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Object, Symbol, and Metaphor: Rossetti's Musical Imagery*

"Music Rossetti regarded as positively offensive; for him it was nothing but a noisy nuisance," recalled Holman Hunt (Doughty, 59). William Michael Rossetti remarked that his brother was indifferent to music (*Art Journal*, 206), and the artist himself declared that he abhorred concerts (Fleming, 26). Given Rossetti's avowed aversion to music, musical imagery appears in his pictures and poems with unexpected frequency. Throughout his career the artist used references to music to enrich the decorative and narrative aspects of his visual and literary efforts. The musical instruments and musicians in Rossetti's works function on three levels of significance: as exotic objects capable of evoking a time and place unrelated to the present; as traditional symbols for death, sexual desire, and love; and as metaphors for synaesthetic interrelations between the visual or literary arts and music.

I. Musical Instruments as Associative Objects

Rossetti often based the musical instruments in his pictures and poems on medieval and early Renaissance prototypes. It would not have been difficult for him to study musical instruments depicted in earlier art: he had only to take a careful look at the sculpture of Westminster Abbey to find musicians playing harps, psalteries, rebecs, and cymbals. Full-page illuminations and marginalia in medieval manuscripts at the British Museum could have further sparked Rossetti's interest, and when reading the *Divine Comedy* and the *Canterbury Tales* he could find frequent references to psalteries, rebecs, and citherns (Montague, 25, 31, 35-36, 42, 45-46, 63). Rossetti's fascination with medieval instruments was not unusual at this time. In France, the Gothic Revival had fostered a lively interest in musical instruments of the Middle Ages, reflected in the publication of Viollet-le-Duc's six-volume *Dictionnaire du Mobilier Français*, 1858. Rossetti owned a copy of this exhaustive compendium and

perhaps looked at the lengthy illustrated section on medieval instruments (*Valuable Contents of the Residence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, #472*) Rossetti's interest could also have been stimulated by the opportunity to see actual ancient or exotic instruments. A psaltery was exhibited at the British Museum in 1852,¹ and the Egyptian rebab displayed at the South Kensington Museum was possibly the model for the instruments in *A Christmas Carol* (Surtees, cat. #195) and *Forced Music* (Surtees, 247).² Rossetti may have even heard medieval music performed. His poem "The Monochord," 1868, is named after a medieval drone instrument and bears the tantalizing subtitle, "Written during Music" (Doughty, *Poems*, 148).

On the whole, however, Rossetti seems to have relied for his models on instruments portrayed in the art of the past instead of on actual examples. His representations of musicians often indicate that he did not really understand how the instruments were constructed or played. Lutes in the early drawings *Genevieve* (Surtees, 38) and "To Caper Nimbly in a Lady's Chamber/To the Lascivious Pleasing of a Lute" (Surtees, 47) contain too many strings for the narrow necks. In the drawing of *St. Cecilia* (Surtees, 83), designed for the Moxon edition of Tennyson's poems published in 1857, the saint plays a portative organ that would not produce sounds, since no one pumps the bellows.³ And in *A Sea Spell* (Surtees, 248), 1877, a dulcimer hangs in a tree in a position in which the musician could not play it.

Lacking an antiquarian's interest in the actual workings of these exotic instruments, Rossetti was not concerned with musical instruments or musicians as subjects in themselves.⁴ By learning about musical instruments through their depiction in other works of art instead of actually hearing and watching them being played, Rossetti seems to have thought of music not as an auditory reality but as a conceptual construct.