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Visions of Inaudible Sounds: Heavenly Music and Its Pictorial Representations*

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My discussion addresses representations of celestial glory under the aspect of *musica coelestis* as a chanted or orchestral *mise en scène*, and hence the development of a pictorial theme that harbors a multiplicity of visual, medial, and semantic paradoxes. Mantegna's *Madonna dei Cherubini* of c. 1485 can serve to highlight some of these complications (**fig. 1**).[1] The painting shows the Mother of God surrounded by a throng of hovering cherubim, their mouths opened wide, their cheeks puffed out, intoning a celestial song with such liveliness and vitality that they even generate cloud vortices. But from which lungs do they sing? And is song produced by such disembodied beings even imaginable? Mantegna follows the paradigm of strict mimesis, devising an emphatically three-dimensional, perspectivally consistent dispositif that is stringently distributed with regard to upper and lower, back and foreground, and the placement of figures alongside and above one another, and at the same time one that is nonetheless—in an ontological sense—meant to be entirely spaceless, timeless, and placeless. In carrying out the paradoxical task not just of depicting a mimetically conceived reality that is devoid of time and space, but an *in*visible music as well, Mantegna adopts the solution of the visibly depicted hybridity of the angels as singing spiritual beings, or more precisely: through the mimetic, highly-consistent visualization of a hybridity within which the intermediality of his subject confronts the viewer as the figuration of the disembodied embodiment of music. Mantegna, there, subtly undermines his own mimetic paradigm by rendering it paradoxical, by evoking a sounding body and an acoustic space that is apparently situated in the disembodied nowhere of inaudibility.

* A comprehensive monograph on this subject is being prepared by the author. This article therefore reflects the presentation delivered at the conference without significant revision. Notes, accordingly, have been kept to a minimum.

1 *Andrea Mantegna. La Madonna dei Cherubini*, ed. M. Olivari, Milan, 2006 (with essential bibliography).

In view of this intermedial configuration the focus of my discussion is the following issue: in many instances, and in accordance with the imperatives of mimetic representation, a celestial music that is defined in theological terms as inaudible is visualized as a given performance by angels who sing or even play physically real musical instruments, and is hence visibly translated into the category of mundane audibility. At the same time, and in light of the muteness of the media of painting, it is precisely the visual and iconographically implied audibility of this *musica coelestis* that is refused any audible, acoustic expression. The question I want to address, then, is: beginning in the Trecento, what aesthetic solutions and procedures of visualization were generated—not least against the horizon of an increasingly paragonal or intermedial discourse—for the sake of overcoming this aporia of an *in*visible audibility, and correspondingly of the visualization of the inaudible?

To begin with, a few remarks on the conceptual preconditions for the representation of celestial music, and on its inherent paradoxes. The celestial music with which we are concerned here differs categorically from the "music of the cosmos" that served as the linchpin of all music-theoretical reflections beginning in Antiquity, continuing into the Middle Ages, and far beyond.[2] Such a "music of the cosmos" was decisively systematized on the basis of Neopythagorean and Platonic foundations by Boethius—who, as we know, interpreted the concept of music altogether in favor of the structure and significance of harmonic proportions and their divinely deployed, hierarchically classified order. The terms "music of the cosmos" or *musica mundana* designate the cosmic, mathematically-based proportional and intervallic relationships of the harmony of the spheres; *musica humana*, therefore, refers to the harmony of the human soul and of the human body, and the harmonic relationships that join them; and *musica instrumentalis*, finally, refers to the harmonic proportions of instrumental music-making (the latter alone is, at least to some extent, close to music as we understand it today). Celestial music as a "music of the cosmos", then, is conceptualized—according to this understanding—as a thoroughly mathematical concept, and as intrinsically inaudible.

The idea of a music *in* heaven, consequently, must be sharply distinguished from that of a music *of* the cosmos. The notion of a *musica coelestis* as an angelic music (*musica angelica*), sung for the eternal praise of God, is already present in various contexts in both the Old and New Testaments, and finally in theological reflections beginning in the early Christian period.

Emerging early and based on such references was a topical notion of "singing angelic liturgists" who with "*indefessa voce collaudant*" to the Lord (that is to say, who glorified the Lord with unflagging, incessant voices of praise, as formulated already by Hilarius of Poitiers in the fourth century).[3] Such praise is repeatedly defined as a song performed by one voice in common (*una voce*), and as everlasting (*senza fine*). This points already toward the metaphoricity of this notion, which harbors a paradoxical kernel from the very beginning to the extent that the celestial voices of the angels are conceptualized as existing in categorical alterity to the human voice, and consequently, as humanly incomprehensible, as surpassing our capacities of conceptualization and understanding. And it is precisely this connection between overpowering euphony, multi-voice unison, and eternally timelessness that is peculiar to the singing of the angels,

2 The bibliography on the whole topic is endless. Still basic and essential remains: R. Hammerstein, *Die Musik der Engel. Untersuchungen zur Musikanschauung des Mittelalters*, Berne, Munich, Francke, 1962.

3 *Tractatus super psalmos*, PL, 9, 317.

