

Representations of Music and the Dance in Late Roman Art

Geç Roma Sanatında Müzik ve Dans Temsilleri

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Abstract

Music and the dance are an important theme represented in various artistic media of the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods, including mosaic pavements and decorative arts such as silver metalwork, woven textiles, and carved ivories. A popular aspect of this theme is imagery of the Dionysiac thiasos, with members of the wine god's entourage making merry by dancing and sounding crotala or cymbal tongs, as we see in a fragmentary mosaic from the House of the Dionysiac Thiasos at Augusta Traiana – Beroe. A similar effect occurs in either an expanded or a somewhat reduced format in pavements from Argos and Madaba. Besides mosaics, this subject also appears on Late Antique silver plate made for display, such as objects in the Mildenhall Treasure from Roman Britain and related works. Coptic textiles used to ornament private houses as colorful wall hangings feature lively dancers and musicians, and these figures may or may not have a mythological identity.

Other non-mythological representations of music and the dance appeared in domestic and public settings. An outstanding example is the well-preserved Mosaic of Female Musicians that decorated a house in Mariamin, Syria, and that assembles an impressive group of instrumentalists and a dancer. One observes a pipe organ (hydraulis) along with a cithara, an aulos, and an acetabulum, consisting of a series of metal bowls struck with a baton. Elsewhere there are depicted a pantomime performance with an organ accompaniment, visible in a mosaic from Noheda, Spain, as well as music-making and dancing in the context of the circus. The latter subject appears on a consular diptych, and on the base of the Obelisk of Theodosius in Constantinople. We finally note that the pipe organ was later adopted for use in the church liturgy, reflected in an illustration in the Utrecht Psalter of 9th-century date. If the latter work of art is a copy of a Late Antique manuscript, as some scholars believe, then the pipe organ's adoption for Christian ceremonial practice should be dated earlier than originally thought.

Keywords: Music, dance, Dionysiac thiasos, Coptic textiles, silver plate, cymbals, pipe organ, acetabulum, Mosaic of Mariamin, Obelisk of Theodosius (its base), Utrecht Psalter.

Öz

Müzik ve dans, mozaik döşemeler ve gümüş metal işleri, dokuma kumaşlar ve oymalı fildişi gibi dekoratif sanatlar da dahil olmak üzere Geç Roma ve Erken Bizans dönemlerine ait çeşitli sanatsal ortamlarda temsil edilen önemli bir temadır. Bu temanın popüler bir yönü, Augusta Traiana – Beroe'deki Dionysos Thiasos Evi'nden parçalı bir mozaikte olduğu gibi, şarap tanrısının maiyetinin üyelerinin dans ederek ve crotala veya zil maşası çalarak neşelendiği Dionysos thiasos'unun görüntüleridir. Argos ve Madaba döşemelerinde de benzer bir etki genişletilmiş ya da biraz küçültülmüş formatta ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu konu, mozaiklerin yanı sıra, Roma Britanyasından Mildenhall Hazinesi'ndeki nesnelere ve ilgili eserlere gibi sergilenmek üzere yapılmış Geç Antik gümüş tabaklarda da karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Renkli duvar süsleri gibi özel evleri süslemek için kullanılan Kıpti kumaşlarda canlı dansçılar ve müzisyenler yer alır ve bu figürler mitolojik bir kimliğe sahip olabilir veya olmayabilir.

