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

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

### I. Musical Instruments as Associative Objects

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

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

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

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

Shunning actual performances, he turned his attention to instruments painted and sculpted centuries before him, whose tones he could only imagine. Even when he began collecting his own instruments in the 1860s, they remained as silent as those in medieval manuscripts. As his studio assistant, Henry Treffry Dunn, remarked (Fleming, 234) about the artist's home, Tudor House: "Wherever I went, I noticed musical instruments of some kind or another, mandolins, lutes, dulcimers, and barbarous things of Chinese fashioning. . .and yet in all the years that I lived in the house I never heard a note of music." From Dunn's description, it seems clear that these were objects meant to be seen but not heard.

On a superficial level, musical instruments in Rossetti's works functioned as exotic still life objects to place the scene of a picture or poem in a setting removed from the nineteenth-century world of dance halls' "wild tunes," as he described them in "Jenny," or from the concerts he abhorred (Doughty, *Poems*, 163). Psalteries, lutes, and bells could transport the reader or viewer to an imaginary era of minstrels and madrigals. Rossetti was clearly aware of the associative power of these musical instruments; in his poem, "Antwerp and Bruges," 1849 (Doughty, *Poems*, 305), he described in lines that visually swing back and forth with their irregular indentation how the medieval bells in Bruges Cathedral made the art of the past more vivid in his imagination:

John Memling and John Van Eyck  
 Hold state at Bruges. In sore shame  
 I scanned the works that keep their name.  
 The carillon, which then did strike  
 Mine ears, was heard of theirs alike:  
 It set me closer unto them

Rossetti was not moved by the actual sounds of the bells but by the imaginative associations they evoked. Thus the angels singing "To their citherns and citoles" in "The Blessed Damozel" (Doughty, *Poems*, 54), or seemingly insignificant still life elements, such as the rebec in the lower left corner of *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (Surtees, 42), can be viewed as devices that place the viewer in an exotic era from the past, just as the bells of Bruges had done for the poet.

Like the still life instruments, depictions of musicians added a touch of opulence and exoticism that

could help the reader or viewer imagine another time or place. For example, in Rossetti's poem "Dante at Verona," 1850, the lingering notes of madrigals in Can La Scala's palace create a scene of indolent harmony far from the frenetic activity of modern life: "Where music, set to madrigals, / Loitered all day through groves and halls." Rossetti may have derived this imagery from a contemporary painting, Ford Madox Brown's *King Lear* (Figure 1). Having posed for the figure of the fool in 1848, the year he began "Dante at Verona," Rossetti was familiar with Brown's depiction of the sleeping king about to be awakened by his physician's musicians, who stand outside the king's tent. While they are more closely tied to the narrative than those in Rossetti's poem, Brown's musicians provide several types of accompaniment to the work's main theme: a formal accompaniment that activates the background space, a narrative accompaniment that enriches but does not constitute the subject, and an implied musical accompaniment whose tones can be imagined by the viewer. The influence of Brown's painting is apparent not only in poems like "Dante at Verona" but also in another work executed nine years later, *The Wedding of Saint George and Princess Sabra* (Figure 2). Although Rossetti undoubtedly patterned his musicians after medieval representations of bell players, formally and conceptually he relied on Brown's painting.<sup>5</sup> As in *King Lear*, the main figures are shown in the foreground, parallel to the picture plane, while the musicians are placed behind them in a spatial box that cuts them off at waist height. Similarly, Rossetti's musicians create both a visual and an imaginary musical accompaniment to the scene that helps remove it from the present. The musicians enrich the picture's artificiality by implying a secondary painting.

Occasionally Rossetti depicted music-making as his main subject; however, even in these pictures the associative qualities of the instruments as exotic objects are dominant. This is especially evident in three watercolors done in 1857: *The Blue Closet* (Figure 3), *The Tune of Seven Towers*, and *A Christmas Carol*. In these works, Rossetti did not rely on medieval prototypes for his instruments; instead, he created his own fanciful musical constructions. In *The Blue Closet*, he imagined a double clavichord with an attached bell tree, and in *The Tune of Seven Towers* and *A Christmas Carol* he devised music chairs on which a psaltery or keyboard are mounted. In each case, Rossetti deco-

rated the instruments with perforated patterns or painted scenes and designed them along the simple, functional lines that recall the furniture being built and decorated at this time by the artists' young admirers, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris.<sup>6</sup>

With their plain shapes and quaint decoration, Rossetti's double clavichord and music chairs evoke a golden age of innocence and purity that contrasts dramatically with the immorality perceived in the present, typified by the keyboard melodrama of Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience*, painted in 1853 and 1854 and retouched in 1856. While *The Blue Closet* and *The Awakening Conscience* both are set in elaborately decorated interiors with musical instruments, the unassuming design of the clavichord implies the simplicity of an imaginary past that is absent in the ornate rosewood piano of Hunt's painting.<sup>7</sup>