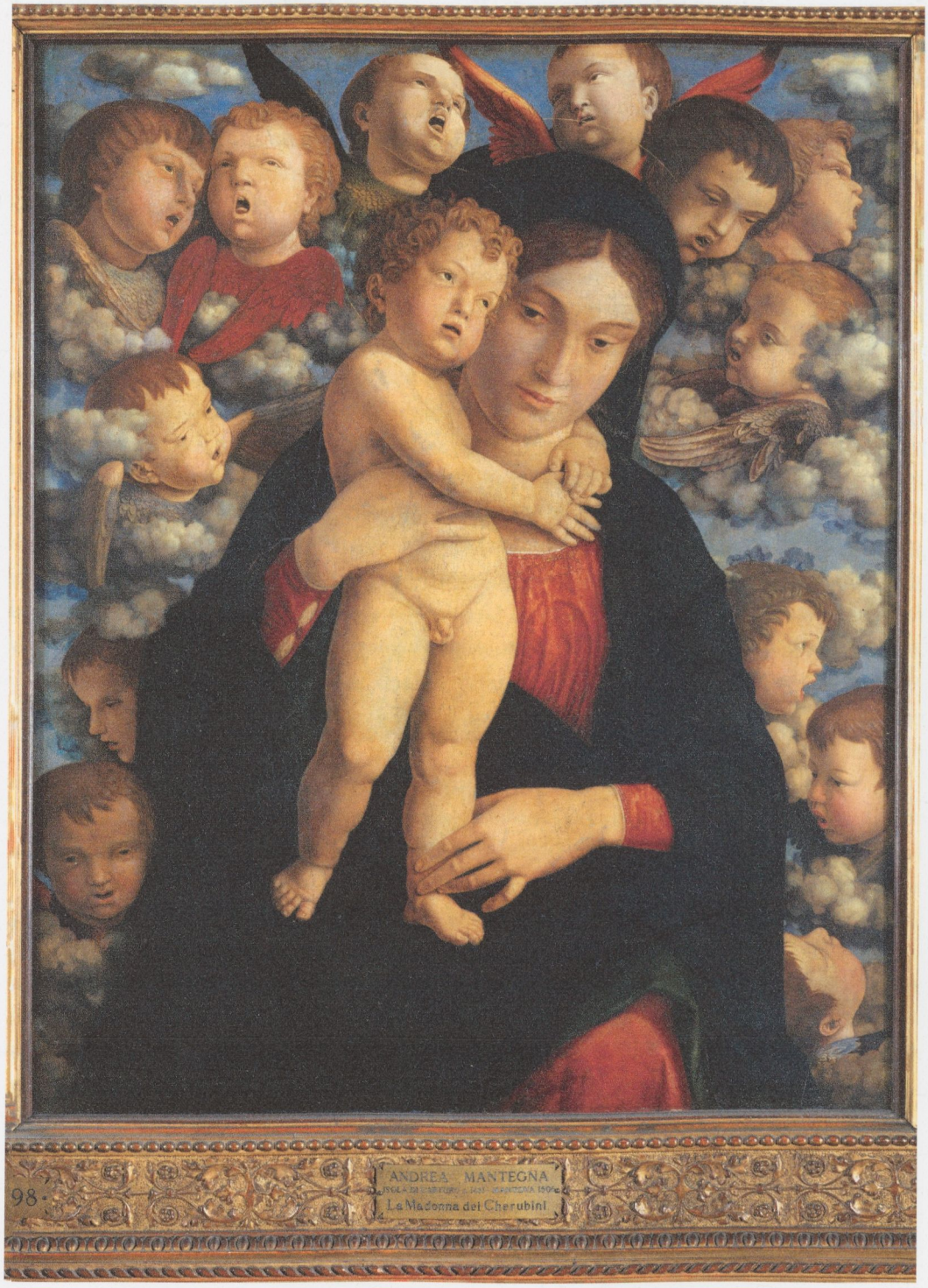

FIG. 1 | Mantegna, *Madonna dei Cherubini*, c. 1485, tempera on wood, 88 × 71 cm, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera © Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.

and which Hammerstein characterizes in his fundamental study about angelic music as their "preexistence in relation to human language (*Präexistenz vor der Menschensprache*)": performed by spiritual beings without bodies or materiality, and detached, as an incommensurable *musica perennis*, from any form of time or temporality.[4]

Notwithstanding this elementary incommensurability of celestial music, it was translated or transmuted quite early into terrestrial categories that were commensurable with human experience. This occurred not least of all through the direct appropriation of the relevant biblical passages, especially the Psalms, into the liturgy of the church (for example as sung hymns, or as sung *praefationes* preceding the Mass), as well as later in the liturgical or para-liturgical drama (like the *Sacre rappresentazioni*). One prominent instance is the praise of the angels in the context of their Annunciation to the Shepherds according to the Gospel of St. Luke, which was used in the Mass in this form at the latest beginning in the ninth century as the *Hymnus angelicus* (*Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te*). Formed beginning in the early Middle Ages, consequently, was the topical notion that singing in the liturgy of the *terrestrial* church was a *sign* (or index) and simultaneously an *image* (*similitudo*) of the *musica coelestis* in the *celestial* church, and that consummated in the culminating event of this singing was the desired ritual merging of celestial and terrestrial liturgy as a kind of mystic and collective choir of the denizens of earth and heaven (so to speak as the ideal or utopia of a mystically-sensuously realized compatibility between heaven and earth). In this spirit, Gregory the Great (in the late sixth century) had already interpreted the sacrifice of the Mass in a pertinent passage of his *Dialogi* that was widely disseminated in the Middle Ages:

> What believer could possibly doubt that precisely in the hour of the sacrifice, the heavens open to the voices of the priests, and that the choir of angels attends (*angelorum choros adesse*) to the mysterium of Jesus Christ, that the lowest is joined together with the highest, the terrestrial unified with the celestial (*terrena coelestibus jungi*), and the visible and the invisible become one (*unumque ex visibilibus atque invisibilibus fieri*)?[5]

In a subsequent step, this adaptation of celestial music to mundane categories of understanding and to models of human praxis also involves the assignment of concrete musical instruments to the angels. In his treatise of circa 1472-75 dealing with the essence of music and its various effects, the music theorist Johannes Tinctoris turns his attention to precisely this issue, and calls the reader's advertance directly to painting and to its aporetic task of presenting an otherworldly, invisible joy and beatitude to the eye of the beholder:

> Third: music heightens the joy of the Blessed (*Musica gaudia beatorum amplificat*) [...]. When painters seek to express (*pictores designare volunt*) the joy of the

4 Hammerstein, *Die Musik der Engel*, esp. p. 17-52.

5 *Sancti Gregori Magni Dialogorum*, IV, ch. LVIII, PL, vol. 77, 425-28; cf. A. Stange, *Das frühchristliche Kirchengebäude als Bild des Himmels*, Cologne, Comel, 1950, p. 54. The passage was widespread in the Middle Ages. For the idea of conflation of earthly and celestial liturgy see A. Franz, *Die Messe im deutschen Mittelalter. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Liturgie und des religiösen Volkslebens*, Fribourg-en-Brisgau, Herder, 1902, p. 18 *sq.*; E. Peterson, "Himmlische und irdische Liturgie", *Benediktinische Monatsschrift*, XVI, 1934, p. 39-47.

> Blessed, they paint angels (*angelos depingunt*) who make music on various instruments (*diversa instrumenta musica concrepantes*). The church would not permit this unless it was believed that the joy of the Blessed would be heightened thereby.[6]

Here, Tinctoris emphasizes two levels of the generation of comprehension (or insight) that are immanent to this adaptation: the first pertains to the ontological status of the angels, to the extent that they are conceived as music-making; the other to the medial specificity of painting and to its mimetic and perceptual structure.

