Music and Visual Culture in Renaissance Italy

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Chapter 15

FANTASTIC FINIALS: The Materiality, Decoration and Display of Renaissance Musical Instruments

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FANTASTIC FINIALS

The Materiality, Decoration and Display of Renaissance Musical Instruments

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One of the most captivating musical instruments on display in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is a sixteenth-century cittern attributed by some to the Italian instrument-maker Girolamo Virchi (1532- after 1574) from Brescia (Fig. 15.1). Predecessors to guitars, citterns are thought to have been developed in the early fifteenth century from the medieval citole. They are wire-strung chordal instruments that were generally played with a plectrum. The Ashmolean Museum's cittern (WA1939.30) is a particularly ornate instrument. The shallow side and back are made in maple and are carved in low relief in the form of a scallop shell. The front, glued down onto the sides without an overhang, is made of yellow larch. The pegbox contains 12 pegs, inserted frontally, carrying strings in six double courses (Fig. 15.2). There are signs of 18 former peg holes that were set in three rows in the pegbox. Other evidence of the earlier stringing was probably removed when new strips of ivory were inserted on the bridge and saddle, when the back, where the strings are fixed to pins, was possibly rebuilt. An extension running along the right side of the fingerboard was probably added when the number of strings was increased. The metal frets are the same width as the present fingerboard and were also probably added later.[1]

What really makes this musical instrument stand out is the many elaborate carvings it features. At the base of the neck, there is a detailed relief depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with the thick body of the serpent coiling around the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge (Fig. 15.3). Another part of this relief depicts a fantastic compound monster (most likely a harpy) with a woman's head, a reptilian body, cloven feet, and wings. A particularly elaborate finial carving features on the pegbox, on the back of which a male and female satyr are depicted with their arms bound together (Fig. 15.4). Their legs protrude outward from the instrument, forming a hanging hook which ends in stylized animal heads. This hook would have allowed the instrument to be hung up when not in use (Fig. 15.5). The rear of the pegbox also has carved

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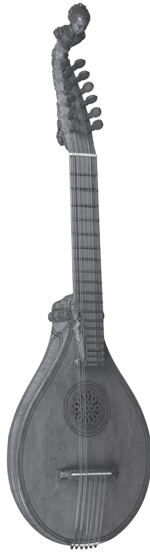

Figure 15.1 Girolamo Virchi attrib., cittern (front), c.1570. Maple, larch(?), blue stone, ivory, glass, and beads; 79.9 cm (overall length) × 23.5 cm (body width—back) × 4.9 cm (body depth—neck). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 15.2 Alternative view of Figure 15.1 (headstock and pegbox, front). Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 15.3 Alternative view of Figure 15.1 (heel). Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 15.4 Alternative view of Figure 15.1 (pegbox and finial, back). Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 15.5 Alternative view of Figure 15.1 (pegbox and finial, side). Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

foliage, and above the satyrs there is a grotesque head with further mythical beasts on either side, their tongues extending into his mouth. Above this figure is another grotesque monster with ram's horns on its head and hemispherical eyes of black glass. At the end of the pegbox, carved as though emerging from the mouth of the monster, is a female bust. The woman's eyes are inset with red beads and a blue turquoise stone is set into the crown of her head. In her pendant necklace, there is an empty hole of roughly the same shape as the turquoise stone, suggesting that it once may have been suspended from this chain around her neck.[2] There are also holes pierced through her ears in which earrings—perhaps suspended pearls—were likely once inserted. Other colored beads or gems are set into the back of the pegbox. Double lines of purfling flow from the front onto the sides, forming a looping shell-like pattern on the back, which wobbles slightly in the tighter bends.[3] The profusion of tuning pegs beneath the bust, topped with small black beads, evokes the form of breasts and nipples.

The elaborate pegbox on this cittern is just one example of the decorative finials that adorn many string instruments produced in Italy and elsewhere throughout the early modern period. In string instrument anatomy, the pegbox or headstock is located at the end of the instrument's neck, where the tuning pegs are fixed. The pegbox is a particularly visible aspect of string musical instruments, making it an ideal decorative space. Many early modern instrument makers were often not only craftsmen, but also painters, sculptors, and musicians.[4] Pegboxes and headstocks provided them with an opportunity to imaginatively showcase their talents. The pegboxes of viol family instruments often feature decorative finials that are traditionally carved in the shape of a volute, a rolled-up spiral or "scroll." The pegboxes of many string instruments, however, depart from these established forms. Zoomorphic creatures, such as lions, or anthropomorphic figures, such as carved human heads—sometimes with grotesque features, as found on the Ashmolean cittern—are some of the most common forms that one encounters. Many instruments also feature figurative imagery in the form of mythological or monstrous creatures, such as demons, cherubs, satyrs, and other half-human, half-animal hybrid creatures. The tuning pegs and pegboxes of citterns, viols and lire da braccio may also be decorated with ornate, expensive materials, such as jewels, silver, ebony, and ivory.[5] Musical instruments provided instrument makers with opportunities for sculptural fantasy; they were objects for artistic decoration and the skilled carving of representational forms in cypress, cedar, beech, and ebony.[6]

Taking as its entry point the finial decorations from the pegboxes of the string instruments within the Ashmolean Museum's collection, this chapter explores what these elaborate material and visual elements might say about the non-auditory dimensions of early modern music cultures. The chapter features images of Italian string instruments from the Ashmolean Museum's musical instrument collection. These images come from a database of 3D visualizations that is being developed to provide fully manipulable models and detailed reference images of the decorative elements of Renaissance musical instruments. This database is one of the key digital outputs of the *Marvellous Musical Instruments* (MMI) project, which is led by the author and brings together decorated musical instruments from museum collections around the world.