Müzik ve dansın mitolojik olmayan diğer temsilleri ev içi ve kamusal ortamlarda ortaya çıkmıştır. Göze çarpan bir örnek, Suriye'nin Mariamin kentinde bir evi süsleyen ve etkileyici bir enstrümantalist ve dansçı grubunu bir araya getiren, iyi korunmuş Kadın Müzisyenler Mozağı'dır. Bir borulu org (hydraulis) ile birlikte bir cithara, bir

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aulos ve bir baton ile vurulan bir dizi metal kaseden oluşan bir asetabulum görülmektedir. Başka bir yerde, İspanya'nın Noheda kentindeki bir mozaikte görülen org eşliğinde bir pantomim gösterisinin yanı sıra sirk bağlamında müzik icrası ve dans tasvir edilmektedir. İkinci konu bir konsül diptiğinde ve Konstantinopolis'teki Theodosius Dikilitaşı'nın kaidesinde görülmektedir. Son olarak, borulu orgun daha sonra kilise ayinlerinde kullanılmak üzere benimsendiğini ve bunun, 9. yüzyıl tarihli Utrecht Mezmurları'ndaki bir illüstrasyonda yansıtıldığına değinilmektedir. Eğer ikinci sanat eseri, bazı bilim adamlarının inandığı gibi, Geç Antik Dönem elyazmasının bir kopyasıysa, o zaman borulu orgun Hristiyan tören uygulamalarına uyarlanması, ilk başta düşünülen daha eski bir tarihe ait olmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müzik, dans, Dionysos thiasos, Kıpti kumaşlar, siler levha, ziller, borulu org, asetabulum, Mariamin Mozaiki, Theodosius Dikilitaşı (kaidesi), Utrecht Mezmurları

I wish to discuss a particular aspect of everyday life in Late Antiquity, namely, performances of music and the dance, as we see them reflected in visual arts of this period. Music-making and dancing were very popular forms of entertainment in both public and private settings in the eastern and western empire. This topic has been discussed extensively in a publication of 2021 by L. Neira (Neira 2021), which spans a much longer period of time than the present article. I shall examine selected examples in various artistic media, and in the process, several kinds of musical instruments will be illustrated.

Educated Late Roman patrons, whether pagan or Christian, had a fondness for imagery of Dionysiac content, that depicted the joy of merrymaking and decorated their private homes (on this subject's popularity in Late Roman art (see Parrish 1995). That is especially true of the *thiasos*, representing boisterous maenads, satyrs, and other, related figures in the company of the wine god. The subject is often depicted in the mosaic pavements of social spaces, such as in a fragmentary panel of 4th-century date from what is thought to be a *triclinium* of the House of the Dionysiac Thiasos at Augusta Traiana – Beroe (Pillinger et al. 2016: I, 252-259; II, pl. 107 figs. 293-294), modern Stara Zagora (Fig. 1). Two maenads and a satyr, the former equipped with finger cymbals and *crotala* or cymbal tongs (as defined by A. Cottet 2022a, 2022b) dance with abandon, punctuating their movements with the percussive instruments. The scene may reflect performances by actual figures in the same space. Similar dancers, with



Figure 1
Augusta Traiana – Beroe, Mosaic of
Dionysiac Thiasos (Pillinger – Lirsch -
Popova 2016: pl. 107 fig. 294).

flute-playing accompaniment, appear in the fragmentary mosaic frieze that ornamented the entrance to the *triclinium* of the Villa of the Falconer in Argos (Åkerström-Hougen 1974: 36 pl. 7.1 in text fig. 68 pl. VIII in folder), dated to the beginning of the 6th century (Figs. 2-3). The half-nude Dionysos stood in their midst, leaning on a pillar with his legs crossed. In another, now incomplete pavement, that decorated a 6th-century mansion in Madaba, Jordan (Piccirillo 1993: 69 col. pl. 7 in text, 76 fig. 40; Talgam 2005: 113 figs. 3-4), we see a maenad (labeled *Banche*) next to a satyr (so identified by an inscription). She holds cymbals in her hands with others attached to her ankles, and strikes both pairs of instruments in an acrobatic gesture (Fig. 4).

Figure 2
Argos, Mosaic of Dionysiac *Thiasos*
(Åkerström-Hougen 1974: pl. VIII in folder).

