

Gaudenzio Ferrari's Concert of Angels



Presented by Cynthia Anne of Silver Lakes

In 1460, a young man named Pedretto, who had been suffering from debilitating leg pains for five years, prayed to a terra cotta image of the Madonna and Child in a small chapel built on the road to Saronno. Pedretto saw a vision that night of a “donna maestosa,” who ordered him to go to the “Cappella di Strada Varesina” to be healed, and, further, she told him that a church was to be built “in onore della Vergine.¹” In 1498 the first stone was laid for a new shrine, “in response to a desire to build a grand house of worship...to celebrate the manifestation to Pedretto.²” The house of deputies was completed in 1507, and the dome, designed by Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, was completed in 1508. Paolo della Porta designed the bell tower, and with the finishing of that in 1516, the building, as decorated by Gaudenzio Ferrari was complete.

Before Gaudenzio created his fresco in the cupola, several other artists began the work of decorating the sanctuary. In 1525, work to decorate the interior of the original building began with two large frescos by Bernardino Luini: “*The Presentation in the Temple*, and *The Adoration of the Wise Men* (figure 1).

In the transept, Luini frescoed the *Disputation*, and *The Marriage of the Virgin*.³ Paintings of Saints Sebastian, Christopher, Antony Abbot and Rocci were added by Luini to the lower part of the dome in 1531, and Saints Martin and George were added in 1534 by Cesare Magni. Wooden statues of Our Lady of Assumption, niche statues, and, “the admirable compositions of *The Last Supper* (figure 2) and *The Deposition from the Cross* ⁴” were sculpted by Andrea da Milano between 1529 and 1531.

¹ Enrico P. Masara, *Ai Santuarii di Maria Santissima: Guida pel Mese di Maggio*. (Milano: Tipografia e Libreria Arciv. Ditta Giacomo Agnelli, 1892) 94-97.

² Andina, Luigi Lazzaroni, “Historical Notes,” in *Gaudenzio Ferrari and the Dome of the Sanctuary of Saronno, Concert of the Angels*, ed. Dario Cimorelli, (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2008), 134.

³ Andina, “Historical Notes,” 134.

⁴ Andina, “Historical Notes,” 135.



figure 1: Bernardino Luini, *The Adoration of the Wise Men*, 1525, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno



figure 2: Andrea da Milano, *The Last Supper*, 1529-1531, wood and paint, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno

It is possible that Bernardino Luini would have continued his work of decorating the Sanctuary at Saronno, but upon Luini's death in 1534, Gaudenzio Ferrari was hired to paint a fresco of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven in the interior of the sanctuary's dome.⁵ In 1536, in

⁵ Andina, "Historical Notes," 135.

the dome of the original building, Gaudenzio Ferrari created a fresco of the *Arrival of the Blessed Virgin* (figure 3).

In almost all of the depictions of various important points in the life of the Virgin Mary, angels are present. “The defining episodes of the Virgin’s life - the Annunciation, Nativity, Assumption, and Coronation - necessarily draw the company of angels to her.⁶” Angels appear in most Renaissance images of Mary, and angel musicians in particular are almost always present in paintings and frescoes of the Nativity. Angels appear in particular abundance in the varying stages of Mary’s Assumption into Heaven.



figure 3: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Concert of Angels*, 1536, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno.

A cupola is a natural architectural structure to depict heaven, and many artists before and after Gaudenzio created frescoes of heavenly angel musicians within a dome. Two of those artists whose frescoes slightly predate Ferrari’s are Paolo da San Leocadio’s in Valencia, in 1474 (figure 4), and Correggio’s in Parma, in 1530 (figure 5).

⁶ Meredith J. Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 83.



figure 4: Paolo da San Leocadio, *Angels Playing Music*, 1474, fresco, Cathedral of Valencia



figure 5: Correggio, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1526-30, fresco, Parma Cathedral

The dome in Valencia has rather stylized angels, all of the same size, holding their instruments with reasonable accuracy and positioned against a starry blue sky. Paolo da San Leocadio's angels must contend with the structural supports dividing them, with which Correggio, fifty years later in Parma, can dispense. Correggio creates a trompe l'oeil which seems to raise the roof of the dome even higher, angels growing smaller as they disappear into Heaven's brightness to join the figure of Christ, whom we see floating in the center of the predominantly gray spiraling

clouds and angels. The angels, apostles, and Adam and Eve all seem to be focused on moving upward, and, similarly to the earlier fresco in Valencia, and the later fresco in Saronno, there are angels playing instruments to celebrate Mary's arrival. The instruments in Corregio's fresco, however, are sparse, and primarily brass and percussion.