Musical Instrument Decoration

When viewing early modern musical instrument collections in museums today, visitors frequently encounter citterns, viols, and lire da braccio with fantastically decorated pegboxes. The practice of carving figures on pegboxes and headstocks was reasonably widespread throughout the early modern period, particularly among Italian instrument makers. The

string instruments with decorative finials that survive in museum collections represent the most ornate of their type. These elaborately decorated instruments were most likely built to please the eye just as much as the ear. As Carla Zecher observes, "it is likely that the instruments with the best sound quality were used until broken or worn out … Those that remain intact tend to be ornate objects destined more for display than for music making."[7] Furthermore, many of the instruments extant today have been modified over the years, as analyses of pegboxes, in particular, have suggested.[8]

An extensive body of literature on musical iconography has traced the symbolic values and cultural meanings attached to representations of musical instruments in varied media such as frescoes, paintings on canvas and panel, woodcuts and engravings, sculptures, reliefs and plaquettes, intarsia, and frontispieces.[9] For organologists and instrument makers, historical representations of musical instruments have provided valuable windows onto the past, from which replicas of instruments that no longer survive or perhaps never existed can be (re)constructed—although it is necessary to remember that, as the result of interpretation, these representations are often unreliable as sources. While representations of musical instruments have been subject to extensive analysis, by contrast, the representational forms we encounter *on* musical instruments themselves have received comparatively less critical attention.

The visual and decorative aspects of Renaissance musical instruments have certainly not been entirely neglected, particularly by instrument collectors and museum curators.[10] Emanuel Winternitz, the first curator of the musical instrument collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, was one of the first to systematically discuss decorated musical instruments.[11] More recently, against the backdrop of the wider "material turn" within Renaissance studies, the materiality of musical instruments has played a growing role in scholarship on music and visual culture within the disciplines of art history and music history.[12] A focus on musical instrument materialities has proved a productive opening onto the multifarious ways in which objects are entangled with, and articulate, social and political forces. Such a focus has, in turn, directed new attention to the visual and decorative elements of musical instruments and the broader sociocultural relations that these elements index. In an analysis of a harpsichord built by Giovanni Antonio Baffo in Venice in 1574, Flora Dennis notes that the "painstakingly elaborate decoration" of the instrument "represents much time, energy and expense."[13] The rarity and value of the decorative materials used on the harpsichord, including rosewood, boxwood, and ivory, communicated the instrument's "costly prestige."[14]

Keyboard instruments, in particular, were often heavily decorated and have attracted scholarly attention.[15] The large and flat field provided by the lids and cases of harpsichords, virginals, and spinets meant

that these instruments could support elaborate painted scenes or surface patterns of floral, geometric, or architectural forms, sometimes with ebony, ivory, bone, or gilded inlays. Depending on the instrument, these decorative patterns were executed in different media: intarsia, painting, carving, or elaborate *certosina* work, in which small pieces of wood, bone, metal, or mother-of-pearl were used to create inlaid geometric patterns that were sometimes painted or lacquered. Sometimes bones were stained specific colors and incorporated into the decoration of musical instruments. Arabesque patterns and the use of exotic materials in decorative practice, such as ivory, provide valuable opportunities for situating Renaissance musical instruments within global histories of exchange and circulation. Instrument materials and ornamentation enable us to trace aesthetic influences from Islamic art and Asian and African worlds beyond Renaissance Europe and explore the complex webs of commercial and colonial relations in which these musical objects and their raw materials were entangled. The type of decorative forms that feature on musical instruments may also have been determined by whether or not the instrument was to be used for sacred or secular music-making. For example, in Lomazzo's 1584 treatise *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scultura, et architettura*, he identifies mythological themes as appropriate decorations for secular instruments.[16] Instruments for sacred music, on the other hand, might feature religious decorative imagery. The shutters of Italian church organs, for example, were often painted with large-scale scenes that dialogued with the sacred space of the church.[17] Artists such as Giovanni Bellini, Cosmè Tura, Parmigianino, and Romanino, among others, were some of those who carried out decorative work on organs.

While keyboard instruments provided instrument makers with valuable surface space for decoration, string musical instruments of the Renaissance period, such as viols, lire da braccio, lutes, and citterns, also often feature decorative elements. Perhaps the most common ornamentation encountered on string instruments is the rosette that surrounds the sound-holes of lutes, mandolins, and guitars. Rosettes typically take the form of geometric patterns, often evoking Islamic art or gothic tracery.[18] They were not purely decorative but were used by luthiers to protect the wood by preventing cracking that could appear in the sounding board because of varying grain alignments. Sometimes the rosette was fashioned from layers of parchment or made from materials that were less sensitive to humidity, such as ivory.[19] Rosettes may also have served as a way for luthiers to express themselves and as a form of signature, with certain patterns being associated with specific craftsmen. String instruments would also sometimes feature decorative binding around the edges of the body or the neck, usually for protective purposes.[20]