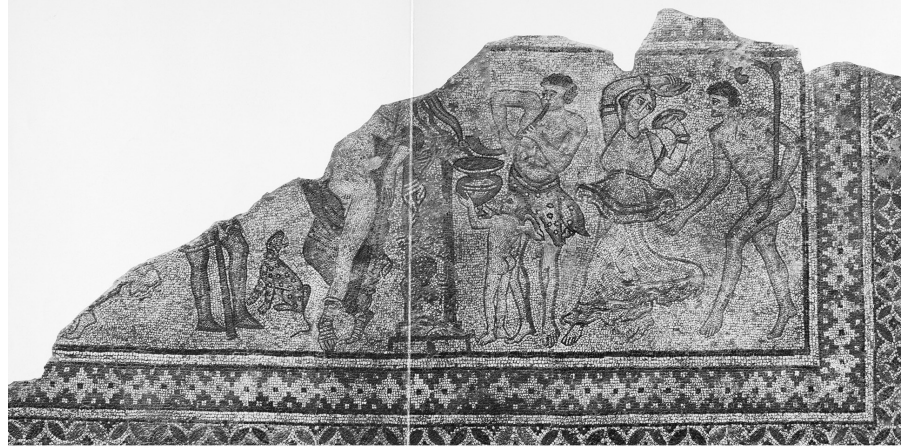


Figure 3
Argos, Mosaic of Dionysiac *Thiasos*, Detail
of Central Section (Åkerström-Hougen 1974:
col. pl. 7.1 in text).



Figure 4
Madaba, Mosaic of Dancing Maenad and
Satyr (Piccirillo 1993: fig. 33).

Dionysiac references to music and the dance also appear in other art forms besides mosaics that embellished convivial spaces in private residences. These objects were frequently used for display to impress guests. The works of art cited here include silver vessels and textiles, either in the form of wall hangings or costumes worn on festive occasions. A striking example in metal is the Great Dish (Strong 1966: 197-198 pl. 60; Painter 1977: 26 no. 1 35-40 pls. 1-6; Kent - Painter eds. 1977: 33 no. 54 col. pl. on 65; Hobbs 2016: 18-62 no. 1 pls. 21-45; also called the Bacchic Plate) or *lanx* belonging to the Mildenhall Treasure from

Roman Britain, dated to the 4th century and now kept in the British Museum (Figs. 5-6). A frieze of exuberant revelers encircles the plate and includes a satyr playing the double flute or *aulos* and two maenads sounding a *tympanon* or tambourine. They are joined by Pan, the drunken Hercules, a respectful Silenos, and the nude, standing Dionysos, seen at the top. A small head of Oceanus, surrounded by sea creatures, occupies the vessel's center, implying happiness and prosperity in the marine world as well as on land. The craftsmanship of the dish is elegant and refined. The same treasure also contains two small silver plates (Kent - Painter 1977: 33 no. 55, 34 no. 56 col pl. on 67, top; Painter 1977: 26 nos. 2-3 pls. 7-8; Kitzinger 1980: 30, 108 fig. 53; Hobbs 2016: 63-71 nos. 2-3 pls. 90-106) with pairs of dancers, and one pair rises gracefully on their toes as the maenad shakes a *tympanon* and holds a *thyrsos* (Fig. 7). The second pair represents Pan blowing his syrinx and a maenad playing the flutes (Fig. 8). Other musical instruments in the Dionysiac repertory include a bell struck with a stick or *februum*, as we observe on a silver plate from Constantinople (Kitzinger 1980: 107-108 fig. 192; Hobbs 2016: 75 pl. 109), dated to the 7th century (Fig. 9); it is now kept in the Hermitage Museum. This maenad's partner is a nimble Silenos supporting a full wineskin on his back.

Figure 5
Mildenhall Treasure, Great Dish or Bacchic Platter (Painter 1977: pl. 1).

Figure 6
Mildenhall Treasure, Great Dish, Detail of Central Part of Dish (Painter 1977: pl. 3).

Figure 7
Mildenhall Treasure, Silver Plate with Dancing Satyr and Maenad (Hobbs 2016: pl. 9).