Gaudenzio's fresco, called *The Ascension in to Heaven*, and, sometimes, *Concert of Angels*, was completed in 1536. His busy and joyful work depicts 86 angel musicians, 31 putti⁷, and, in the center, a dimensional Eternal Father⁸. It is this fresco that will be the primary focus of this paper. The angels in Ferrari's fresco play almost every instrument imaginable to Italian musicians at the time – including some instruments that appear to have been imagined entirely by the artist.

Gaudenzio was a painter from the northern part of Italy, born in the Duchy of Milan around 1471. He studied painting in Milan and Florence, and it is possible that he was a student of Bernardino Luini. He was known as a sculptor and architect as well as a painter, and was integral to the work at the Sacra Monte di Varallo. This Sacra Monte contains around 800 life-sized statues as well as interior frescoes, created by many artists, all realistically and animatedly depicting the life and death of Jesus, and Gaudenzio created the scenes of *The Three Kings*, *Pieta*, and *Calvary*.

Gaudenzio's fresco at Saronno, begun a few years after his work at the Sacra Monte di Varallo, is a natural and harmonious decoration for the architectural design of the dome of a sanctuary designed for the celebration of Mary. The Renaissance part of the sanctuary uses the "central plan, signifying the 'circularity of the universe' and 'divine harmony' [which is] an ideal and oft-repeated pattern for churches dedicated to Mary."⁹ It is significant that the space in which the *Arrival* is housed seems to follow Alberti's statement, regarding sacred architecture, that "Nature herself...enjoys the round form above all the others."¹⁰ The base of the dome is a square, and the geometric shapes transition gradually from the square of the floor space to the perfect

⁷ Winternitz, Emanuel. *Gaudenzio Ferrari, His School, and the Early History of the Violin* (New York: Alexander Broude, 1967) 11,12

⁸ Andina suggests that the carving of the Eternal Father God was done by Andrea da Milano and Giulio Oggioni.

⁹ Artioli, Albero, "The Architecture of the Main Body of the Church: the Sanctuary's Beginnings," in *Gaudenzio Ferrari and the Dome of the Sanctuary of Saronno, Concert of the Angels*, ed. Dario Cimorelli (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2008), 136.

¹⁰ Wittkower, Rudolf, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600-1750*, 6th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

circle of the dome, “chang[ing] as they rise, as though to mark the process of the Virgin Mary from earth to heaven.¹¹” The “hemisphere of the vault [was] the building’s symbolic sky.¹²”

The fresco in the dome's interior continues the architectural theme of moving from the earthly to the heavenly, using the space from the outer circle of the dome to the center to extend the geometric motion. The outer circle of musician angels is the most earthly, surrounding a circle of putti, in turn encircling the Eternal Father, who appears to greet Mary with open arms and a paternal look from the center of the dome. Gaudenzio uses color, body position, face position, and even the instruments played by the angels to aid the onlooker in experiencing the welcome of Mary into heaven, and her transition from earthly mother to enthroned Queen of Heaven.

The musical angels have richly colored clothing, but the most vivid and eye-catching red and gold are found on the dimensional half-torso of the Eternal Father (*figure 6*), emerging from the leafed golden burst of Heaven in the center of the dome, and on the statue of Mary, whose matching red gown is draped with a gold-spangled royal blue robe, and surrounded by gold-adorned putti.



figure 6: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Concert of Angels*, detail (the Eternal Father), 1536, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno.

It is difficult to tell from photographs whether the haloes and trim of the angel musicians are gold leafing or excellent painting which imitates gold leafing, but, either way, it is not as brilliant as the gold surrounding the Eternal Father and Mary. The visual message here is that, while the angels

¹¹ Artioli, “The Architecture of the Main Body of the Church,” 137.

¹² Artioli, “The Architecture of the Main Body of the Church,” 136.

are beautiful, Mary and the Eternal Father are the most real - they have both dimensionality and depth of color and shine which the angels lack.¹³

Almost all of the angel musicians are positioned to play their instruments, and, thus, focused on the earthly objects in their hands, or on each other. Their bodies and faces draw the viewer's eyes to either their instruments, or to another musician, or in a few cases, to the statue of Mary in the dodecagon at the immediate base of the dome. There are three angels who appear to be gazing at the viewer, and eight angels who are looking toward the image of God¹⁴, but, as a group, these angels are taking their cues from each other, and primarily paying attention to the music they are about to make. Their brightly colored garments and beautiful instruments, as well as the lively and graceful motion of their arms and torsos invite the viewer to notice their beauty, and to imagine the music they are ready to play.