Against the background I have sketched so far, it becomes clear that the concept of *musica coelestis* is associated with multiple paradoxes. For if its noetic core is defined as an eternally numinous giving of praise, one whose necessarily transcendental and *in*audible substance is grounded in its categorical alterity to all forms of aesthetic immanence, then reflected at the same time in the historical process of its link to religious praxis and its socially as well as culturally differentiated discourses is that which one might call a de-substantialization of the inaudible, that is to say that celestial music not only acquires a physical dimension, even physical bodies (those of the angels, the instruments, the music notation), but instead that it is also conceived in its categorical dependency on its aesthetic presence and consequently on its medial determinations. To the extent that the experience of an inaccessible and inaudible music, one that is incommensurable with the human sensorium, unavoidably discloses itself as purely theoretical, as a clerical construct, and as such appears to be increasingly burdened by a deficit of relevance, and is consequently eroded in its significance and displaced to the realm of philosophical or theological speculation. "*Gli orecchi nostri non possono capire la dolcezza dell'harmonia celeste, per l'eccellenza & grandezza sua*", and only theory and rational arguments compel us to presuppose its existence, as in the sixteenth century Gioseffo Zarlino prompted his decisive turn away from its systematic elucidation, held to resemble a "*speculatione [...] vana*", and instead his turn toward a clear focus on *musica instrumentalis* (1558).[7]

Viewed in this way, the music of the angels is revealed as a paradoxical phenomenon par excellence of aesthetic presence: conceptualized in theological terms as disembodied spiritual entities, the notion of their music nonetheless serves to assign to the realm of the inaudible the category of sensuous experience and of substantial and bodily perceptibility. If we turn now against this background toward painting and toward the question of pictorial depictions of *musica coelestis*, then it becomes evident that emerging alongside this paradox—namely the one that is characteristic just of *musica coelestis* itself, that is to say the ontology of the *object* of representation—is another paradox, one no less essential, which is founded in the inaudible medium of its pictorial representation itself, or more precisely: a paradox, which is founded in the intermedial configuration (of painting and music) and the conditions of aesthetic presence associated with it. Emerging from the medial difference between painting and music, and hence from the polarity between muteness and sound, between visuality and audibility, is the complication of a double problematic: first, the question of how painting is to express audible sound as a visual evocation of something immaterial, ephemeral and un-representable, creating thereby, so to say, the alterity of

6 J. Tinctoris, *Complexus effectuum musices* (c. 1472-75), in *Johannis Tinctoris Opera theoretica*, dir. A. Seay, Dallas, American Institute of Musicology, 1975-78, vol. 2: *Corpus scriptorum de musica*, p. 165-177, cit. p. 168-169.

7 Gioseffo Zarlino, *Le istitutioni harmoniche*, Venice, s.e., 1558, I, ch. VI: *Della Musica mondana*, p. 16-21, cit. p. 17.

genuine pictorial and imaginative evidence; and secondly, whether and if so how it is at the same time to render visually perceptible the genuinely *in*audible quality of this celestial music.

A brief look at a work by the Sienese painter Bartolo di Fredi, executed in 1383-88, and depicting the Birth of Christ with the Adoration of the Shepherds, can serve to introduce a discussion of this configuration and the multiplicity of its concrete manifestations (**fig. 2**).[8] The work depicts the biblical story according to the Gospel of St. Luke, with the above-mentioned joyful praise of the angels in the upper section, which is nonetheless at the same time—in the functional setting of an altar painting and in view of the garments of the angels, with their white stoles, embroidered with crosses, and hence associated with deacons and priests in the ecclesiastical hierarchy—staged as a performance of the liturgical *hymnus angelicus* (*Gloria in excelsis*), as mentioned above. The celestial and liturgical reality of the chant, then, stand here simultaneously in a relationship of similarity and difference. Against the horizon of this relationship, the image delineates differentiated modes of communication, and of hearing and seeing. The discrepancy that exists between heavenly chant (by angels removed to the clouds and with gazes either turned toward one another or unapproachable, directed into the remote distance) and terrestrial experience (close to the earth, with caves framed by jagged rock formations) is attenuated and bridged in two ways: on the one hand through the angel on the right-hand side, who *speaks* to the shepherds, but does not *sing*, and at the same time communicates with them via *gesture,* indicating the path with a finger that points toward the star; on the other hand by having the shepherds below in front of the manger (complete with a dog that looks on fervently) experience the heavenly song like a vision, and moreover with gazes that are directed, remarkably, above Christ and toward the star, and hence toward the music of the angels. Just as the song of the angels confronts the viewer in an ambivalent fashion as a phenomenon that is located between celestial and liturgical performance, it also oscillates between audition and vision.

Fig. 2 | Bartolo di Fredi, *Adoration of the Child*, 1383-88, tempera on wood, 32,8 × 45,4 cm, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera © Photograph by the author.

This media-reflexive aspect, namely the presentation of non-representable audition as a celestial vision, is encountered frequently elsewhere as well. A panel painting by Pedro Berruguete in Madrid dating from the late-fifteenth century (**fig. 3**) illustrates a Dominican legend according to which the Virgin Mary once appeared before the assembled religious order of the convent in Bologna together with a host of angels in order to show her gratitude for their ardent performance of the *Salve Regina* hymn and to give her blessing and protect

8 G. Freuler, *Bartolo di Fredi Cini. Ein Beitrag zur sienesischen Malerei des 14.Jahrhunderts*, Disentis, Desertina, 1994, p. 474-75, cat. 56.

FIG. 3 | Pedro Berruguete, *Apparition of the Virgin to the Dominicans*, c. 1500, tempera on wood, 130 × 86 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado © Photo Scala, Florence.

them from external threats.[9] Berruguete stages this event in such a way that the apparition of the Virgin is set in a monumental, golden, radiant gloriole that seems to hover directly above a triptych that serves as an altarpiece. In this altarpiece, in turn, the Virgin appears in a quite similar fashion as the enthroned Madonna, and in the same garments. Both the monks and the celebrating priest perform their liturgical work in a visibly mute fashion, fully absorbed, in front of an altar image that is presented as being equally soundless, while Mary's gloriole is surrounded by the sonorous and lively intonation of angelic music. Here as well, altarpiece and celestial apparition stand in a relationship of similarity and difference, one that is at the same time a relationship of outer stillness and inner acoustic imagination. The heavenly apparition fills the space and is palpably present, yet at the same time remains non-spatial and remote; it is resonant, yet remains mute. The monks are suffused by the presence of the Mother of God that is manifested to them, and which they nonetheless seem hardly to perceive at all with their eyes and ears. In fact, this vision is—as Victor I. Stoichita has pointed out—"both spatialized and aspatial, in the same way that it is both interior and exterior, real and imagined",[10] and is moreover, one might add, staged qua audition as a tonelessly sonorous vision, which to be sure renders the celestial music visible, but which localizes its actual place of performance ultimately in the inwardness of the monks.