Figure 8
Mildenhall Treasure, Silver Plate with Pan and Maenad (Hobbs 2016: pl. 90).



Figure 9
Constantinople, Silver Plate with Dancing Maenad and Silenus (Kitzinger 1980: fig. 192).

Our inventory of domestic adornments with the theme of the dance would be incomplete without mentioning wall hangings or tapestries, often referred to as Coptic textiles. The dancers depicted on these objects may or may not have a mythological identity. One slender female in a tapestry (Rutsschowscaya 1990: 110-111 fig. on 111, right side) of 7th-century date displays a swaying motion,



Figure 10
Coptic Textile with Dancer (Rutschowscaya 1990: fig. on p. 111, right side).



Figure 11
Fragmentary Textile with Upper Part of Dancer (Rutschowscaya 1990: fig. on p. 70).

Figure 12
Mariamin, Mosaic of Female Musicians, Overall View with Border (Dick Osseman, https://pbase.com/dosseman_syria/image/117822240, Hama Museum 443. jpg).

as she raises one arm with cymbal tongs over her head and holds other *crotala* in her lowered hand (Fig. 10); this work belongs to the Fondation Abegg at Riggisberg. A different textile fragment assigned to the 4th-5th centuries, now in the Louvre (Rutschowscaya 1990: 66, 70 fig. on 70) has only the upper part of a young woman preserved, and she snaps her fingers in time to the rhythm of the dance (Fig. 11).

Other types of music and dancing besides the *thiasos* are represented in domestic contexts. A related festive event is a concert of a down-to-earth sort, employing a wider variety of musical instruments beyond those seen previously. These include the pipe organ (also called a *hydraulis*), the *cithara*, and an unusual instrument referred to as an *acetabulum* (Böhm 1998: 47-66). It shows metal bowls arranged in a couple of rows that were struck with a pair of sticks or short batons, producing soft tones, perhaps comparable to those of the modern marimba. These and other instruments such as the *aulos*, *crotala*, and finger cymbals are visible in the magnificent Mosaic of Female Musicians from Mariamin (Zaqzuq - Duchesne-Guillemain 1970: 93-125 figs. 2, 17, 19; Perrot 1973: 95-105; Balty 1977: 94-99 nos. 42-44 figs. on these pp.; Balty 2011: 647-656; Kiilerich 2009: 87-107 fig. 1-8, 10; Neira 2022: 237-240 fig. 23) in Syria, dated to around the year 400 AD (Fig. 12). It occurs at present in the museum at Hama, ancient Emesa (see Fig. 13) The mosaic decorated a *triclinium* (see Zaqzuq - Duchesne-Guillemain 1970: 93 fig. 1) with apse in a private house. Diners reclining in the apse gazed upon the floor in the main part of the room. In the *emblema* appears an entire orchestra and a dancer, framed by a border depicting acanthus scrolls that are inhabited by Erotes hunting wild animals (Fig. 12); single masks, male and female, punctuate the middle of the border on each side. The orchestra begins with a woman, perhaps the group's leader, playing *crotala* on the left end of the *emblema*. Next to her is a female standing at the keyboard (hidden from view) of a large pipe organ, resting on a support or pedestal covered by an embroidered cloth. Two small Erotes in the lower left corner (Cottet 2022a: 33 identified these figures as real children with wings attached to their back by cords) pump air into the instrument with pedals. The ensemble continues with a flutist pausing momentarily in her playing of the *aulos*. She is followed by a female sounding an *acetabulum* with eight golden bowls. The one other musician in this company plucks a large *cithara* that has cusped metal sides and rests on a covered table.



The troupe of performers, whom we can label a *symphonia*, ends with a dancer on the far right who steps forward holding finger cymbals in her lowered hands, as she is about to begin her performance. A. Cottet (2022a) offers an illuminating discussion of the two types of cymbals visible in this mosaic, drawing numerous comparisons with works of art in a variety of media including sarcophagi.

