

## Drawing on the Musical Past

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### **Music Iconography and Iconological Interpretation in Music Archaeology: A Keynote**

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I'm happy to open this conference with a keynote on *iconographical research and iconology in the study of past music cultures*. This topic is **not** new – we all know – it is **as old** as music archaeology – but so far no general guidelines are discussed, which is remarkable. One of the aims of this conference is to define more precisely the frames of iconography and iconology in the study of past music cultures.

Let's start with some basic definitions. *Iconography* and *iconology* are cultural sciences, which study the content of visual art using descriptive and interpretative methods. At least in its original meaning, **iconography** is primarily descriptive. Literally, it is "the description of the image" or the *icon*, which is "a sign or likeness that stands for an object by signifying or representing it".

**Iconology** is "the study of the meaning of the image" through the analysis of a series of aspects, such as medium, message, convention and style, symbolism, or historical context. **Iconological** research is carried out, when the image – conceived as symptomatic and representative of a given culture – is subject of *interpretation*.

Some definitions of music archaeology. Dale Olsen understood the subject as "the study of music as culture through the remains of antiquity", and Graeme Lawson as "the archaeology of ancient sound- and music-making behaviours". Taking these definitions as a basis, I understand music archaeology as "the study of the phenomenon of past musical behaviours **and** sound".

As can be seen in this diagram, in which I tried to combine the principle source groups and methods of music archaeology, the place of iconography is highly important: both types of music related finds – *sound artefacts* **and** music depictions – are subject of iconographical and iconological research.

In **sound artefacts** often their morphological shape and/or decorative elements are subject of iconographical discussion. **Music depictions** sometimes survived on the sound artefacts themselves, and in all media, including paintings, mosaics, reliefs, and statues. As diverse societies produced and left such finds throughout history, rich material for research is present, which enables to glance into past music cultures. However, we all know, that the frames of iconographical research can be extended considerably when written sources concerning music are related, and also the study of contemporary music cultures, in which past musical traditions are preserved, may offer valuable insights. Most precise results can be obtained when substantial information for each music archaeological source group is present **and** equally taken into account. But we all know that in many cases not all source groups are present - it can even be that **only** iconographical information is at hand.

In the following I'll summarize the virtues of iconography and iconology in music archaeological research. I'll briefly mention the iconographical sources of music archaeology in terms of type and content, and then outline what I think are some common research problems, of which we all must be aware.

Speaking in general terms, music depictions primarily show instruments for sound and music production, **and** performance practices and contexts. A third, smaller but quite interesting group consists of *signs of sound*. Most frequently preserved are depictions of musical instruments, which (depending on the particular medium) can be highly informative, as the original models are in many cases deteriorated or completely lost.

In researching organological forms and their individual history, iconography is often the **primary** source. *Especially* when the image is dated and the archaeological context is *well* documented, an instrument depiction is a precise

marker of a specific musical tradition in space and time and in this way can be treated like the find of a sound artefact.

Due to questions of medium and style, music images are subject of different grades of abstraction and precision. In many cases only a shadow is left, in other cases details are shown, which are otherwise lost, including information on the materials of manufacture through different colouring, relief texture, etc.

Also, important organological features can be depicted of which otherwise we would not know, such as devices for attaching the strings in chordophones, or mouthpiece types in wind instruments, carrying straps for drums or gongs, etc.

The use of drum sticks or plectra, and of accessories, like the *phorbeia* used in *auloi* playing, is also revealed. The bags for the *auloi* and reed mouthpieces in Greek vase paintings are a rare testimony of instrument safekeeping in antiquity.

In addition to musical instruments, *performance practices* and *performance contexts* are a frequent subject of music depictions. Here, images are understood as a synchronic summary of a succession of movements. Especially when a large sample of iconographic material is present, it can be suggested that the positions are characteristic. Among the **performance practices** I subsume (1) *playing positions*, like standing, sitting, dancing, walking, etc., and (2) *playing techniques*, showing how the instrument was held or placed, and played. Music images may also indicate solo, simultaneous, or group playing, and if song or dance was practiced in addition to instrumental performance.

Regarding the **performance contexts**, precise information can be obtained on the sites where particular performances took place. Frequently, views of the original settings are shown, including interior elements and, if the performance took place outside, the flora and fauna, sometimes even topographical details.

Intimately related with depictions of performance practices and contexts is the question of function and meaning. Indeed, sociocultural and socioreligious contexts of past music traditions are among the prime fields of music archaeological reconstructions on hand of iconographical data. The type of

clothing of the performers and elements of the setting of the performance help identifying the social position of musicians and the place of music in society.

It is also relevant where the depiction was originally placed. A temple relief indicates another context than a vase with a painting designed for courtly life. Regarding the contents, a great variety of musical functions is depicted. The array of possible uses is endless, there are even images showing that instruments were used for other purposes than musical - for example as a weapon.

Finally, even the sound itself can be indicated, which is quite remarkable, as the *invisible* auditory phenomenon is shown on hand of *visual* forms. Examples, which can be considered forms of early notation, are related from the Greek antiquity and from pre-Columbian cultures. In Greek antiquity, song texts or little scrolls in front of the singers' mouth are shown, as well as in Aztec codices. In the Teotihuacan culture, Mexico, also complex scrolls with signs of so far unknown meaning are preserved. It can be suggested, that the content - and possibly also the structure of Teotihuacan ritual songs - are captured in these depictions.