Another work, of Sienese provenance, possibly painted by Lippo Memmi, around 1340, can serve to illuminate even more clearly the media-reflexive aspect that is inherent in the transmutation of music into painting as a translation of audition into vision (**fig. 4**).[11] The composition shows the Assumption of the Virgin, an event that—according to the *Legenda aurea*—was accompanied by a genuinely multi-voiced and resounding jubilation, the circle dance and festive song of a celestial choir of angels. On the *iconographic* level, the motif of the inaudible circle dance of singing and music-making angels alludes to the topos of glorification and praise *sine fine*, and hence to the never-ending timelessness of a celestial *musica perennis*. The decisive *aesthetic* procedure, however, that attempts to endow an alterity that is resistant to representation with a supra-temporal or timeless musical manifestation lies in the translation of an implied sonic phenomenon into an order of perception that is permeated by manifold forms of ambivalence between surface and space, and one that consistently undermines the visibility of the celestial scenario vis-à-vis its actual invisibility. The composition is dominated by the apparition of the hovering Virgin Mary surrounded by a circle of music-making angels which forms a genuine orchestra of shawms, psalteries, fidels, lutes, tambourines, triangles, and harps. Mary is positioned at the precise spatial center of this perspectival constellation, and nonetheless occupies the foremost image plane, and moreover projects—by virtue of her greater dimensions and axial position, which is overlapped by no other figure—from the

9 From the Convent Santo Tomás in Avila. See P. Lopez de Osaba, *Pintura española*, Madrid, Museo del Prado, 1980, p. 68; P. S. Silva Maroto, *Pedro Berruguete*, Valladolid, Junta de Castilla y León, 1998, p. 241; for a profound interpretation see V. I. Stoichita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art*, London, Reaktion Books, 1995, p. 57-59.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

11 H. van Os, *Marias Demut und Verherrlichung in der sienesischen Malerei 1300-1450*, La Haye, Staatsuitgeverij, 1969, p. 164-67; R. Kultzen, *Alte Pinakothek München. Katalog V: Italienische Malerei*, Munich, F. Bruckmann, 1975, p. 102-04; J. Polzer, "The 'Master of the Rebel Angels' Reconsidered", *The Art Bulletin*, XXVII, 1981, p. 563-84.

circle of angels. She forms the center of an arrangement—one that is conceived simultaneously as spatial and planimetric—that fills the picture plane and is adapted to the frame, a sphere surmounted by the blue segment of an arch. Here, the composition adopts a bifocal order of perception. The celestial sphere with the host of angels that is staggered perspectively alongside and behind Mary is intrinsically three-dimensional in character, and is shaped by corporeal, highly animated volumes, yet nonetheless represents an unbounded, supra-spatial and incorporeal place whose dimensions surpass all terrestrially fathomable distances. At the same moment, and through this effect, also the music—how lively and animated by the angels it may be—manifests its inaudible dimension. And it is precisely the incongruity of these two perspectives that reveals the imposing presence of the heavenly music as one that acquires substance solely through the image and by imagination, whereas actually it goes beyond the scope of the outer eye just as much as it surpasses that of physical hearing. Somewhat pointedly, we could say that the image produces its aesthetic effect by means of a double paradox, or stated differently: that it originates various dimensions of aesthetic presence. First of all, it manifests a celestial music within the perceptual categories of space and of the body (a transformation, hence, that was referenced already by Tinctoris), while on the other, it renders the inaudible accessible to experience by suggesting that it is analogous to the category of the non-visible. In short: it provides the aesthetic effect of the inaudibility of a heavenly music that is certified as eminently plastic and corporeal.

This demonstration of a paradox of the visibly invisible serves as an aesthetic paradigm that at the same time makes the observer to realize the actual inaudibility of the nonetheless highly suggestive music-making and singing angels, and even more: it reveals this inaudibility as a phenomenon that is in essence not a consequence of the muteness of painting as a medium, that is insufficient in this respect, but instead as grounded in a deeper and ultimately ontological and theological level of meaning.

I want to add only marginally here that Lippo Memmi's *Assunta* composition and its specific pictorial meaning stands at the beginning of a long