The entire ensemble of instruments seen in the Mariamin floor apparently was not uncommon as a musical accompaniment to dining in Late Roman times, as indicated in a text of Sidonius Apollinaris (Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.2.6 trans. W. B. Anderson, Cambridge, MA; London, 1936). We further note that each of the women in the mosaic is richly draped in an embroidered *dalmatica*, a favorite type of garment in Late Antiquity, and all have a similar coiffure with the hair rolled up behind. This is a professional ensemble, possibly hired from an urban center in the province of Syria (see Fig. 13), and the women perhaps helped celebrate a local event such as a wedding. Alternatively, they may allude to a performance in a theater (Neira 2022: 238). The pavement gives us a precious insight into musical life in Late Roman times.

The other kind of private performance of music and dancing that I wish to mention is that of mime and pantomime, which enjoyed great popularity in both the East and West. A fine mosaic representation of this subject is a pavement adorning the triconch of the villa at Noheda (Valero Tevar 2013: 316, 320, 325-327 figs. 15-16, 20; Dunbabin 2016: 13-15, 95 figs. 1.6, 4.8) in Spain, dated to circa 400 AD (Fig. 14). In the left half of Panel B of this mosaic, a pantomimist wearing an elaborate costume and mask dances to the accompaniment of an organ player with two small assistants (who work the bellows), as well as a man in a white tunic sounding a foot clapper or *scabellum* (Greek *kroupeza*), as other figures look on. Such a performance actually may have occurred in the room where the mosaic was found. In the right half of the same panel appears an episode of mime acting, identified by a Latin inscription as “The Mine of the Jealous Husband”, and it too has a musical accompaniment (Fig. 15). In this case, the performance is supplemented by a *cithara* and an *aulos*, a combination of instruments echoed in the mosaic from Mariamin, but forming part of a narrative presentation at Noheda.

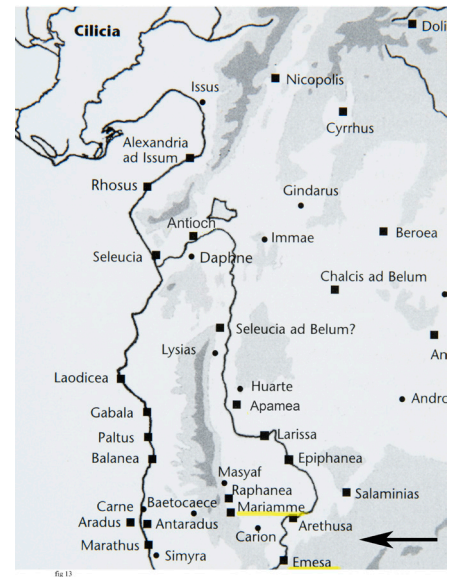
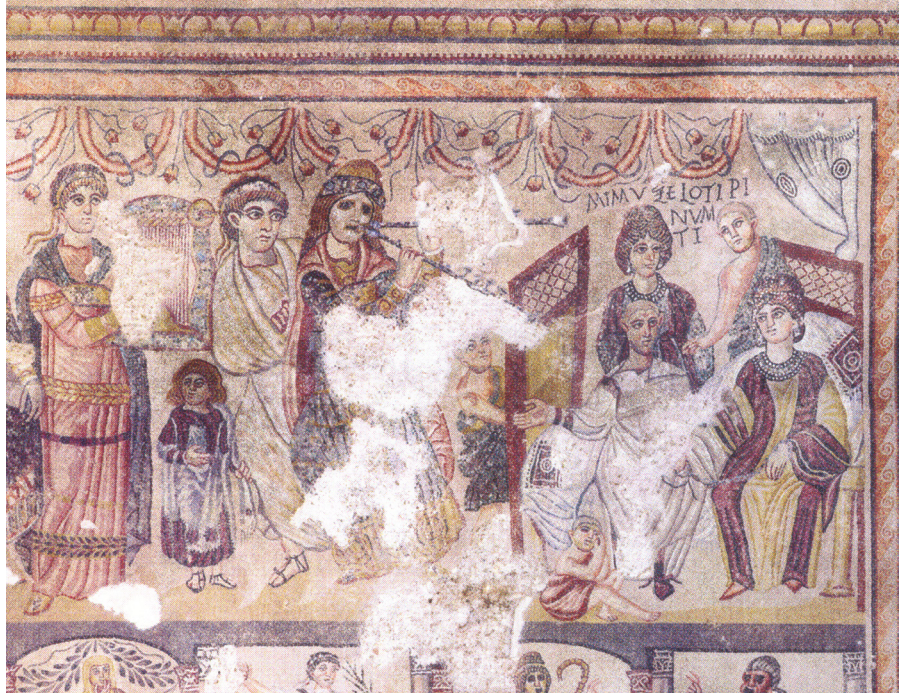