This layer of angels, which connect the earthly, in the form of colored clothing and beautiful instruments, to the Eternal Father, on whose behalf they are making music, are also giving a subtle hint about the distraction which beauty can create. They are more celestial than the statues of the saints in the niches below them, and closer to heaven than Mary, who is not yet either crowned or enthroned - but unlike the putti above them, or Mary below them, the angels are not, as a whole, focused on moving upwards toward the Eternal Father. The worldly presence of music and color (in the form of clothing) necessarily place them below the naked putti, who, not burdened by material goods, are all (with the exception of one, who looks downward to Mary), looking toward the Eternal Father.

The instruments which the angels play are also arranged in a manner which adds to the visual journey from earth to heaven. Late medieval musicians divided instruments into two categories: *haut* and *bas*. Haut instruments were louder, and usually used for outdoor dances, and, if used in a church setting, for regular liturgical worship. The instruments in the haut category included most brass, reed, and percussion instruments, and were rarely used to accompany voices. The bas category included most string and wind instruments, which were used for

¹³ ...this may also, admittedly, have been a difference of taste and materials, if Mary and the Eternal Father were carved by Andrea da Milano.

¹⁴ ...not coincidentally, I believe, the majority of the angels who look to God are singers, less distracted by the earthly presence of their instruments.

chamber music, indoor dances, and Marian and other small worship settings, as well as with solo and choral vocal pieces.¹⁵

Paintings and frescoes of Mary as she ascends are most likely to appear in spaces used for regular liturgical worship, and angel musicians were abundant, representing the joy of Heaven as Mary is welcomed home and reunited with her son. Haut and bas instruments were both used in regular liturgical worship, particularly as the distinction between the two became less finite in the early sixteenth-century: choral music began to eclipse instrumental music as the heart of worship, and choirs were frequently accompanied by lute. In addition, the portative and positive organs shown in Gaudenzio's *Ascension*, as well as other keyboard instruments, began to be used to keep singers together as naves grew larger.

In the case of Gaudenzio's concert of angels, however, there is a rather riotous mix of instruments, from both categories, and in a much larger group than would have been heard at that time. Most instrumental groups of this time did not exceed five or six, and few choirs were larger than ten or twelve voices. Here, we see twenty-two singers, and fifty-six separate instruments, about half of which fall into the haut category. Given both the larger-than-life assemblage of sounds, as well as the acoustical properties of the space in which they are gathered, a real-life group of this size and makeup would have been not only difficult to physically fit in the area, but cacophonous. The actual musical result would be likely singers - even with twenty-two voices - and all plucked strings completely unheard, with the sound primarily coming from the brass (*figure 7*), percussion, bagpipes (*figure 8, bottom*), and the instrument Boccardi identifies as a "nyastaranga."¹⁶ (*figure 8, top*). The difficulties of tuning and matching timbre alone would make this unlikely to be anything other than, at best, unpleasant.

¹⁵ Kenneth Kreitner, "Instrumentation and Orchestration," *Grove Music Online*. Edited by Deane Root, accessed November 20, 2016

¹⁶ Boccardi, Sandro, "Glossary of Instruments," In *Gaudenzio Ferrari and the Dome of the Sanctuary of Saronno, Concert of the Angels*, ed. Dario Cimorelli, (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2008), 150.



figures 7, 8: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Concert of Angels*, detail (serpent; nyastaranga, bagpipe), 1536, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno.

This brings up the question as to whether Gaudenzio was knowledgeable and realistic in his depiction of these angel musicians, or if he merely painted them symbolically. In his treatise on painters and painting, Lomazzo assures his readers that Gaudenzio was, in addition to being a painter, sculptor and architect, a musician. Winternitz says, "There is no doubt that Gaudenzio had more than profound interest in musical instruments; he must have been an expert player and, I am convinced, also a builder of instruments.¹⁷" Boccardi seems to disagree, and suggests that artists and musicians existed in primarily separate spheres,¹⁸ with the exception of Leonardo, whose "ability as a musician was especially appreciated.¹⁹" He goes on to quote Tilman Seebass:

Let's face reality...the perspective is wrong, the number of strings and holes is impossible, and the bridge is in a completely absurd position from the acoustical standpoint...A deeper reason for such lack of realism lies however in the fact that musical instruments often have a symbolic

¹⁷ Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 106.

¹⁸ ...Boccardi also seems find it necessary to bring up the tiresome argument, using Leonardo's quotation about the matter, about whether music or painting is the more worthwhile art form.