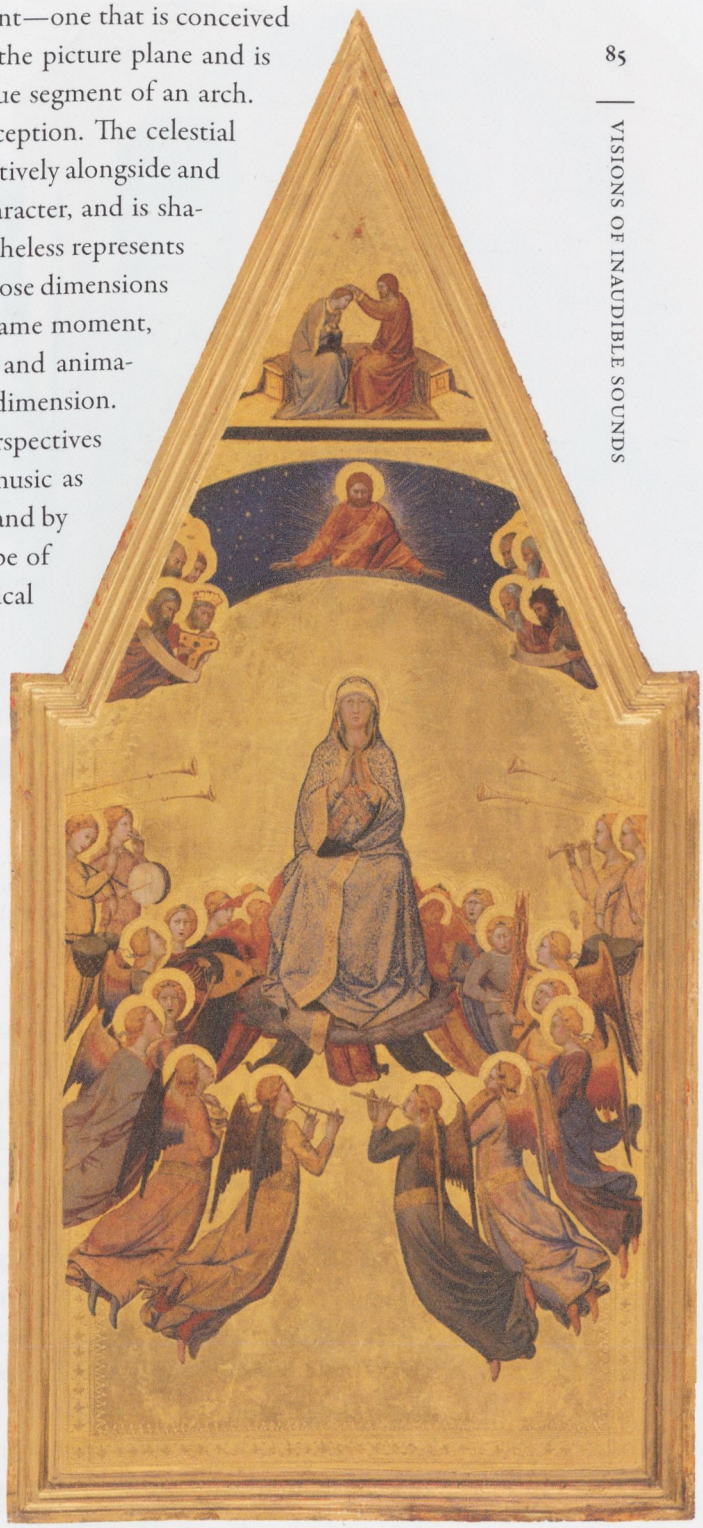

Fig. 4 | Lippo Memmi, *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1340, tempera on wood, 72,5 × 32,5 cm, Munich, Alte Pinakothek © bpk.

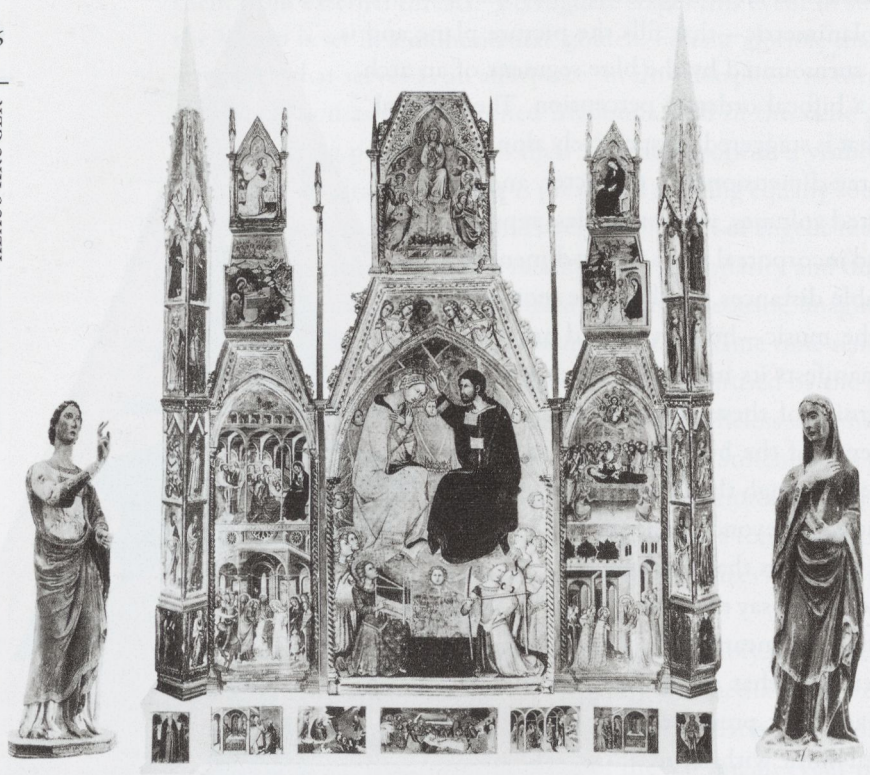

Fig. 5 | Bartolo di Fredi, Altarpiece of the *Cappella dell'Annunziata*, Montalcino, San Francesco, reconstruction by Gaudenz Freuler (G. Freuler, *Bartolo di Fredi Cini. Ein Beitrag zur sienesischen Maelrei des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Disentis, Desertina, 1994, p. 202, fig. 186).

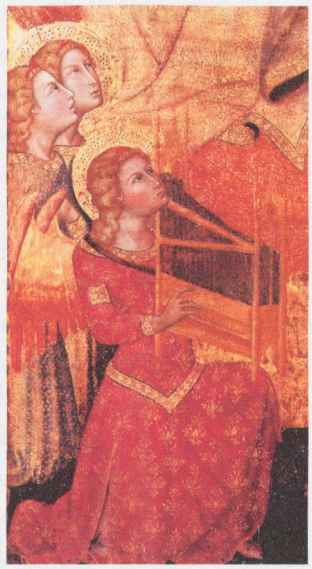

Fig. 6 | Detail of fig. 5.

series of analogous visualizations.[12] Among them is a monumental altarpiece by Bartolo di Fredi, which once integrated his *Birth of Christ*, discussed above (**fig. 5**: a reconstruction of the now somehow dismembered altarpiece with the added *Birth of Christ*).[13] This retable, which once stood on the altar of the Annunziata Chapel of the *Confraternità dei Laudesi* in S. Francesco in Montalcino, stages the Assumption above—and like the Coronation of the Virgin in the central axis—as an orchestral event (**fig. 6**) that is intoned with special richness, one whose inaudibility is so to speak drowned out, first by the suggestive veristic rendering of the palpably real instruments, and secondly by a wealth of planar-ornamental gold punched patterns and auras. It is worth mentioning in passing that the altarpiece was commissioned by the prominent and highly rich *Compagnia di San Pietro* alias *Confraternità dei Laudesi*; like a splendid ciborium in the monumental *Cappella dell'Annunziata* in the right transept it formed the central focus of its daily and on feast days even more solemnly celebrated Marian devotions, with songs of praise to the glory of the Virgin, which were given instrumental accompaniment. Vis-à-vis this painting, the cere-

12 See K. Krüger, "Medium and Imagination. Aesthetic Aspects of Trecento Panel Painting", in *Italian Panel Painting of the Duecento and Trecento*, ed. V. M. Schmidt, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 2002, p. 57-81, esp. p. 68-71.