Figure 13
Map Locating Mariamin within Ancient Syria (Butcher 2003: fig. 31).

Figure 14
Noheda, Mosaic of Pantomime and Mime Performances (Panel B), Left Half (Dunbabin 2016: fig. 4.8).

Figure 15
 Noheda, Mosaic of Pantomime and Mime
 Performances (Panel B), Right Half
 (Dunbabin 2016: fig. 4.8).



Up to this point, we have described and illustrated music and dance performances in private settings, while noting that pantomime elsewhere also was presented in public theaters (on public performance of pantomime, see Webb 2008: 58-65). I now wish to consider other types of public entertainment featuring music and dance, most notably, performances that occurred in the spectacle of circus racing at the Hippodrome and at other locations. A very informative monument is one section of the sculpted reliefs on the base of the Obelisk of Theodosius (Bruns 1935: 12-14, 33, 65-68 figs. 77-85; Kähler 1975: 44-55; Kitzinger 1980: 32-33 fig. 61; Kiilerich 1998: 56-60 figs. 9-13; Markovits 2003: 226-230 pls. 27-28 figs. 19-20; Işın - Pitarikis 2011: 162-163; Neira 2021: 120 fig. 333), dated 391-393 AD, specifically, the lowest part of the relief imagery on the base's southeast side (Fig. 16). Below the imperial box and two rows of spectators appears a frieze of musicians and dancers, smaller in scale than the spectators immediately

Figure 16
 Constantinople, Base of the Obelisk of
 Theodosius, Southeast Side, General View
 (Bruns 1935: fig. 77).



above. At either end of the frieze is a musician playing a pipe organ assisted by two smaller figures working the bellows (Figs. 17-19). The two organs provide musical accompaniment for the blue and green circus factions, and between them is a row of dancers and other musicians. We see a *syrinx* player, a man sounding the double flute, and someone playing a long *monaulos* with a curved tip. The dancers link hands in groups of three and four, with a dancer at each end bending inward gracefully, and having one arm bent over her head and striking finger cymbals with both hands. The performance not only entertained the crowd but also glorified the emperor above. According to Kiilerich, the ceremonial dance depicted celebrates imperial victory merged with the notion of cosmic Christian triumph (Kiilerich 1998: 59, 165).



Figure 17
Constantinople, Base of the Obelisk of Theodosius, Southeast Side, Detail of Frieze with Musicians and Dancers, Left Half (Bruns 1935: fig. 84).



Figure 18
Constantinople, Base of the Obelisk of Theodosius, Southeast Side, Frieze with Musicians and Dancers, Right Half (Bruns 1935: fig. 85).