¹⁹ Boccardi, Sandro, "A Concert in the Saronno Sky," in *Gaudenzio Ferrari and the Dome of the Sanctuary of Saronno, Concert of the Angels*, ed. Dario Cimorelli, (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2008),143-145.

meaning...they can be bearers of religious, moral, or social messages, or they can become an image of beauty, that is, take on an aesthetic value.^{20 21}

While the space in which the angels are depicted playing is, indeed, an unrealistic one, in which "the musicians would not have room, I don't say to play, but to even tune their instruments,²²" there are several factors to consider. The first is that this is obviously an artistic depiction of that which, for most of us, is unknowable; I suspect that Seebass did not find fault with the half-torso of God the Father popping out of the center of the dome, or the putti sitting on what appear to be solid clouds, when we know scientifically that clouds are vapor. The second, and more important factor is that the angels are, actually, all holding their instruments in a way which, while slightly distorted due to the circular perspective, in, nonetheless, correct for each instrument. In addition, it is unclear why realistic portrayal and symbolism are necessarily mutually exclusive. Therefore, I will continue with the assumption that Gaudenzio had purpose as well as musical knowledge in this depiction of angel musicians.

There are, in fact, several instruments in Gaudenzio's *Assumption* which have no record of existing elsewhere. He combines strings and wind in two instances (*figures 9, 10*), and shows elaborately carved string instruments, a split-valved brass instrument, and rather preposterous bagpipes, as well.



figures 9,10: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Concert of Angels*, detail (recorder-rebec, pan-pipe-lira), 1536, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno.

²⁰ Boccardi, "A Concert in the Saronno Sky," 145.

²¹ ...as I was unable to locate the writing from which Boccardi take this quotation (*Iconografia...*), I have to assume that he was, actually, referring to Gaudenzio's fresco. If he is, and is referring to one of the specific fantasy instruments, and has attempted and failed to make it, I will have to defer to him in that matter. However, if he is referring to all of the instruments, I take great issue with the idea that these are poorly or unrealistically executed.

²² Boccardi, "A Concert in the Saronno Sky," 145.

It is possible that he designed and created these instruments, as he was a worker in wood, and it is also possible that these were instruments which existed in the region, and his paintings are the only remaining record of their existence. I propose, however, that, whether he actually created the instruments or not, his overly large ensemble and fantastical instruments, as well as the configuration of angels playing them, were designed to draw the viewer into an understanding that Heaven is full of things which are not possible on this earth. The angels (which are heavenly) playing instruments (which are earthly, and familiar), are a bridge between what would have been culturally understood at the time - clothing, instruments - and what would have been just beyond the realm of reality - fantastic instruments, wings on human-like creatures, the occupation of space, and the sound the musicians would have created.

The ways in which the angels are holding their instruments, however, is firmly rooted in musical reality, and suggests that Gaudenzio did understand how each one was played. There are, for example, several lute players, some showing the newer style of holding the lute so that polyphony is possible²³. There are also some who still hold their hands under the body of the lute, as was done prior to the use of the lute for polyphony, but no plectra are visible. However, as no strings are visible, either, it is possible that he just left them out of the painting. His representations of the *lira da braccio*, violone, viol, and rebec have been used by music historians to further understanding of the development of the violin.²⁴ In addition, a brass instrument strongly resembling the serpent (*figure 11*) appears in this painting, and that instrument has been historically acknowledged as not having been invented until 1590, sixty-five years after Gaudenzio's fresco. It is difficult to tell whether his angels' twists of brass tubing have the six holes needed for them to qualify as a serpent, but it appears to be so: at least six are visible.

²³ Matthew Spring, *The Lute in Britain: A History of the Instrument and its Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001: 31.

²⁴ Katherine Powers, "Marco Palmezzano's Music-Making Angels: Holding the Fiddle in the Renaissance," *The Galpin Society Journal* 59, 2006: 139-259



figure 11: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Concert of Angels*, detail (serpent), 1536, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno.

The arrangement of the instruments within the band, however, suggests a further elaboration on the ascension from earthly to heavenly. The *haut* instruments - the instruments primarily associated with dances, pageantry, and boisterousness - are almost entirely located toward the outer edge of the circle of angel musicians, and all are focused on either their instrument or another musician, or the observer.



figure 12: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Concert of Angels*, detail (hurdy gurdy), 1536, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli di Saronno. This player seems ready to challenge the viewer.

In contrast, the angels who are focused upward, on God, are all either singers, or playing the softer, more contemplative *bas* instruments.

It seems clear that Gaudenzio had strong purpose in this entire fresco: to draw the worshiper who was under the dome into deeper contemplation of the journey from earthly matters to the more spiritual. He built on the architectural passage from the more mundane square upwards to the heavenly, beloved circular dome, continuing the geometric evolution of the building through subtle layers of color, body language and sound. In the *Concert of Angels*, Gaudenzio employed his deep understanding of form and music - and the contemporary, unspoken sounds and purposes of music and the instruments making it - to not only express the joy of homecoming, but to invite observers to contemplate their own welcome into heaven.

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