## II. Musical Instruments as Symbols

Instruments in Rossetti's scenes of music-making also belong to a complex iconographic tradition in which music and musical instruments symbolize abstract ideas.<sup>8</sup> Rossetti relied most heavily on traditional musical iconography in his treatment of the themes of death, desire, and devotion. Among his earliest pictures in which musical instruments are linked with death are the drawing, 1849, and the watercolor, 1853, of *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (Surtees, 58). Although he may have included the instruments in these works as a general reference to death, as he did with the "stray lute notes. . . . Low like dirge-wail or requiem" in "The Bride's Prelude" (Doughty, *Poems*, 284), their presence in these works has additional significance. In the drawing, Rossetti grouped a rebec in the lower left with an hourglass, books, and an extinguished lamp. These objects often appear in seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* still lifes that include such items as a musical instrument, books, an extinguished candle, an hourglass, and a skull. With the exception of the skull, these are the objects in Rossetti's drawing. Knowledge of Dutch *vanitas* symbols was common in Victorian artistic circles, and it is likely that Rossetti was aware of the Dutch *vanitas* tradition. In the later version of the same subject, he placed a skull on top of the musical instrument under Dante's table.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the seventeenth-century iconographic tradition, Rossetti's still life in *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* emphasizes Dante's awareness of

mortality. The instruments in these two pictures do not function merely as decorative details to evoke the era of Dante but as symbols of death.

In addition to using musical instruments to represent the transience of life in the *vanitas* tradition, Rossetti also incorporated another standard motif in his imagery of music and death: the psychopomp musician (Meyer-Baer, Chapters 11 and 12). In classical iconography, music, death, and immortality were united in representations of psychopomp musicians who accompany the soul on the journey to the Elysian fields. In Christian times, this motif was transformed to the angel musicians who accompany the soul to heaven, and it appears, for example, in Dante's description of his passage through the spheres in the *Divine Comedy*. Many of Rossetti's Dante subjects contain anonymous figures with musical instruments who act as psychopomp musicians. While these figures are sometimes winged, in keeping with the Dantean motif of the musical angel, more often they are wingless, following the classical tradition. In either case, the musicians symbolize the transition from death to the afterlife that preoccupied Rossetti as early as 1847, when he began the poem, "The Blessed Damozel." In the poem, both the psychopomp musicians—"Angels meeting us shall sing to their cytherns and citoles"—and the imagery of the music of the spheres—"she spoke as when the stars sang in their spheres"—show Rossetti's dependence on Dantean imagery (Doughty, *Poems*, 6; Meyer-Baer, 352-56). Rossetti soon included psychopomp musicians in visual works as well; his first version of *The Salutation of Beatrice* (Surtees, 116 A), 1849, included two musicians behind Beatrice. He probably derived the musicians in the drawing as well as those in "The Blessed Damozel" from the psychopomp figures in Dante's description of the guardians who accompanied Beatrice when she descended from heaven to meet Dante in purgatory (Elliot, *Divine Comedy*, 269):

...ever these  
Did sing that, with the chiming of Heaven's sphere,  
Still in their warbling chime, but when the strain  
Of dulcet symphony express'd for me  
Their soft compassion.

Using the motif of the psychopomp musician in his representations of Dante meeting Beatrice, Rossetti indicates that the scene takes place in a supernatural

sphere and that the figure accompanied by musicians is a soul instead of a mortal being.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from relating music to death, Rossetti also drew upon its traditional association with eroticism. In ancient mythology, wind instruments connoted base desires because they were played by satyrs like Pan or Marsyas and because of their phallic shape. On the other hand, stringed instruments held noble associations as instruments to be used by poets for the profession of love or worship.<sup>11</sup> Rossetti was clearly aware of this hierarchy between the musical instruments of lust and love. In his poem, "Passion and Worship," c.1869, he used the motif of the hautboy, or oboe, to symbolize passionate desire and the harp to represent worshipful love. He alluded earlier to this moralistic distinction between the instruments of passion and worship in his drawing of *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* (Figure 4), which he began in 1853 (a distinction that he did not pursue in his poem on the picture, "Mary Magdelan at the Door of Simon the Pharisee," which contains no references to music or musical instruments). In the upper left corner are a trumpeter and a harpist, representatives of the elements of passion and worship in Mary Magdalene's life. As a symbol of sexual promiscuity the wind musician looks back to the road that Mary Magdalene has travelled prior to her revelation. It is the harpist who watches her transformation as she sees a vision of Christ. Unlike the frolicking crowd of disbelievers, the harpist is subdued and inclines his head pensively toward the woman. In fact, the only heads on the same horizontal line as the Magdalene's are those of the harpist and Christ, reinforcing the harpist's role as a symbol of her transition from a life of physical desire to one of spiritual devotion.