Decorated and ornamental pegboxes constitute a rich aspect of musical instrument art that has not been fully explored. Unlike the double function of the rosette that was both decorative and protective, it is unlikely that the elaborate pegboxes and headstocks of string instruments were incorporated to preserve or protect the instrument. Indeed, as one of the outermost parts of the instrument, the pegbox is particularly vulnerable to damage, and a protruding figure further increases this fragility. Nevertheless, a range of Italian string instruments from the early modern period features elaborately carved or decorated pegboxes or headstocks. These carved finial figures may have had symbolic value or allegorical meaning that was significant to the instrument maker or to the person who commissioned the instrument's construction.[21] Indeed, many musical instruments include emblems, coats of arms, or other heraldic iconography that serve to delineate ownership.[22] Many instruments are decorated with common themes drawn from mythological subjects or associated with love and music scenes, while some instruments include elaborate carvings of human and nonhuman figures.[23]

Musical Beings

Throughout the early modern period, musical instruments were often associated with the visual appearance, form, and physiology of the human body.[24] Not only have musical instruments themselves long been understood as extensions of the human body, but we can also find instances when musical instruments were presented *as* human bodies.[25] Anatomy and music were closely aligned in early modern science and philosophy. Indeed, anatomy provided Renaissance artists with a model for creating new musical instruments and for exploring acoustics.[26] Leonardo da Vinci, for example, turned to the larynx and its cartilage rings to design wind instruments, and to the tendons of the hands and fingers to construct keys for musical instruments.[27] Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century descriptions of musical instruments often unfold within the semantic field of the body: instruments have "bodies," "bellies," "heads," and "necks;" they also possess their own "character" and "voices," referring to the specific sound qualities of an instrument.[28] As the seventeenth-century Italian composer and instrumentalist Girolamo Dalla Casa highlights concerning the cornett, musical instruments were more desirable if they "imitated as much as possible the human voice."[29] The metaphorical entanglements between the human body and musical instruments are captured by the very name "headstock," used to describe this fundamental structural element of string instrument architecture. The anthropomorphic quality of musical instruments is nicely captured in a 1533 poem by Maclou de La

Haye, which describes a lute in anatomical terms. The lute speaks in the first person:

> I am a body, I mean without movement,
> without arms, without feet, or any emotion,
> I am not of substantial size,
> in all, at most, a foot in width,
> and in length two large or three small,
> I am sought after by nobles and the gentility,
> I have a big belly, and one also sees my bones,
> I have a long neck, my mouth opposite to my back,
> my sides are on my glistening belly,
> and my guts on my languishing back,
> Whoever does not move me, hears nothing from me.[30]

Here the anatomical vocabulary extends into anthropomorphism, ascribing to the musical instrument life-like attributes. Beyond literature and discourse, the association between musical instruments and human bodies was extended through their decorative form and materiality. Zecher highlights that musical instruments were "material objects particularly suited to anthropomorphization" and notes that they were sometimes "decorated so as to resemble the human body."[31] Just as Maclou de La Haye extended the musical instrument-as-human-body metaphor through the literary technique of anthropomorphism, instrument makers furthered this through their decorative practice. The shape of certain instruments made them especially amenable to this anthropomorphic mode of representation: "the lira da braccio lent itself particularly well to anthropomorphization, for a unique feature of the lira (as compared with the violin) is the indentation at the lower end of the case where the tail piece is attached."[32] This gives the base of the lira da braccio (or lyre) a distinct buttock-like shape. Similarly, the curvy shape of the lute meant that it was frequently compared to the female body in Renaissance art, literature, and society. As Zecher has observed, the "rounded belly" of the lute "reinforced connections with notions of femininity and especially fertility, by evoking pregnancy."[33]

Musical instruments did not even need to have some physical resemblance to the human body in order for anthropomorphic features to be imagined or integrated. The decorative heads carved into pegboxes provide a particularly powerful example of the material anthropomorphization of musical instruments. Through anthropomorphism, objects like musical instruments take on life-like capacities. Ethnomusicological literature on musical instruments has shown that anthropomorphic instruments from human cultures around the world have frequently been endowed with personhood and often represent powerful spiritual

beings.[34] As objects whose sounds have transformative power, in many human societies, musical instruments are "treated almost as magical 'beings'."[35] Considerably less attention has been paid to the personhood and agency of Renaissance musical instruments. Anthropologist Carlo Severi has suggested that the principle of "parer vivo," the appearance of or semblance of life, was a fundamental element in the arts of the early modern period.[36] Severi traces the notion of *parer vivo* through Renaissance art and philosophy, from Leon Battista Alberti to Marsilio Ficino. For Renaissance philosophers such as Ficino matter was governed by a constant propagation of energies and vital forces "that make every single body a living being, whether this body has the appearance of a rock, an animal, a star, or a human being."[37] Within this cosmology of lively matter, objects and artifacts "take on a kind of life and become object-persons."[38] The anthropomorphized musical instruments under discussion here similarly present us with a lively or performative materiality, which perhaps bestowed these musical objects with life-like attributes and human properties.[39] The carved heads that appear on some finials may have granted these musical objects a form of life or personhood and, in so doing, reconfigured the "objectness" of these musical instruments, transforming their materiality beyond simply being carriers of sonorous signification. The faces on pegboxes invite the owner, player, or viewer to imagine these musical instruments as lively inspirited things—musical beings who may have formed powerful relationships with their human interactors. As objects imbued with life-like characteristics, "instruments own, use, and transform those under whose care they fall," Zecher suggests, concluding that "to possess a musical instrument is also to be possessed by one."[40]

The Ashmolean Museum's collection of string instruments contains a number of lively faces carved into pegboxes. A lack of documentary evidence means scholars often can only surmise how different instrument makers, owners, or players may have related to these anthropomorphic musical objects, and the larger cosmologies or ontologies they may have expressed. Beyond speculation about Renaissance musical object ontologies, placing these visual and decorative aspects at the center of musical instrument research also provides openings onto questions of power, concerning gender, class, race and colonial relations. The following sections briefly explore three musical instruments from the Ashmolean Museum's collection, in order to trace three lines of analysis—gender, race, and monstrosity—that the *Marvellous Musical Instruments* project is following as it develops.