13 Freuler, *Bartolo di Fredi Cini*, p. 188-221.

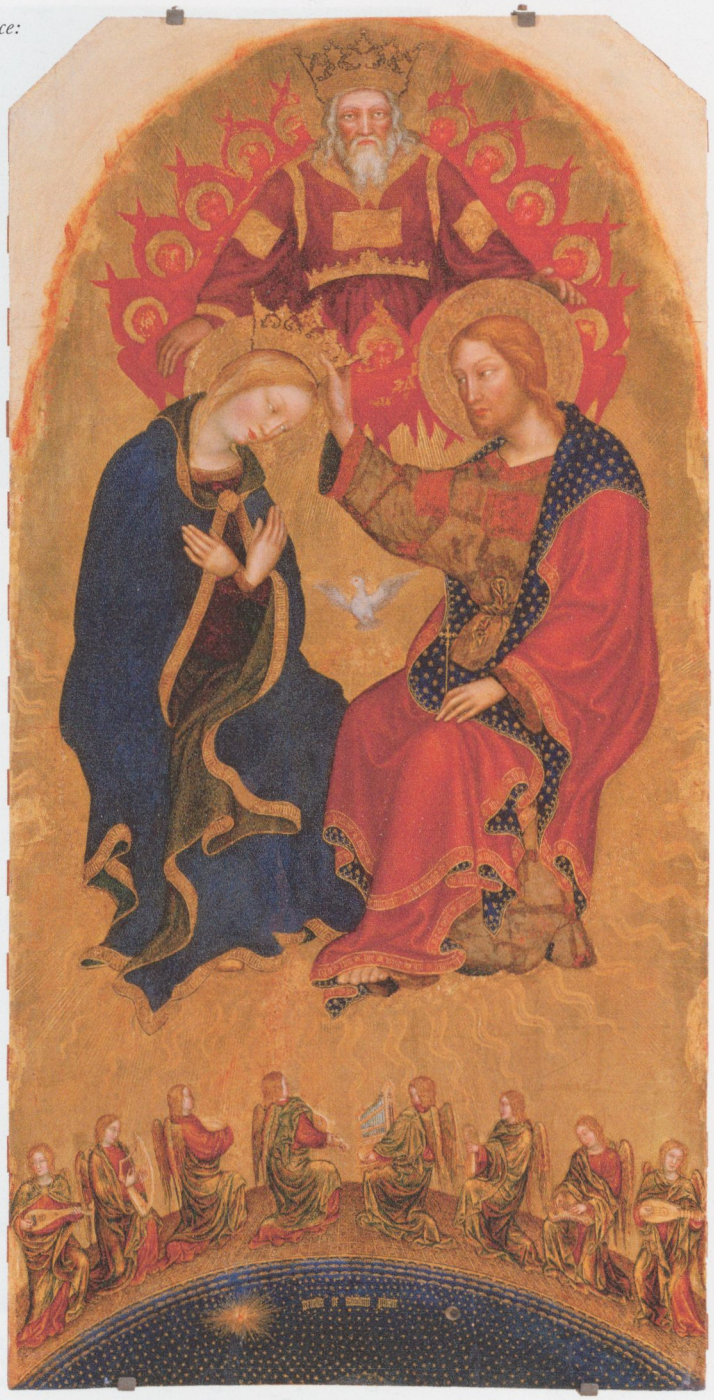

Fig. 7 | Gentile da Fabriano, *Valle Romita Alterpiece: Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1410, tempera on wood, 280 × 250 cm, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera © Photo Scala, Florence.

monial, instrumentally accompanied performance of sung Marian hymns (*Exaltata super choros angelorum ad celestia regna*) means a terrestrially enacted praxis of self-elevation, so to speak, a self-projection onto a supra-temporal horizon of grace, one that confronts the eye directly with the visible figuration of another, inaudible world of celestial music.

I will refrain from pursuing further the manifold implications that emerge in this context for other variants of this subject. Gentile da Fabriano's *Coronation of the Virgin* of ca. 1410, for example (**fig.** 7 and 8),[14] transports the circle of music-making angels into a novel intermediate realm. On the one hand beneath the coronation scenario—which lacks any throne, and takes place in a kind of poise, beyond any conceivable model of space and superimposed on or within a richly punched aureole with flaming corona; on the other, they are located above the blue, celestial firmament with sun, moon, and stars (as symbols of terrestrial time and space). Significantly, this takes place on a vaulted, perspectively receding tiled floor that terminates nowhere, and is arranged in a subtle figuration that turns from an outward orientation (i.e., toward the viewer) progressively inward, thereby effecting a genuine spatial switch from the physical world of the beholder to the celestial music found in the image's interior, as though toward the hereafter. Or for example Cenni di Francesco's roughly contemporary altar painting of 1413 (**fig.** 9), which represents a quite different solution, where the *musica coelestis* is staged and intoned as a variegated chromatic spectrum.[15]

14 *Gentile da Fabriano. Il Polittico di Valle Romita*, ed. M. Ceriana, E. Daffra, Milan, Florence, Charta, 1993; F. Billiet, "Entendre le concert céleste dans les œuvres de Gentile da Fabriano", in *Il mondo cortese di Gentile da Fabriano e l'immaginario musicale. La cultura musicale e artistic nel Quattrocento europeo e la sua riscoperta in epoca moderna e contemporanea*, ed. M. Lacchè, Rome, Aracne, 2008, p. 105-27, esp. p. 107 *sq.*

15 *Chiese medievali della Valdelsa. I territori della via Francigena*, vol. 2: *Tra Siena e San Gimignano*, ed. P. Cammarosano, Empoli, Editori dell'Acero, 1996, p. 175-77.

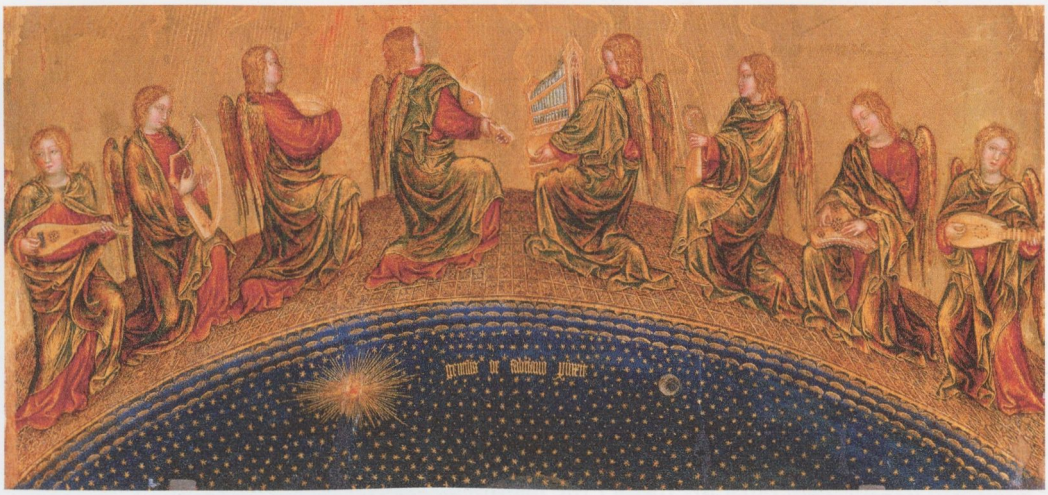

Fig. 8 | Detail of fig. 7.