Rossetti, however, did not use this symbolism consistently throughout his work, and stringed instruments also appear in the hands of seducers and sirens. In several of Rossetti's early works, female musicians appear as temptresses and objects of lust, following the tradition established in earlier centuries. Entitled with a quotation from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, "*To caper nimbly in a lady's chamber/To the lascivious pleasing of a lute*" shows a young woman playing a lute while a trio of men leer at her. In the foreground is a still life with fruit and a carafe; on the right is a fettered ape. Although the lute player is the central element of Rossetti's design, in Shakespeare's play, Richard speaks the lines quoted simply as evidence of Edward

IV's neglect of his duties. There is no mention of the dancing children, still life details, or a fettered ape that Rossetti added to strengthen the erotic content of the scene established by the lute's association with lascivity.<sup>12</sup>

In another drawing, *Hesterna Rosa* (Figure 5), composed in 1850 and executed in 1853, Rossetti again included a musician and an ape in a scene of debauchery.<sup>13</sup> Illustrating lines from Henry Taylor's Phillip van Artevelde, the drawing depicts the moment when one of the female revellers turns away from the riotous group. Although Surtees has identified the ape in this drawing as a symbol of lust and the musician as a symbol of innocence, the musician's role seems to be more complex. She holds her instrument to her ear as if she is tuning her instrument rather than playing it. Thus, in this scene of discordant debauchery, the lute player attempts to correct the tune of her instrument as the young woman to her right wearily recognizes the false note in her wayward life, paralleling the musical moment in Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*. In these works, the disillusioned enchantresses turn away from musical instruments that symbolize their former immorality, when, as in "Dante at Verona," "Poets and Harlots, all the throng/Let loose their scandal and their song" (Doughty, *Poems*, 62).

The theme of the female musician as enchantress or enticer recurs in several of Rossetti's later paintings. In some cases, the musician seems innocent, as the *The Tune of Seven Towers*, in which the figures seem irresistibly drawn to the music's power rather than to the musician as a sexual object. In *The Merciless Lady* (Surtees, 177), 1865, however, the psaltery player lures the man beside her away from his female companion. His passionate gaze focuses not on the instrument, as in *The Tune of Seven Towers*, but on the musician's face: it is not the psaltery but the woman who absorbs his attention, recalling the musical imagery of enchantment in Rossetti's poem "The Card-dealer" (Doughty, *Poems*, 95), when the poet asks:

Could you not drink her gaze like wine?  
 Yet though its splendour swoon  
 Into silence languidly  
 As a tune into a tune,  
 Those eyes unravel the cold night  
 And know the stars at noon.

Rossetti further developed his imagery of musical

enticement in another painting, *The Blue Bower* 1865 (Figure 6). Set against a background of passion flowers, a woman plays a dulcimer while gazing provocatively at the viewer. Unlike the previous works, in which the musical provocation was confined to the imaginary world within the picture, this musician through her frank gaze challenges the viewer to succumb to her musical and, presumably other, charms.

In ancient times, music connoted temptation and desire in myths of sirens who charmed their victims with songs to lure them to their deaths. Although in an early drawing of boatmen and a siren (Surtees, 63), the siren charms her victims by merely looking at him, and in "Love's Nocturn," of 1850, the "Siren there/Winds her dizzy hair and sings," Rossetti later conflated the classical myth of the singing siren with the medieval folk tale of the harp-playing mermaid to create a harp-playing siren in the painting *A Sea Spell* and the poem that accompanied it.<sup>14</sup> In these works, the siren plucks an instrument to accompany her song: in the poem, "Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree/ While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell," while in the painting a dulcimer hangs from the apple in a position that renders it all but unplayable. Music represents the fatal lure of the libido represented by the sirens. The eros-thanatos theme latent in the ancient myth surfaces in "Love's Nocturn," in which the victim's desire for the siren is consummated through death. Her fatal music "shall tell how glad and strong / Is the night she soothes away," and she provides the release of death with "moan and song, while the chill months long for May (Doughty, *Poems*, 9). In "A Sea Spell," Rossetti used music as the lure for sexual fulfillment in death in more explicit terms. In this poem, the siren gradually reaches an irresistible peak of arousal—"She sinks into her spell: and when full soon/Her lips move and she soars into her song"—and the bare-breasted mariner, who hears her "summoning rune," comes to her rock to die (Doughty, *Poems*, 259). In the painting, Rossetti focused on the siren, who casts her spell amid the iris of hope, the apple of temptation, and the poppy of sleep and death.<sup>15</sup> The swelling of the music described in the poem is echoed in the swirling lines of the siren's dress and hair, so that she visually embodies the tones of the music and its fateful spell.<sup>16</sup> The song has become a "rune," a magical visual sign, rather than an auditory lure, that transfixes the siren as well as her victim.