Gender

The head of an aristocratic-looking female adorns the pegbox of one cittern in the Ashmolean's collection (WA1939.29), made by Gasparo

Figure 15.6 Gasparo Bertolotti Da Salò, cittern (pegbox and finial, front), c.1560–70. Cedar of Lebanon and maple; 74.8 cm (overall length) × 22.2 cm (body width—back) × 4.7 cm (body depth—neck). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

da Salò (Fig. 15.6). Carved from a separate piece of maple from the rest of the pegbox, the female head features an elaborate coiffure, eyes of small black gemstones, and a ruff around the neck. Beneath the ruff there is a leaf motif. These are perhaps acanthus leaves, a plant form that has a long history as a stylized ornamental motif in Greek, Roman and Byzantine art and architecture, and that was popular throughout the Renaissance period, particularly as a carved furniture decoration. The leaves that adorn this pegbox have traces of gilding.[41] The female head on the cittern plays a central role in the construction of the musical instrument's meaning, visually ascribing the instrument with a gender. The gendering of musical instruments has been widely understood as an aspect of the sociology of Renaissance music.[42] Musical instruments were often associated with specific genders, based either on their physical appearance or the social contexts in which they were played.[43] Virginals, harpsichords, and other keyboard instruments, for example, were often associated with femininity and female virtue, as young women of wealthy

status were expected to learn to play them in their social circles, where musical skills were an important social talent.[44] Through social practices, associations with masculinity or femininity emerged around musical instruments, with certain instruments being deemed suitable or unacceptable to be played by women.[45] While some musical instruments were thus ascribed or associated with genders through their social contexts, the carved woman's head on the Ashmolean cittern materially codes the instrument as female in itself rather than through its association with a gendered user. The material form of a musical instrument is a particularly important indicator of the gendered social meanings that may have circulated around it. As previously discussed, the curved bodies of the lira da braccio and the lute were suggestive of the female form. Phallic-shaped instruments like *flauti* (recorders) presented opportunities for sexual innuendo and word play and operated as sexual symbols in songs and literature.[46] Gendered characteristics may also have been introduced through an instrument maker's choice of utilizing culturally gendered materials or substances, such as incorporating the body parts (skin, teeth, intestines, etc.) of a male or female animal.

Musical instruments are intimate objects. Their material forms change over time and merge with the sweat, breath, and blood (when played excessively or by beginners) of the people that play them. They are often held close to the body when played. In the case of the Ashmolean cittern with the carved female finial, the body of the performer would have been nestled against the body of the cittern, in intimate contact with the woman's head. In addition to the carved head of the woman, the curved body of the cittern is suggestive of the female form. When played by a male musician, the gendered cittern may have lent itself to a performance of courtly love or heterosexual masculinity, with its female body providing him with an opportunity to demonstrate his skillful touch and sexual prowess (of course, this does not preclude queer readings when played by women).[47]

Race

Carved finials also provide openings onto questions of race and music. Another cittern from the Ashmolean's collection (WA1948.134), from the early seventeenth century, features a carved male head at the top of the pegbox (Fig. 15.7). In the catalogue of the Ashmolean's string instruments edited by Jon Whiteley, this male figure is identified as an African boy.[48] The head is carved from a piece of maple with a straight grain. The figure is painted black with a touch of red and has carved bone eyes and teeth. The neckerchief and lips are painted red, and the back is decorated with a pattern of floral and arabesque motifs.

The instrument appears to belong to a long tradition of early modern objects decorated in the "blackamoor" (or "black moore") style.

Figure 15.7 Pine, maple, sycamore, ebony, pen and black ink, and ivory; 76.3 cm (overall length) × 23.4 cm (body width–back) × 5.4 cm (body depth—neck). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo © Tucker Densley courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the black moor's head featured prominently as an exoticizing decorative element on luxury objects, such as jewelry, furniture, and drinking vessels.[49] With colonial and imperial projects accelerating in the 1500s, and amid growth in personal collecting among the wealthy, particularly for cabinets of curiosities, there was demand for luxury goods that featured unusual or exotic materials, including those naturally exhibiting rich blacks and browns such as onyx, sardonyx, jasper, agate, black marble, and rosewood.[50] Joaneath Spicer suggests that this demand for exotic materials may have led to an increase in luxury goods featuring representations of African people, with blackness becoming a material signifier of an object's value or curiosity, and, by extension, the owner's social status.[51] The carved head of this particular cittern embeds the object within a matrix of colonial power relations. Musical instruments were key tools of colonization, particularly within missionary contexts where indigenous musicians were taught to play western instruments.[52] While the cittern

under discussion here was most likely not used in overseas missionization projects, in European settings it would have lent itself to a different mode of colonial performance.

