently?

Several musicological articles dealing with individual questions, or providing interpretations of the painting in its entirety, have so far essentially succeeded in accurately identifying the illustrated musical instruments. The presence of singers appears clear, thanks to the three boys without instruments who are apparently singing from a part-book. The question of whether the Mielich painting shows an exact performance situation or is only a representative illustration of various instruments of the period, however, has remained highly controversial to the present day.

The situation of source material of the period of Lasso’s activity in Munich can be described as very favourable. Alongside information on musicians in the form of payrolls, petitions and other such written records, we are fortunate to have the *Dialoghi* of Massimo Troiano, an alto singer at the court ensemble; this is a concrete “insider’s report” on the musical culture at the Munich court. It provides a detailed depiction of the musical offerings on the occasion of the princely wedding of Albrecht’s son Wilhelm in 1568. The temporal proximity to the Mielich painting, dated 1570, enables us to compare the performance situation in the painting with the concrete scoring indications from Troiano’s Dialogues. With him, we indeed find very similar combinations of instrumentalists and singers – in connection with performances of motets as dining music at the wedding banquet – as in Mielich’s illustration. This realisation strengthened my conviction that the famous picture also represents a concrete performance situation. But what is being played? Which piece could have been played in Munich in those days with 15 instruments and several singers, and who played which part?

The separate group of four persons on the left edge of the painting has been convincingly identified by the musicologist Nicole Schwindt as Duke Albrecht V (with his right hand making a stately gesture), assistant kapellmeister Johann à Fossa (hidden by Albrecht), music director Johann Jakob Fugger and, to the far left, Orlando di Lasso. One immediately notices the player with the string instrument which, with its six strings, can be identified as the great-bass viola da gamba. Upon closer inspection, we see another five string instruments which turn out to be three violins, a tenor viola and an instrument played transversely that can be identified as a tenor or bass violin and is

partially hidden by the great-bass gamba player. Next to these six string instruments, we see seven wind instruments: from right to left, we recognise the black curved cornett, a rackett, a yellow mute cornett a bass trombone (which can be definitely distinguished from a tenor trombone by the handle on the slide), a transverse flute and a bass recorder. The wind instrument partially covered by the players of the bass violin and the great-bass gamba has been definitely recognised in a musicological article as a wind-cap instrument in the tenor range and is, in my opinion, a cornamuse, the frequent use of which in very similar consort ensembles is confirmed by Troiano in the wedding report. This band is completed by two chord-play-ing “foundation instruments” – a virginal and a choir lute.

In the search for the composition the performance of which is represented by the Mielich painting, the seven *Penitential Psalms* and the two *Laudate Psalms* of Orlando di Lasso are highly probable. These pieces, after all, have been copied into the opulent two-part Munich volume. However, Lasso’s *Penitential Psalms* are basically composed only in five parts. Five-part works and six strings, seven brass and two foundation instruments plus a group of singers – how could they go together?

The solution to this puzzle is found in the last half-verse of the Doxology, which forms the ending of each individual *Penitential Psalm*. Starting with *Sicut erat in principio*, Lasso adds a sixth part to the composition. Now, one must only find the logical doublings of the instruments and singing voices in the *Sicut erat*. With the wind instruments, this is done with the two cornetts on cantus I and II, transverse flute on the alto, cornamuse and bass recorder on tenor I and II, as well as bass trombone on the bass vocal part. Of the string instruments, two violins play the cantus I and II, tenor and bass viola the tenor I and II, as well as the great-bass gamba on the bass part. The presence of the third violin, which seems puzzling at first, is explained by the transverse flute also doubling the alto vocal part: equivalent to a transverse flute sounding an octave higher, the violin plays the alto part transposed an octave higher. Not least through the occasional transposition of the great-bass gamba an octave lower, there results a simple and simultaneously ingenious expansion of the composition’s sonic spectrum through the instrumentation without changing it. The rackett, virginal and lute support the entire ensemble as foundation instruments.

The scorings of the two to five-part verses follow the scoring indications of Troiano with the help of the instruments illustrated by Mielich. Thus the singers are alternately accompanied by the strings or winds in the five-part verses. Whereas the five string instruments each support a voice, the winds are a mixed “quiet” consort with mute cornett, transverse flute, cornamuse, bass recorder and bass trombone, as documented at the princely wedding of 1568. The “loud” wind instruments – curved cornett and rackett, like the third violin, are not used until the *Sicut erat*. The players of these three instruments thus form a group of their own in the picture that only joins in at the beginning of the Doxology. Verses with only two to four parts are performed by solo singers, at times accompanied by the lute or virginal – Troiano speaks of the *scelte voci* (“selected voices”) in the performance of such passages. The complete ensemble of the

Mielich painting thus remains reserved for the half-verse *Sicut erat*. There is, therefore, an incredible final effect at the end of each *Penitential Psalm*. This is Renaissance music in all of its splendour, allowing us to feel with all our senses what people were then able to experience as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a total work of art.

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