In addition to desire, music has traditionally been

associated with love, appearing frequently in the art of the past with musical instruments as symbols for pure and noble love.<sup>17</sup> Rossetti employed two traditional musical motifs in his representations of love: wedding music and Cupid as a musician. Musicians appear in the background of *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation* (Surtees, 50), 1851, and in *The Wedding of Saint George and Princess Sabra*, 1857. In both cases, the artist used music as an identifier to clarify the nuptial subject.

Rossetti frequently chose to represent love in less orthodox ways and explored the motif of the personification of love as a musician. Love makes his first musical appearance in *Michael Scott's Wooing* (Surtees, 56), a drawing done around 1853, in which Love stands in a tree while watching the casting of a magical love spell. In a later version of the same subject (Surtees, 222), Love stands in the flowering tree and sings heavenward, ignoring the evil spell below. In both cases Love seems to draw away from the scene, although he plays a more active role in the casting of another love spell in *Sir Tristram and La Belle Yseult*, 1867 (Surtees, 200). In this watercolor painted in 1867, Love draws an arrow from his quiver as the lovers drink their potion. The theme of love is also emphasized by the odd stringed instrument in the lower right corner, which may refer to Love's musicality. Rossetti also represented Love as a musician in, entitled *Three Sang of Love Together*, 1865 (Surtees, 184), in which three women sing to the tune provided by the winged Love in the foreground.

For Rossetti, Love as a musician was a physical manifestation of an intangible sensation. Describing the origin of Love he wrote in "Love Lily," 1865 (Doughty, *Poems*, 129),

A spirit is born who lifts apart  
His tremulous wings and looks at me;  
Who on my mouth his finger lays,  
And shows, while whispering lutes confer,  
That Eden of Love's watered ways  
Whose winds and spirits worship her.

Here Love is a spirit whose presence is confirmed by music.

The association between Love and music explains the inclusion of a psaltery and later a bell in his two versions of *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice* (Surtees, 81). These instruments are not

merely still life elements; rather, they announce the physical manifestation of Love. In Rossetti's works, music plays a more important role as a means with which Love can communicate. In his poem "Willowood" (Doughty, *Poems*, 116), Love and the lover sit together:

Nor even did he speak nor looked at me,  
But touched his lute wherein was audible  
The certain thing he had to tell.

In this instance, it is the musical instrument that conveys Love's thoughts. Thus, the figure of Love holding an arrow and hovering behind two female musicians in the study for *The Bower Meadow* (Surtees, 229 B) suggests that their music is his voice.

### III. The Musical Metaphor

As in his imagery of death and desire, in representing love Rossetti began with a traditional motif—Love as a musician—and complicated its meaning. Despite Rossetti's dependence on traditional iconography, his works should also be considered within the context of contemporary theories of the role of musicality in other art forms. His was a period in which artists and writers strove to achieve the goal of *ut pictura musica* (Viardot, 19-29). When Walter Pater wrote in 1877 that all art should aspire to the condition of music, his remark reflected a current of aesthetic thought that had been developing since the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Accepting the importance of the vague, associative experience, nineteenth-century artists explored the interrelationship between music and the other arts by examining ways in which one sense could activate another through synaesthesia. Charles Baudelaire used synaesthetic analogies in his poem "Correspondances," 1861, when he described "des parfumes frais comme des chairs d'enfants/Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies" (Pichois, II). Another way in which the arts could be linked was through synaesthetic transfer by which, the perception of one art form gives rise to sensations normally caused by another. For example, in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Kreisleriana," 1814, the author described hearing the scent of dark red carnations as the deep tones of a bass horn (O'Malley, 407).

The success of both synaesthetic analogy and the transfer depended upon the response of the viewer or reader. Perhaps because the perceiver played a key

role in determining the correspondences between art forms, musical analogies and metaphors became an important critical tool in interpreting the visual arts. In general, critics took two approaches to musicality in art. On one hand, they used musical terms to describe a work of art or drew analogies between the arts to describe a painting. Ruskin chose this approach in 1838, when he compared a painting in which the design abuts the edges to a piece of music in which the sounds cease in the midst of a burst of melody (Ruskin, *Works*, v.1, 242). Some critics sought actual synaesthetic transfers between themselves as perceivers and the work of art. When reviewing the Salon of 1843, Theophile Gautier wrote: "I hear the noise of colors; the green, red, blue, yellow sounds" (O'Malley, 398). In his review of the Salon of 1846, Baudelaire attempted to clarify Gautier's aesthetic approach by advising that the best way to tell if a painting is melodious is to look at it from a distance without regard to the subject. In other words, for Baudelaire, musicality existed in the abstract qualities of a work (Loncke, III).