If the body of the cittern is to be understood as the "body" of the black person whose head sits at the end of the instrument's neck, the cittern becomes an object of colonial subjugation, domination, and control. The instrument, as the racial subaltern, is forced to play the tune of the white musician who plays upon its body in a performance of mastery, constructing a relationship of colonizer (player) and colonized (instrument). When displayed in a cabinet of curiosities, the object foreshadows a history of colonial exhibitions and ethnological shows in which people from colonized countries were presented as wonderous or subhuman exotic objects.[53] The large, staring eyes and the visible, perhaps scary, teeth of the carved head reproduce the stereotyped imagery associated with European caricatures of African people, a representational regime in which people of color were often imaged and imagined as fantastic, wonderous, or sub-human.

The Grotesque and the Monstruous

A focus on finial carvings also invites us to consider the monstrous creatures—both anthropoid and bestial—that frequently adorn the pegboxes and headstocks of string instruments, such as the cittern with which this chapter opened (Fig. 15.4). The fantastic and grotesque are fundamental elements of early modern literature, art, and science.[54] Monstrous and marvelous creatures had captured people's imaginations since antiquity and this interest continued in early modernity. Luke Morgan describes this fascination with the monstrous in the sixteenth century: "If, on the one hand, the sixteenth-century *trattatisti* from Cesare Cesariano to Gian Paolo Lomazzo dedicated many pages to debating the legitimacy of the grotesque in art, on the other, physicians, natural historians, and teratologists attempted to categorize and explain monstrous births, hybrid creatures, and legendary beasts."[55] Scholarship has suggested that interest in grotesque ornamentation during the Renaissance was sparked, in part, by the rediscovery, around 1480, of the Roman paintings of strange, hybridized, biomorphic figures that adorned the vault and walls of the underground structure that was later identified as the Domus Aurea. These paintings were described as "grotteschi" in reference to their location in what were thought at the time to be underground caves or grottos (*grotte* in Italian). Throughout the sixteenth century, there were debates about the place of the grotesque in the visual arts, fuelled partly by revisitations of treatises that explored this subject, including Vitruvius's *De architectura*.[56] In Chapter 5 of book 7 in this treatise, Vitruvius condemned grotesque imagery that featured composite figures because such imagery defied logic and the principles

of naturalistic representation. Reflecting on the work of contemporary artists, Vitruvius describes how "monsters are now painted in frescoes rather than reliable images of definite things," and comments that this grotesque imagery flouts "authority and the principles of correctness."[57]

Hybrid and monstrous creatures were often invested with musical meaning and musical instruments provided opportunities for the *fantasia* of artists.[58] Fascination with the grotesque was expressed in musical instrument making through a range of forms, from the fashioning of animal bones into musical instruments to the incorporation of monstrous figures within instrument ornamentation. Bizarre and fantastical musical instruments and musical machines were regularly designed, painted, imagined, and sketched throughout the Renaissance.[59] According to Carlo Ridolfi's (likely apocryphal) account of the young Tintoretto, the artist would invent "bizarre" instruments and play them.[60] At times, it can be difficult to dis-entangle imaginary instruments from those that were actually built. As Winternitz observes: "the borderline between the fantasy of the painter and the love of the builder for fanciful decoration is not easy to draw, especially since the building of instruments was by no means standardized."[61] Giorgio Vasari reports, in his biography of Leonardo da Vinci, that the artist owned a lira da braccio in the shape of a horse's skull, an instrument Leonardo had constructed himself, largely of silver.[62] While Leonardo's horse skull lyre provides an unusual example of a grotesque instrument, the grotesque was "often bestowed upon Renaissance instruments not so much through their shape but by their ornamentation."[63] Indeed, the monstrous and zoomorphic heads and torsos affixed to the pegboxes of many string instruments root these musical objects within the register of the grotesque.[64]

Displaying Musical Instruments

The decorative elements of the musical instruments under discussion here suggest that these musical objects were designed for the eye as much as the ear, to be seen as well as sounded. Indeed, when we bring the decorative features of musical instruments to the center of our analyses, questions of (dis)play invariably arise, directing attention to the material environments and social settings in which these instruments would have been showcased. Whether or not these finials were purely decorative, they can shed light on the visual, social, and multi-sensorial dynamics of Renaissance music cultures. Instruments would have appeared in a variety of viewing contexts, from private collections, to studioli, to public performances.

Musical performances were multi-sensory events where musicians and their instruments were often placed on display.[65] Treatises and manuals on musical technique, such as those written by Silvestro Ganassi—*Regola*

Rubertina (1542) and *Lettione Seconda* (1543)—emphasize that the playing of musical instruments should be visually and not just aurally pleasing. Such playing instructions provided detailed information about bodily comportment and positioning, as well as the attire, hairstyles, accessories, gestures, and spaces associated with specific instruments. Within the visual culture of early modern music performance, instruments, musicians, and space were inherently intertwined. Musicians and spectators would have been attuned to the visual and spatial details of music performance, which may have included the elaborate decorative forms of some musical instruments. These decorated musical instruments may have particularly suited the intimate settings of private concerts, *musica da camera*, *ridotti* and other noble gatherings, where their ornamentation could have been closely admired and discussed. In addition to drawing the attention of audience members, the pegbox is an area of string instrument anatomy that receives regular visual attention from the performer, who would have often interacted with the pegs in order to tune the instrument.