Now, I like to discuss mainly one question: to which extent iconographical research can be carried out? What are the limits?

Despite the many possibilities that iconographical information provides, a series of difficulties in the correct interpretation of music depictions exist, especially if no comparative source material is present. By nature, depictions are *always* subject of different grades of abstraction and precision, and *always* follow the rules of stylistic conventions, which are culturally determined. It can be suggested, that the more the forms of a musical instrument and the elements of a musical performance are conventionalized - which is often the case in cultures with highly formalized practices - the more informative the image gets. If a series of depictions shows the same element, it is likely that it is characteristic of a given music culture.

Obviously, a crucial factor is the medium itself. Quite precise can be free standing sculptures, reliefs, and pictorial sources. Other media, such as petroglyphs or mosaics, offer only general impressions. In planar depictions and to a certain extent also in reliefs, the reduction of three-dimensional objects may cause interpretative problems. If no other sources are present, the volumes can only be tentatively reconstructed. Sometimes, important organological elements of an instrument are shown on one level, even if they were in fact *invisible* from the line of sight. It can also be that instruments are shown in a playing position that could never be real. If the stylistic conventions are not correctly understood, such images can be easily misinterpreted.

It must also be taken into account that not all organological details can be depicted. Frequently, only the general forms are outlined and construction elements or details of the sound mechanism are not observable, making the exact manufacture of experimental replicas on hand of only iconographical information a very difficult task.

In the correct identification of the materials of manufacture, colour symbolism is a crucial factor. When a feature is depicted white, it can be that it was of any given material coloured white, or that it was made from bone, ivory, or shell. Without any references, we simply don't know.

Iconographic uncertainties are also present in more or less precise depictions. For example, in flutes the number and placement of fingerholes is often only roughly indicated, and in string instruments the number of the strings must not necessarily match the original number. The more abstract the depiction, the more problems emerge in the reconstruction of the organology of a given musical instrument and its playing techniques.

A frequent subject of critical discussion is the depiction of scale relevant to the individual organological parts and to human figures. Here, it must be taken into account that the grade of importance given to an object can influence its dimension in relation to other objects. Did such a huge shell trumpet really exist? And was the giant drum in Mesopotamia really a giant drum? These examples show the importance of comparative sources. Regarding the Aztec shell trumpet

player, 16<sup>th</sup> century written documents tell that the young disciples of the priests blew shell trumpets, and regarding the giant drum, a cuneiform script from the second millennium BC informs about the problems of transportation that a giant drum caused. Only with further support of other music archaeological source groups, we can be sure that such instruments really existed.

A frequent problem is the correct organological identification. Is the depicted object really a musical instrument? - It can not always be excluded that it represents something completely different. The image here is an example from Mesoamerica, showing a person with an object tentatively identified with a string instrument. In this case, no additional source is present, and the absence of any further information makes the interpretation highly questionable.

It can also be that the musical scene and the musical instrument with its imaginative sound are pure works of fantasy, for instance when the scene is placed in a mythological context or invented by some weird artist. Obviously, in such a case experimental manufacture and playing would not lead to reasonable results. Interestingly enough, it would only help to give life to a sound that only the artist once imagined. On the other hand, it may be that the musical instruments are placed in a mythological context, but that their depiction was based on real models. In some cases, neither the first nor the second possibility can be excluded.

There is also the question of the depiction's place in society and aim. Images of the performance contexts are often reduced to aspects considered most essential, neglecting others. Spectators, such as of religious processions, are frequently not depicted, even when other sources indicate the participation of large audiences. As depictions belong frequently to the ruling classes, the music of the lower classes is a rare topic.

Instruments can also be depicted by artists from contemporary, but foreign, or even subsequent cultures, revealing the problem of emic or etic views. It can be supposed that such depictions are not of the same grade of precision, especially when the spatial and temporal distances are great and real models were not present. How would experimental replications look like, if the only survived

representation of these instruments is found in modern paintings or comics? Even the artistic convention within one culture may change over time, and it can be that the organology of the objects and the performance practices did not change, but were subject of different depiction.

Finally, a serious problem is produced by published drawings and other copies of the originals, which are not necessarily exact but frequently used as a basis for research, especially when the original depictions are lost. It is often forgotten, that recent copies, even if they are precise line drawings, photographic or based on computational reconstructions, are also subject of individual perception and artistic reproduction and thus cannot be treated as equal than the original. The same of course applies to copies in antiquity.

### **Conclusions & Beginning**

It is quite clear, that depictions show only a specific section of reality and thus cannot be seen direct. A transformation took place from performance practice and real sound to visual art, and the question is, if this transformation is ever reversible. I think yes – at least to a considerable extent, if we are aware of the respective limits of research.

Certainly helpful for iconological interpretation is additional data – principally sound artefacts and written sources, sometimes even ethnomusicological information. If only scarce comparative source material is present – which is quite often the case as we all know – it is useful if a large sample of depictions is at hand, which helps to understand the cultural conventions behind the image. Only when the conventions of specific art styles are understood, iconographical and iconological research can be successfully carried out. In depth knowledge of the cultural particularities is a basis for any conclusion, especially when the function and meaning of music practices are discussed.

In this conference insights into a variety of case studies will be presented, which deepen many aspects that I could mention only briefly. Now, let the images speak, and let's listen to the images...