If the relationship between music and other art forms had remained a theoretical issue to be debated in aesthetic discussions, it is unlikely that it would have become such an important factor for a broad spectrum of artists and writers during the nineteenth century. As a critical issue it reached a much wider audience. From its genesis as a critical mode in France, through Gautier and Baudelaire, the search for musicality in other art forms soon affected English critics, especially Algernon Charles Swinburne. An early admirer of Gautier and Baudelaire's works, Swinburne experimented with intersense transfers in his own poetry and critical writings.<sup>19</sup>

Rossetti's awareness of these issues may have come about through his friendship with Swinburne, whom he met in 1857, during the Oxford Union mural project. After 1857 his works show an increasing use of musicality as a stylistic tool, especially evident in his poetry of the late 1850s. Instead of describing music as part of the setting, as he had done earlier, he developed a new interest in insistent rhythms and repeated refrains. This musical approach is apparent, for example, in the opening stanza of "Even So," 1859 (Doughty, *Poems*, 99):

So it is, my dear  
All such things touch secret strings

For heavy hearts to hear.  
So it is my dear.

It can also be felt in the sing-song quality of the opening lines of the "Song of the Bower": "Say, is it day, is it dusk in thy bower, / Thou whom I long for, who longest for me?" (Doughty, *Poems*, 132).

The heightened musicality in Rossetti's poetry was noted by several critics, including Swinburne, who described the "Song of the Bower" as having "such depth and weight in its moving music that the echo of it is as a sea-shell held to the mind's ear forever" (Swinburne, 69). In addition to placing greater emphasis on musical qualities of rhythm and refrain in his poems, Rossetti also broadened his concept of music as a visual image. In his early poem "Dante at Verona," music was simply a madrigal filling a palace and courtyard; by 1869 in "Newborn Death," music is "song, whose hair / Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath" (Doughty, *Poems*, 128). By describing music through non-musical images, Rossetti created an imaginary picture in which musicality is expressed through the sinuous, organic lines of hair, fire, or blossoming flowers.

Paralleling the increased musicality in Rossetti's poems in the late 1850s, his drawings and paintings from this period also indicate a new interest in visual musicality, or, as he called it in "Heart's Compass," "Music's visible tone" (Doughty, *Poems*, 219). By 1857, his designs become much denser, with the rhythmic repetition of lines and shapes becoming an important element. In *The Blue Closet* (Figure 3), for example, the repeated lines of the patterned tiles enclose the visual space in the same way that the repeated first and last lines enclose the first stanza of "Even So." The rhythmic pattern of words that imparts a musical feeling to the poem is transformed into visual terms as a closely knit rhythmic pattern of shapes and lines. A similar emphasis on the rhythmic distribution of line and accent is evident in *The Tune of Seven Towers*, in which the main theme established by the knight's banner staff is echoed by the strings of the Psaltery and the bell rope, and countered by the repeated diagonal lines of the dress of the woman at the far right. These diagonal themes and variations are superimposed upon a firm matrix of horizontal and vertical lines that lend stability to the composition.

In other paintings Rossetti explored the use of non-musical images to suggest musical tones. As in his

poems, he turned to imagery of hair and flowers to convey the idea of music. In *A Christmas Carol* he portrayed a woman playing a clavichord while two women comb and arrange the musician's hair, with the repeated, rhythmic motion of hair-combing suggesting the rhythm of music. He repeated this motif in 1864 in *Morning Music* (Surtees, 170), in which a woman has her hair combed as a lute player performs in the background.<sup>20</sup> In both cases, the swirling lines of the hair recall Rossetti's poetic image of song's flame-like hair. Rossetti also used intertwining patterns of flowers in his pictures to suggest musicality. The background of *The Blue Bower* is reminiscent of the poet's description of song blossoming like a wreath. Behind the sensuous musician, the lines of the floral tiles imply the movement of sound from the dulcimer out of the picture and into the surrounding environment. Rossetti created a similar effect in *A Sea Spell*, in which the flowers and swirling lines of the woman's draperies seem to be activated in response to the music.

Contemporary writers who commented on Rossetti's art often noted the musical qualities of his works. One of the first to do so was Coventry Patmore, who praised Rossetti's Oxford Union mural, *The Vision of Sir Lancelot*, as a painting that "affects the eye as much as one of Mendelssohn's most unwordable *Lieder ohne Worter* impresses the ear" (Fleming, 107). For the most part, however, critics discussed the musicality of the artist's color harmonies. F.G. Stephens interpreted *The Blue Closet* as "an exercise intended to symbolize the association of color with music" (*Rossetti*, 41). Describing *The Blue Bower* in the *Athenaeum* in 1865, he again noted the musical qualities of Rossetti's color harmonies, adding "the music of the dulcimer passes out of the spectator's cognizance when the chromatic harmony takes its place in appealing to the eye" (546). It is difficult to assess whether Stephens's remarks reflected Rossetti's intentions. No doubt the artist was familiar with Ruskin's opinion that "to add color to a drawing is to undertake for the perfection of a visible music" (Staley, 108). Moreover, Rossetti later became acquainted with the French artist, Henri Fantin-Latour, visiting him in Paris in 1864, when Fantin-Latour was working on his first compositions intended to interrelate color and music (Chetham, n.p.). It is not without significance that Rossetti met Fantin through his close friend, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, who was already experimenting with his own analogies between art and music at this time. Rossetti was also probably

aware of the correspondences drawn between music and color by Gautier, who published his poem, "Symphony in White Major," in 1852.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Rossetti may even have known of Schumard's symphony described in Henri Murger's *Scènes de la Vie Bohème*, entitled "The Influence of Blue on the Arts."