Pegboxes carved in non-conventional forms most likely would have required additional hours of craftsmanship, implicitly serving to display the owner's wealth. These carvings may also have indicated the instrument maker's prowess or served to distinguish the style of particular craftsmen. Decorative features could thus have linked together different owners, performers, and instrument makers within the spatial and social settings in which music was performed and through which musical instruments were collected and displayed. For example, the sixteenth-century Venetian musical instrument maker Lorenzo da Pavia was well known for his one-of-a-kind musical instruments for the art and luxury goods market.[66] It was through Lorenzo da Pavia that Isabella d'Este—a keen collector of precious objects, including musical instruments—could track what special instruments people owned in Venice, Rome, and at other courts. She was proficient on several musical instruments associated with courtly entertainment, including the lute and lira da braccio, and furnished her private residence with these musical instruments.[67]

The early modern period saw an increase in the production of portable musical instruments for private ownership. Musical instruments were popular ornaments in private households in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The majority of portable musical instruments would most likely have been stored in cases or closed chests or cupboards rather than placed on display in private dwellings, primarily to protect them from damage and humidity.[68] Wooden chests and other large wooden boxes for the storage of musical instruments frequently appear on household inventories; sometimes these storage containers are themselves heavily decorated or painted.[69] The inventory for the Palazzo Talenti-d'Anna in Venice, for example, shows that in "a painted fir-wood chest was an old organ *desfatto* (taken apart), and in another similar chest, which also

contained a woollen pillow, were three violas, two lutes and a lute case."[70] Such chests would not have served to display instruments but primarily to protect them securely from the elements, locking them safely beneath the lid.[71]

As noted above, many of the heavily decorated musical instruments that survive today were most likely made more for display than for music-making. Whether or not these instruments were played, they were precious objects to possess, and works of art in and of themselves.[72] Musical instruments that featured elaborately carved pegboxes may have served decorative as well as musical purposes and, when not being played, would likely have been displayed in their owners' houses. In the case of the Ashmolean cittern (WA1939.30) with which this chapter opened, this is suggested by the material form of the pegbox, which includes a wooden hook from which to hang the instrument. The cittern with the female head in the Ashmolean Museum's musical instrument collection (WA1939.29) also features a hanging hook. The underside of the hook has been left smooth, presumably in recognition of its practical purpose.

A considerable body of work has explored the visual presence of musical instruments in domestic settings.[73] As well as providing musical entertainment, these musical instruments were works of art that were used to furnish the Renaissance home and to spark conversation during private gatherings. Musical instruments frequently featured in Renaissance spaces of display and collection such as studioli and cabinets of curiosities, where collections of fascinating natural and man-made objects were housed. Dedicated music rooms in the Renaissance home served not only as spaces of study and performance but also as spaces of visual display. The studiolo of the fifteenth-century Udinese lawyer Andrea de Monticuli contained a lute that was used both for playing and decorative purposes.[74] The sixteenth-century Veronese patron Mario Bevilacqua had a substantial collection of musical instruments in his house, some of which were rare and valuable: there were 4 keyboard instruments, 22 string instruments, and 52 wind instruments. His interest was not only related to the practical function of making music, but also to the value and rarity of these instruments.[75] Mark A. Meadow highlights how powerful merchant-banking families, such as the Fuggers, the Medici, and the Welsers, included precious musical instruments among their collections.[76] Such collections served to demonstrate the wealth, travels, and intellectual credentials of the owner.[77] Within Renaissance cabinets of curiosity, Krzysztof Pomian observes, musical instruments often figure among the "vanities"—objects that operate between that which is "discernible through the senses of sight and touch, and which resists time, like ancient statues, and all that is transitory, such as sounds, tastes, smells."[78]

Household inventories are valuable sources of information regarding both instruments and the spaces in which they were stored and displayed

in private settings. As Victor Coelho and Keith Polk have pointed out, by the middle of the sixteenth century, customers knew where the finest instruments were made and sold.[79] Bonnie Blackburn and Stefano Toffolo have shed light on specific cases of demographic distribution of musical instrument possession in sixteenth-century Venetian households.[80] The detailed analysis of inventories and notary documents show *nobili* owning expensive and finely crafted musical instruments, sometimes with aesthetically pleasing particulars, such as ivory inserts, elaborate gold ornamentation, and carvings.[81] Unfortunately, few inventories provide precise detail as to the decoration of particular instruments, or the spaces in which they were displayed. A rare case is the household inventory of the wealthy sixteenth-century Venetian Vincenzo Paqualigo. The inventory describes a violin and a dulcimer featuring decorative carving and silverwork: "one violin in a wooden case, one dulcimer, and all silver framed and carved." In this case, there is also a reference to a specific decorated room in which these instruments were stored.[82] Another example is the wealthy sixteenth-century Venetian Donato da Lezze. The inventory of his *camera d'oro* (golden room) lists a virginals with carved feet.[83] This kind of information is quite rare, as specific details might not have been deemed worthy of recording or were perhaps not important for the purpose of the inventory itself.

Flora Dennis has shown that musical instruments were often intentionally placed in the most public spaces of the home.[84] In wealthy households, the particularly expensive instruments may have been displayed in more private spaces, providing visitors with an exclusive viewing experience. In his treatise, *I trattati delle virtù sociali* (1498), Giovanni Pontano provides advice on how to furnish a house, including which objects to purchase and where to display them in order to demonstrate one's wealth and "magnificence."[85] He recommends different parts of the house should be adorned with these luxurious objects according to specific events.[86] The most precious objects would be displayed in a more private part of the house for esteemed guests, while the less expensive objects would be displayed in the most public parts of the house and used to showcase the owner's reputation, education, and taste.[87] The sixteenth-century Dominican writer Matteo Bandello, in his *Le novelle* (1554), describes in detail how the Roman courtesan Imperia Cognati displayed a lute or cittern and music books on an elaborately carved table covered with green velvet as the centerpiece of her studiolo: "in the middle could be seen a small table, the most beautiful in the world, covered in green velvet. There was always either a lute or a *cetra* there with books of music, and other musical instruments."[88] Chriscinda Henry notes in her contribution to this volume, in which she explores the early development of the music study, that Fra Sabba da Castiglione, in his *Ricordi* (1560), includes musical instruments in his discussion of "ornaments of the home." He commends those who adorn "their palaces, houses, and above all their

private rooms and studies with many and diverse ornaments, according to the variety and nature of their wit and fantasy, from which it happens that some adorn their rooms with musical instruments."[89] Da Castiglione notes that musical instruments are objects ideally suited for studioli due to their aesthetic qualities: "such instruments as these greatly delight the ears … and they also please the eye very much when they are diligently made by the hands of excellent and ingenious masters."[90]