With these and numerous other examples, it is always a question, in essence, of a double manifestation of music: first, of the visualization of sound and of song through a motivic-figural index, namely the display of instruments, of music notation, of singing mouths, all guided by a celebratory round dance and reinforced by solemn gazes and gestures. On this level, painting works against—in a manner of speaking—its elementary medial deficits, specifically muteness, inaudibility, soundlessness, and does so suggestively with the resources of figural mimesis. Secondly, however, it is at the same time a question of the visible elucidation of the alterity of another music—of a music that cannot be performed on terrestrial instruments, nor heard with earthly ears. On this level, painting strives quite deliberately to create an impression of muteness, inaudibility, and soundlessness, but this time, this impression is not the manifestation of a medial deficit, but instead testifies to the ontological status of the music itself as it presents itself to the eye. Arising now for painting is a special challenge (as we saw in the case of Mantegna), but at the same time an opportunity for a media-reflexive demonstration of its genuine aesthetic capacities. It becomes evident now that these capacities are not available to music itself as an art form, since music is able to demonstrate or to realize the notion of inaudibility solely through theoretical conceptualization (whether as *musica mundana* or as *musica coelestis*), not however through concrete aesthetic praxis.

At this point, it becomes clear that the novel task of a pictorial representation of heavenly music—one that the medium of painting set for itself on a rapidly expanding scale beginning in the early Trecento—not only inaugurates aesthetic reflection on a specific intermedial configuration (painting *and* music), but that it also initiates the constellation of an elementary Paragone (painting *confronted to* or *in relation to* music). For this is a constellation within which painting (still anchored in handicraft conditions, lacking the status of an *ars liberalis)* already brings into play with increasing aesthetic ambitions the potential and the claims of its own artistic praxis in relation to music. As an *ars liberalis,* music had long occupied a privileged position within the social system of knowledge and science, but was nonetheless limited in relation to the dimension of aesthetic immanence and its concrete artistic implementation—a factor that was becoming increasingly relevant, whether culturally, socially, or politically. Of course, this *Paragone* before the *Paragone* was shaped not by rivalry or artistic competition, but

Fig. 9 | Cenni di Francesco di ser Cenni, *Virgin in the Glory with Angels*, 1413, San Giminiano, Chiesa di San Lorenzo in Ponte © Photograph by the author.

instead by the mere conditions of a specific intermedial configuration. For specifically in relation to *musica coelestis,* painting repeatedly generates visual effects that contour the pictorial as an aesthetic liminal experience. It is precisely that the exceeding of the visual in the direction of the nonvisible becomes—as a genuine aesthetic experience that is substantiated within painting—the actual supporting medium for the evocation of celestial music. To be sure, the intermedial

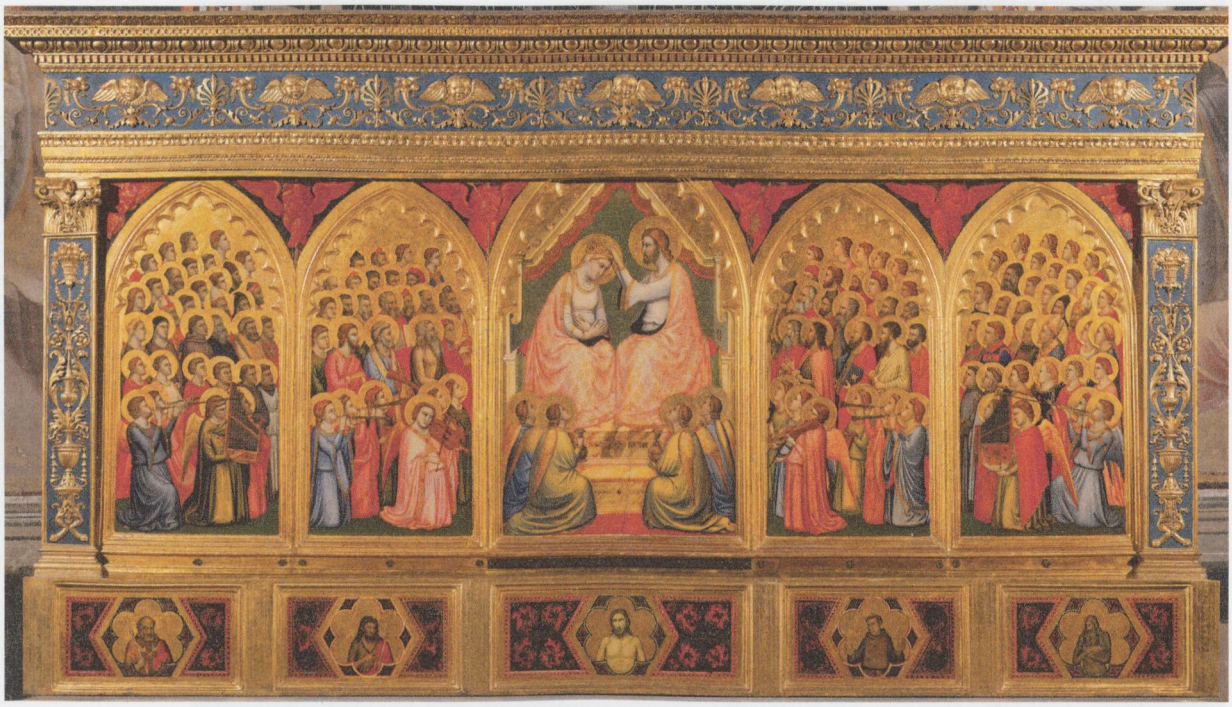

Fig. 10 | Giotto di Bondone, *Baroncelli Altarpiece*, c. 1328, tempera on wood, 185 × 323 cm, Florence, Santa Croce, Baroncelli chapel © Santa Croce Opera Firenze (Photo Scala, Florence).

constellation and the process of its increasing differentiation is inscribed as a multi-sensual charging (sound *and* vision, seeing *and* hearing, music *and* painting), but is reinforced at the same time as a mono-medial self-privileging (painting *prior to* music). Disclosed as an essential sign of this process—one that is effective both semiotically as well as in terms of the aesthetics of reception—is a rebalancing in the relation of representation and presence, of depicted bodies and the corporeality of the image itself, a rebalancing through whose implementation medial effects of presence become genuine manifestations of the pictorial expression of music.