Despite these opportunities to become exposed to contemporary uses of synaesthesia, Rossetti does not seem to have been very interested in color as an analogue for musical tones. References to color are almost non-existent in his poetry, and even in his pictorial works he seems to have relied more closely on recognizable, parallel images, such as swirling hair or flowers, to convey musicality. Only in his paintings in which blue predominates—*The Blue Closet* and *The Blue Bower*—does there seem to be a suggestion of an attempt to match color with sound. Such works, however, are exceptions. For the most part, Rossetti restricted his musical imagery to synaesthetic analogies. He implied in his paintings that musical rhythms are like the action of combing hair or the appearance of repeated flowers, but he did not often strive for synaesthetic transfer. Unlike the art of Whistler or Fantin-Latour, Rossetti's pictures cannot be described

as symphonies or oratorios; instead, they are closer to visual poems in their dependence on highly descriptive imagery and analogies.

Rossetti's musical imagery is a complex subject. Approaching music on levels of object, symbol, and metaphor, he used musical imagery to strengthen the meaning of his art. His reliance on traditional musical iconography may have hindered his thinking about music in wholly abstract terms. For him, music represented a combination of ideas and associations. He sought symbolic images that could function in a picture similar to the way that descriptive words work in a poem. Musical imagery, with its long iconographic tradition, neatly fitted his need for symbolic imagery he could creatively manipulate. Occasionally, he explored the formal qualities of his media and introduced musical correspondences into his works. But his main fascination seems to have been with music as an idea rich in associative power and poetic suggestiveness, despite his professed abhorrence of the "noisy nuisance."

Middlebury College

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "A Dictionary of Terms of Art," *Art Journal* 4 (1852): 369.

<sup>2</sup> The Rehab was illustrated in the second edition of *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum* (London, 1874), p. 143. It may have been exhibited prior to this date.

<sup>3</sup> Rossetti later alleviated his technical inaccuracy in his design of *King Rene's Honeymoon* for the *King Rene's Honeymoon* cabinet made by John P. Seddon. John Christian (60) has shown that Rossetti derived his motif of the queen at the keyboard and the king pumping the bellows from a sixteenth-century woodcut by Hans Burgmair.

<sup>4</sup> Rossetti's neglect of technical accuracy led F.G. Stephens to remark later that Rossetti's musical instruments were "the despair of the specialists" (*Rossetti*, 34).

<sup>5</sup> Rossetti may have derived the motif of angels playing bells on ropes from reproductions of angel musicians in

Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire*, pp. 254-55.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the same perforation pattern seen on the bell tree in *The Blue Closet* and on the top of the harp chair in *The Tune of Seven Towers* also appears on the bar of the chair in Burne-Jones's caricature, done in 1856, of himself looking at a painting by Rossetti on a chair designed by Morris. Burne-Jones's caricature is dated 1856 in Georgiana Burne-Jones's *Memorials*, vol. 1, 149. Allen Staley has described the chair in *The Tune of Seven Towers* as "a prototype piece of Arts-and-Crafts furniture." Morris began designing furniture of this type during the summer and fall of 1856 (Staley and Cummings, 314). It is possible that Morris's furniture was also the prototype for Rossetti's, since Rossetti did not include Arts-and-Crafts furniture in his works until 1856.

<sup>7</sup> Rossetti may have been sensitized to the morality implied in furniture through Ruskin's comments on the

furniture in Hunt's *Awakening Conscience*. See Ruskin's letter to the *Times*, reprinted in Nochlin, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Good discussion of this iconographic tradition can be found in Winternitz.

<sup>9</sup> See Bergstrom, 154-89, for a discussion of Dutch *vanitas* painting. Rossetti not only admired seventeenth-century Dutch painting, praising "an exquisite de Hooghe" in his letters (Doughty, 1136), but he also collected paintings from that era. In the sale of his belongings held after his death, a watercolor by Adrian van Ostade was listed. See *The Valuable Contents . . .*, No. 442.

<sup>10</sup> In one of the studies for *Beata Beatrix* from 1872 (Surtees, 168), the musicians hovering in the trees effectively signify that the setting is not an ordinary one. Furthermore, the musicians play a similar role in *The Boat of Love* (Surtees, 239), in which Beatrice steps into her enchanted boat while musicians perform above her.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the hierarchy of instruments, see "The Curse of Pallas Athene," in Winternitz, 150-65. Rossetti may have become aware of the hierarchy of instruments through Ruskin who drew the distinction between the "lofty passion" of stringed instruments and "degraded, . . . brutal, or meaningless" music of wind instruments. See Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air*, 342-43.