As Luke Syson and Dora Thornton have shown, the purchase, possession, and display of "virtuous" and "marvellous" objects in the domestic interior were a means of demonstrating one's education, as well as displaying the status, taste, and character of the owner.[91] These objects would also have been displayed to imbue viewers with a sense of wonder and surprise. Elaborately decorated or exotic musical instruments would have played a role in what Stephen Greenblatt calls "the production of wonder" within the performance of the domestic interior.[92] Indeed, the carved and inlaid details of decorated instruments would have lent themselves to the close observation and manipulation possible in studioli, *studi di musica* and *kunst-* and *wunderkammern.*

Conclusion

Musical instruments are curiously liminal objects within early modern music cultures. Operating at the intersection of the temporal realm and the celestial sphere of music, these objects sit firmly within the nexus of what ethnomusicologist Eliot Bates has called "human-object-divine relations."[93] Given the transitory and fleeting nature of the sounds they produce, musical instruments bridge the world of matter and non-matter, the visible and the invisible, the enduring and the ephemeral. Musical instruments of the Renaissance period are tightly enmeshed within the textures of social relationships, cultural meanings, and significance.

The *Marvellous Musical Instruments* project is exploring the "social lives" of Renaissance musical instruments in museum collections around the world through a focus on their decorative materiality.[94] Such a focus directs attention to the role that musical objects played in early modern social worlds, beyond their music-making capacities. This chapter has outlined some of the potential pathways opened up when Renaissance musical instruments are approached not only as sounding objects, but also as visual and material objects permeated with physicality, meaning, and affect. Musical instruments were objects of possession, performance, pleasure, aesthetic appreciation, and cross-cultural exchange. Intertwined in cultural flows, commodity chains, and global trade, instruments moved through Renaissance worlds, articulating meaning, establishing relations, reproducing power dynamics and signifying social status and cultural values as they did so. Designed to be seen as well as sounded, dis-played as well as played, musical instrument ornamentation invites reflection on

the circulation of aesthetic influences beyond Europe, as well as on the gendered, colonial, and racial relations of Renaissance music within an interconnected global culture. The faces we find on pegboxes invite us to imagine musical instrument materiality differently: as a lively, performative, and potentially affective materiality. Matter is not inert, nor simply the background for human activity. Instruments are entanglements of labor, craft, and materials, and much can be learned by examining their physical characteristics alongside the social networks in which they were enmeshed. These anthropomorphic and zoomorphic musical instruments were far from passive objects from which sound emanated. Endowed with anatomy, gender, race, character and social status, musical instruments with visually ornamented finials were expressive objects.

The practice of carving figures on pegboxes was certainly not limited to Italian musical instrument makers. While this chapter has revolved around a set of Italian string instruments held in the Ashmolean Museum's collection in Oxford, examples of strange, curious, and fantastic finial figures can be found within museums from around the world, as even a quick browse through the collections of musical instruments held in other museums will reveal. In their silenced and immobile states as they sit enclosed within sterilized, climate-controlled museum display cabinets, these musical instruments appear removed from their original social and cultural contexts and, often, little descriptive information is provided about their social lives beyond a dendrochronological date of construction and a list of materials from which they are made. Occasionally we are furnished with the details about who donated these instruments to the museum, but rarely is there detailed information about who has previously owned them, with this knowledge typically being lost when the instruments were inherited, traded, exchanged, forgotten, and found again throughout their lifetimes. In such a context of scarce connection with the human past, the carved faces that peer back from behind the glass display cabinets provide one crucial entry-point for better understanding the social lives of historical musical instruments and the objecthood of Renaissance music cultures.