In closing and following up this argument, I want to examine two further works. In Giotto's Baroncelli Altarpiece of circa 1328 (**fig. 10**), music acquires a hitherto unknown significance, one that is subtly accentuated aesthetically.[16] Music takes up the entire foremost pictorial level, represented by the only figures that are entirely visible, the ones that are at the same time endowed with the greatest plasticity and spatial fullness. This is evident down to details, for example to the puffed out cheeks of the trumpet players, to the expansive bodily poses of the angels, and to the musical instruments, both realistic and fully three-dimensional. In contrast, the saints retreat into a spaceless and at the same time physically attenuated foil; they are diffused upward and toward the edge of the picture and progressively absorbed by the non-figural quality of the gold ground, while their golden auras too tend to fuse together subtly into an opaque and undifferentiated plane. The angels in the extreme foreground—and with them the music—are significantly removed from this aesthetic stratification of bodies in an almost abstract repetitive pattern. In short: music is

16 M. V. Schwarz, *Giottus Pictor II. Giottos Werke*, Vienne, Böhlau, 2008, p. 484 *sq.* (with further literature).

emphasized in its corporeality, as an act of physical production. Yet this is only one aspect. For appearing among the saints as well are numerous figures who sing with opened mouths, and at the extreme upper edge, we find a series of angels, also singing, a terminus that marks the transition from depicted vocal intonation toward a transfiguring gold ground that visualizes the Beyond. In this way, music is progressively transmuted, so to speak, into an abstract and non-corporeal realm.

To a significant degree, this dialectic between embodied and disembodied music shapes the whole conception of the altarpiece as a form or structure of aesthetic oscillation. The space-filling and corporeal dimension of music waxes and wanes, acquires volume or recedes toward the aesthetic shimmer of the gilded ground. This dynamic is reinforced by the circumstance that depending upon the beholder's standpoint, the depicted figures are obscured or so to speak drowned out by the gold ground and the auras, which suggestively produce the effect of a homogenous visual coherence, and simultaneously act as a foil against which the figures emerge all the more incisively (and in all likelihood, this effect was more potent originally, when the former gold frame decorated with pinnacles still existed, and when bright illumination was provided by candlelight). Achieved aesthetically through this continual oscillation and transitory state between corporeal, space-creating figurality and the abstract patterning of the opaque gold surface, through which the terrestrial dimension shifts perpetually back-and-forth with an implied Beyond, is the theme of a celestial music whose un-representability, visualized transfigurally, at the same time becomes the sign and pictorial expression of its inaudibility.

I will not be pursuing further the historical differentiation of the categories and aesthetic procedures embodied in the Baroncelli altarpiece. But instead, in closing, and with very few and short remarks I want to point to the fact, that what we find here are actually the categorical foundations of a mode of aesthetic reflexivity, which will be followed on and further be developed highly then in the Renaissance and Baroque times. In Giovann Bellini's *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, for example, the mute and speechless attitudes of the saints grouped without any communication around Mary, all sunk in profound meditation, generate an atmosphere of utter stillness and quietude whose visual impact extends to the angel

FIG. 11 | Giovanni Bellini, *Pala di San Giobbe*, c. 1475, oil on wood, 471 × 258 cm, Venice, Galleria dell'Accademia © Photo Scala, Florence.

Fig. 12 | Giovanni Lanfranco, *Assumption of the Virgin*, fresco, 1627-29, Rome, Sant'Andrea della Valle
© Photograph by the author.

positioned below the throne who plays a *lira da braccio*, and who generates the paradoxical effect of a likewise mute, inaudible music. This effect corresponds directly to the scenario as a whole, whose plastic, spatially plausible concreteness seems to correspond to the empirical reality occupied by the beholder, and yet at the same time to represent a space that is utterly inconceivable in sensory or rational terms, one lacking all spatiotemporal determinations. The mimetic consistency of the scene is thereby diverted into a consistency of the imaginary, an aesthetic effect that encompasses a music that consequently stands before the viewer as visibly inaudible and as such as eternal, *sine fine*.

Bellini's pictorial intentions can be traced down to details. Already in his *San Giobbe Altarpiece* from the 1470s (**fig. 11**),[17] Bellini positions the three music-making angels, with their realistically rendered instruments, directly along the pictorial boundary that is shared by the

17 P. Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 203-07.

beholder, thereby suggesting their concrete presence. By setting them, however, emphatically in front of the planar fields of speckled marble and integrating them optically into its fluid, green-white-ocher play of tones, they are at the same time presented as emerging entirely from the substance of the paint itself. Their sound, then, becomes the sound of painting, a chromatic sonority whose subtle fine-tuning of hair, textile materials, the surfaces of the instruments, and the fluid colored fields of marble testifies to their categorical alterity in relation to any empirical audibility. And not by chance Bellini's signature appears exactly in this pictorial field or context.

Only in subsequent stages would this remarkable level of aesthetic reflection be conceptually processed and systematized in the context of art theory. A prominent instance is Bellori's explication, dating from 1672, of Lanfranco's cupola fresco depicting the Assumption of the Virgin in Sant'Andrea della Valle in Rome from about 1627-29 (**fig. 12**). Bellori describes the multiple circles of the blessed, the saints, and finally the angels, with their various musical instruments, which change above to become the heads of cherubim, then into luminous apparitions, before finally melting into pure light:

> *[...] in lieta armoniosa gloria di Angeli [...] spiegano note, e canti, con flauti, viole, timpani, e varij musici strumenti. [...] si addolciscono in un ultima luce, ove risplendono teste di Cherubini, con insensibili dintorni; tanto chela soavità del colore fà sentire la melodia celeste nel silentio della pittura (and to such a degree that the loveliness of the colors renders the celestial melody audible through the silence of painting).*[18]

In other words, the imaginary audibility of a celestial music is transformed into the visible inaudibility of painting, and is in a sense transmuted into its aesthetic substance, so that in the end, the inaudibility of celestial music is wholly embodied through the mute painting and the loveliness of its colors. Or stated differently: by inverting music into the paradox of a mute sound (*muta musica*), painting here enacts—precisely through its genuine muteness (*muta pictura*)—the competition between the arts in a highly subtle fashion. But this is a new, a somehow different, and very long story, while my focus in this contribution has been on the beginnings and decisive roots of this phenomenon in the Trecento.

18 G. P. Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni*, ed. E. Borea, Turin, Einaudi, 1976 (Rome, 1672), p. 371.

Fig. 12 | Giovanni Lanfranco, *Assumption of the Virgin*, fresco, 1627-29, Rome, Sant'Andrea della Valle

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