<sup>12</sup> See Janson, 145-57, for a discussion of the relationship between apes and sensuality. Rossetti repeated the design of "To caper nimbly in a lady's chamber."

<sup>13</sup> Surtees, 21, dates the drawing to 1853, but notes that the Arts-and-Crafts style stool in the foreground is a later addition.

<sup>14</sup> A similar conflation occurs in "The Doom of the Sirens," an outline of an opera libretto written by Rossetti in 1869. With distinct Wagnerian overtones, this drama pits a Christian hero against the pagan sirens. An excellent discussion of this libretto, as well as the theme of music and sirens in Rossetti's works, can be found in Macleod, 89-102.

<sup>15</sup> Rossetti also combined apple and siren imagery in his poem "The Orchard Pit," written in 1869.

<sup>16</sup> Not all of Rossetti's musical temptresses were specifically sirens. In many of his works, female musicians use their instruments to entice their listeners, in keeping with a tradition established in medieval and Renaissance astrological manuscripts, in which musical lovers are shown as the children of Venus. For example, see Baccio Baldini's astrological prints reproduced in Lippman, Berlin, 1895.

<sup>17</sup> Rossetti may have derived the motif of angels playing bells on ropes from reproductions of angel musicians in Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire*, pp. 254-55. Alicia Faxon also offers a convincing source for the motif in medieval

manuscripts in the British Museum and in the *Hours and Psalter of Isabelle of France*, owned by John Ruskin (111-13). For a discussion of the traditional role of music in allegories of love, see De Mirimonde, *Gazette*, 183-91.

<sup>18</sup> Although the interrelationships between the various art forms had fascinated aestheticians since ancient times, it was not until the eighteenth century that the correspondences between music and painting were seriously examined. Eighteenth-century theorists sought measurable analogies between the arts. For example, Newton's proposed "ocular harpischord" and the Abbe Castel's color organ depended on carefully calculated, one-to-one correspondences between colors and tones, while Charles Avison looked for measurable correlations between different instruments and colors and between pitch and illusionistic distance. Although these investigations were predicated on the observation of finite interrelationships between the carefully limited realms of music and visual art, by the end of the century theoreticians were increasingly fascinated by the blurring of the boundaries between music and the other arts. For further discussion of this topic, see Herbert Scheuller, *JAAC* (1963), 334-59. Rossetti may have known of Avison's research through his acquaintance with Robert Browning, who knew Avison. Browning's poem, "Parleying with Charles Avison," includes a staff of music at the end.

No longer willing to examine the interrelationship of tone and color through scientific measurement, aestheticians during the last decade of the century turned their attention to the psychological effect of art forms on the perceiver. In his *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790, Immanuel Kant divided the arts into speaking arts, plastic arts, and the arts of beautiful sensations. Combined in the last category were music and the art of color. And, in 1795, Friedrich Schiller took a further step in breaking down the distinctions between the arts by stating that "the plastic arts, at their most perfect, must become music and move us by the immediacy of their sensuous pleasure" (See Honour, p. 119; Scheuller, *JAAC* (1955), 218.) Both Kant and Schiller realized that sensation was a key to understanding the interrelationship between music and painting, and they focused their attention of the subjective, undefinable response of the perceiver. Emphasis now shifted from the scientific observation of comparative phenomena to a broader attempt to define affinities of sensation in the perception of different art forms. In 1813, Mme de Stael (O'Malley, 398) summarized this new approach when she observed: "Incessantly we compare painting to music and music to painting because the emotions that arise in us reveal the analogies to us,

while cold observation only shows the differences."

19 In his criticism, Swinburne often took a musical approach, writing about Whistler's "chords" of blue and white, "interludes" on tones, and the "antiphonal" contrasts. See Rossetti, 44-45.

20 This motif seems to have its origin in Rossetti's depiction of *Desdemona's Death Song* (Surtees, 254), in which he illustrated Shakespeare's *Othello* by showing a woman having her hair combed while a musician plays in

the background.

21 Like Rossetti, Gautier seems to have had reservations about the value of music as an aesthetic experience. In his novel, *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, 1835, Gautier remarked, "Paradise as it is commonly described, appears to me too musical, and I confess, with all humility, that I am perfectly incapable of enduring a sonata which would last for merely ten thousand years."