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Notes

1 Whiteley, 72.
2 Whiteley, 70.
3 Milnes, 266.
4 Zecher 2007, 16. The question of who decorated a musical instrument will vary from instrument to instrument and will depend on the decorative form. Many musical instruments would most likely have been decorated “in house” by the instrument-maker (see Thornton 1991, 101). Artists may have been commissioned to embellish particularly elaborate or expensive musical instruments. Some have suggested that furniture painters also decorated instruments (see Griffini, 436).
5 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Giudizi di Petizion, Inventari, b.337, F.55. c.1, 19 octobre 1581: this Venetian household inventory shows musical instruments made with precious materials such as ebony, ivory, gold, and silver.
6 Winternitz 1982, 27. Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 354, have catalogued some of the materials that were used in musical instrument craftsmanship.
7 Zecher 2007, 16.
8 Fleming and Bryan, 77–84; Caldwell, 20–22.
9 Some of the earliest studies in this direction include: Panofsky 1939; McKinnon 1977; Leppert 1977; Winternitz 1979.
10 See Winternitz 1979; Winternitz 1982, 19–21; Rueger 1982. More recently, among others: Falletti, Meucci, and Rognoni 2007.
11 Winternitz 1979.
12 Tresch and Dolan, 278–298; Dennis 2016, 371–382; Gétreau 2017; Dennis 2012; Dennis 2018.
13 Dennis 2016, 374.
14 Dennis 2016, 374.
15 P. Thornton 1982, 2–10, 18–20; Griffini, 436; Dennis 2016, 374.
16 Lomazzo, 347.
17 Bisson. For the relationship between musical instruments and sacred space, see Vai.
18 Martin 2006, 123–137, 252–256; Fleming and Bryan, 88–90.
19 Échard and Albiero ... and Albiero 2021.
20 Fleming and Bryan, 84–91.
21 Fleming and Bryan, 109; Gétreau 2007.
22 Radepont et al. 2020.
23 Heyde 2007.
24 For musical instruments as metaphors in anatomical science, see Gouk and Sykes 2011.
25 Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have widely shown that within non-European ontologies of music, musical instruments are often understood as bodies. See Qureshi; Stobart, 28; Gordon, 202.
26 Gouk, 157–192.
27 Winternitz 1982, xxii.
28 Zecher 2007, 7: “Musical instruments possess a voice, albeit one that is mechanically produced rather than human.”
29 Della Casa, 112.
30 De la Haye, 13v–143r (cited in Zecher 2007, 153).
31 Zecher 2007, 7, 16–17.
32 Zecher 2007, 16–17.
33 Zecher 2000, 772. On the decoration of lutes, see Sadie, 549–575.
34 Laurenty, 989.

35 Doubleday, 4.
36 Severi, 255.
37 Severi, 259.
38 Severi, 255.
39 Buettner.
40 Zecher 2007, 161.
41 Milnes, 259; Whiteley, 70.
42 Steblin.
43 Austern has explored the connections between femininity and music in the early modern period.
44 Marsh, 515; Gardiner, 120; Leppert 1985, 53; Pendle.
45 Sider, 167.
46 Zecher 2000, 772.
47 Marsh, 515; Gardiner, 120; Leppert 1985, 53; Pendle.
48 Whiteley, 76.
49 Seelig.
50 Spicer, 47.
51 Spicer, 43.
52 Scholarship has of course shown that music in colonial contexts was a site of hegemonic struggle, resistance, and cross-cultural exchange, with indigenous music traditions and practices often influencing the music of the European colonisers. See: Bloechl; Coelho and Polk, 42–46.
53 Bennett; Mitchell; Woodham; Conklin.
54 Huet; Prescott; Rae; Morgan; Hillman and Mazzio; Baert, Traninger and Santing; Winternitz 1982, 39.
55 Morgan, 49.
56 Cesariano; Barbaro.
57 Vitruvius, 91.
58 Zayaruznaya, 12–14; Hansen.
59 Keating, 1–16; Wolfe, 29–55: Campbell, 59–65.
60 Ridolfi, 2:69.
61 Winternitz 1982, 28.
62 Vasari, 3.5.
63 Winternitz 1982, 54.
64 Winternitz 1982, 54.
65 Vai.
66 Brown; Prizer.
67 Shephard.
68 Dennis 2006; Howard, 104–114.
69 Palumbo-Fossati (1984, 126) has discussed an ornamented lute case owned by the wood carver and artist Andrea Faentino, as documented in a 1582 inventory.
70 Howard, 100.
71 Fleming, 6: "Chests of a suitable size may be seen in many grand houses. The most obvious problem with the use of a chest for storing viols is access to the contents, which is exclusively by lifting the lid. If an instrument at the bottom of the chest was required, it would be necessary first to remove any that were stored above it. This would undoubtedly be inconvenient and add a potentially hazardous event to the life of the instruments, but it would hardly be a critical impediment to the use of a chest for storing viols."
72 For musical instruments as works of art, see P. Thornton 1982.
73 See P. Thornton 1991, 272–274; D. Thornton, 121–123; Toffolo 1995; Palumbo-Fossati 1984, 126–127 2004; Palumbo-Fossati 1986; Palumbo-Fossati 2004, 476–477; Fortini Brown 2004; Dennis 2006; Howard, 95–114.

74 Paschini, 121–138.
75 Moretti, 72–73; Castellani.
76 Meadow, 182.
77 Koeppe.
78 Pomian, 51.
79 Coelho and Polk, 228–232.
80 Blackburn; Toffolo 1987, 47–67.
81 Coelho and Polk, 231.
82 ASV, Cancelleria Inferiore, Miscellanea notai diversi, b.38, n.74, 7 June 1553.
83 ASV, Cancelleria inferiore, Miscellanea notai diversi, b.42 N. 69 or 66, 3 August 1580.
84 Dennis 2012.
85 On magnificence: Pontano, 239 (*Spese per cui si richiede la magnificenza*).
86 Pontano, 272–273 (*Gli oggetti ornamentali*).
87 On hosting honourable guests: Pontano, 259–260 (*Il ricevimento degli ospiti*).
88 Bandello, Volume secondo, Terza Parte, Novella XLII, 462.
89 Da Castiglione, 56 (*Ricordo circa gli ornamenti della casa*), cited in Dennis 2012, 43.
90 Da Castiglione, 56 (*Ricordo circa gli ornamenti della casa*), cited in Dennis 2006, 233.
91 Syson and Thornton, 8–9.
92 Greenblatt, 74.
93 Bates.
94 Appadurai; see also Bates.

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