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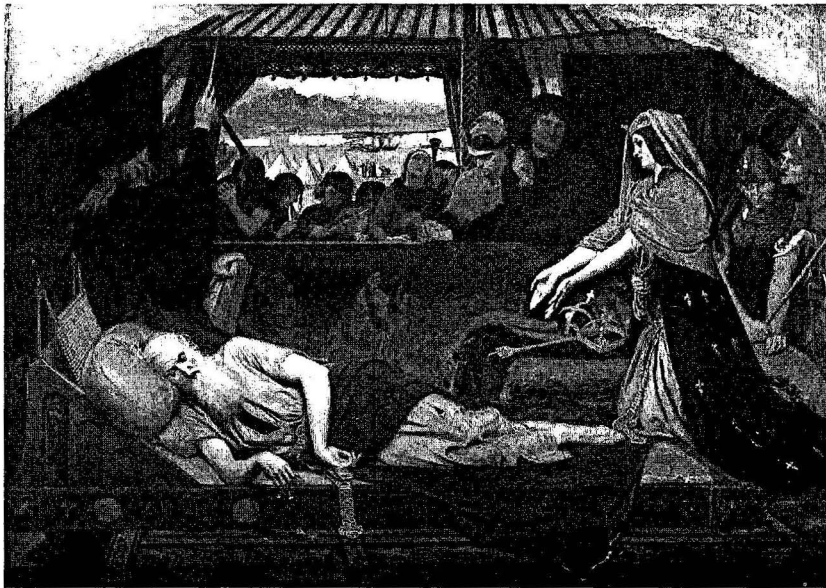


Figure 1. Ford Madox Brown, *King Lear and Cordelia*, 1848-49; 1853-54; oil on canvas; 28 x 39 inches; Tate Gallery. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. D.G. Rossetti, *The Wedding of Saint George and Princess Sabra*, 1857; watercolor; 13 1/2 x 13 1/2; Tate Gallery. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3. D.G. Rossetti, *The Blue Closet*, 1857; watercolor; 13 1/2 x 9 3/4; Tate Gallery. Reproduced with permission.

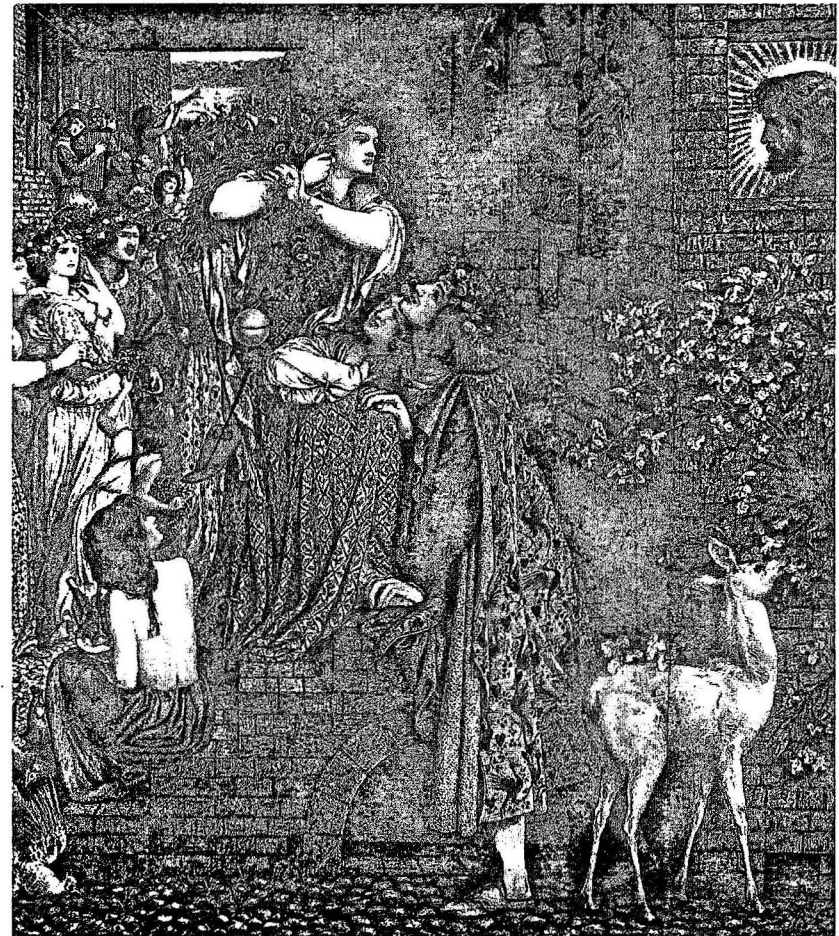


Figure 4. D.G. Rossetti, *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, 1858; pen and ink; 21 1/4 x 18 3/8; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Reproduced with permission.



*With tongue of mother maid: nor wife  
To heart of father wife nor maid:  
"And we not love a false life  
Against the wind and shade?"*

*With heart of mother maid nor wife  
To tongue of father wife nor maid:  
"Then what is love? and what is  
And still like flowers that fade."*

Figure 5. D.G. Rossetti, *Hesterna Rosa*, 1853; pen and ink, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2; Tate Gallery. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 6. D.G. Rossetti, *The Blue Bower*, 1865; oil on canvas; 32 1/2 x 27 1/4; The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham. Reproduced with permission.