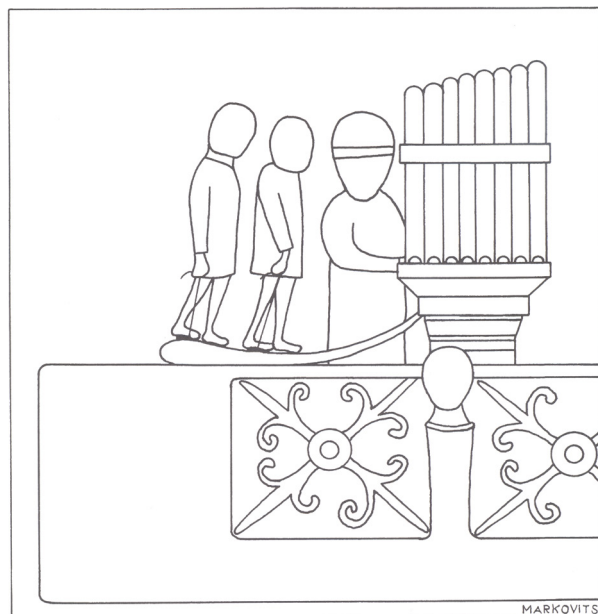


Figure 19
Constantinople, Base of the Obelisk of Theodosius, Frieze with Musicians and Dancers, Drawing of Organ Player and Assistants on Left End (Markovits 2003: fig. 19).



Figure 20
Ivory Diptych of Consul Anastasius, Overall View (Delbrueck 1929: no. 19, pl.).



Figure 21
Ivory Diptych of Consul Anastasius, Detail of Lowest Register (Delbrueck 1929: no. 19, pl., detail).

Another intriguing work of Late Roman to Early Byzantine date that broadens the theme of public entertainment at the circus is an ivory diptych of the Consul Anastasius (Delbrueck 1929: 120-121 no. 19 pl.; Markovits 2003: 337-338 pl. 40; this object is currently located in the Bibliotheca Capitolare in Verona), dated to the year 517 AD (Figs. 20-21). The enthroned, elaborately draped consul in the upper part of the panel dominates the image, facing forward and holding a *mappa* and a scepter in a formal manner. Below him in smaller scale are tethered horses of the two main factions, and in the lowest register appears a scene of music-making with four boys, presumably choristers, seen on the left. The choral master, wearing a *dalmatica*, stands in their midst, and a *syrix* player is seen behind on the left. On the register's right side appears a pipe organ played by a figure in a long tunic, who is assisted by a youth pumping the organ bellows. The largest figure in the entire scene is a juggler, viewed in profile and throwing balls in the air in a dance-like movement. The two groups of figures, left and right, may represent separate activities to entertain the public, while also honoring the presiding magistrate. This ivory diptych is the latest known artistic example of music and the dance in the setting of the circus.

Some types of musical instruments we have mentioned for the Late Antique period subsequently fell into disuse, whereas others remained popular and reappeared in new settings. The pipe organ, for example, gradually was accepted into the church liturgy to accompany choral music, and by the Carolingian era it was well established in that role. A clear reflection of this change is a miniature image in the Utrecht Psalter (Hinks 1971: 115 pl. X; Van der Horst - Engelbert 1984; Van der Horst et al. 1996: 6 fig. 6, 73 n. 134; Markovits 1993: 260-262 no. 2 pl. 33a), specifically, the illustration for Psalm 150, which speaks of praising the Lord with numerous musical instruments (Fig. 22). Most prominent among them is the pipe organ, shown with two musicians at the keyboard, and other figures working the bellows (Fig. 23). Of lesser importance in the drawing are elongated flutes, portable harps or psalteries, and small *tympana*. The miniature confirms contemporary appreciation of the pipe organ in a Christian context. Some scholars consider the Utrecht Psalter to be a copy of a Late Antique manuscript, thereby confirming that organ playing already was important in Christian worship before Early Medieval times. Further musicological research hopefully will clarify this question. A very useful discussion of the role of music in Late Antique society was made by K. Levy (s.v. Music in the Alphabetical Guide of Bowersock et al. 2000: especially 598-599). Other valuable insights on musical practice in the Christian liturgy are found in a publication by C. H. Cosgrove (Cosgrove 2011: passim).

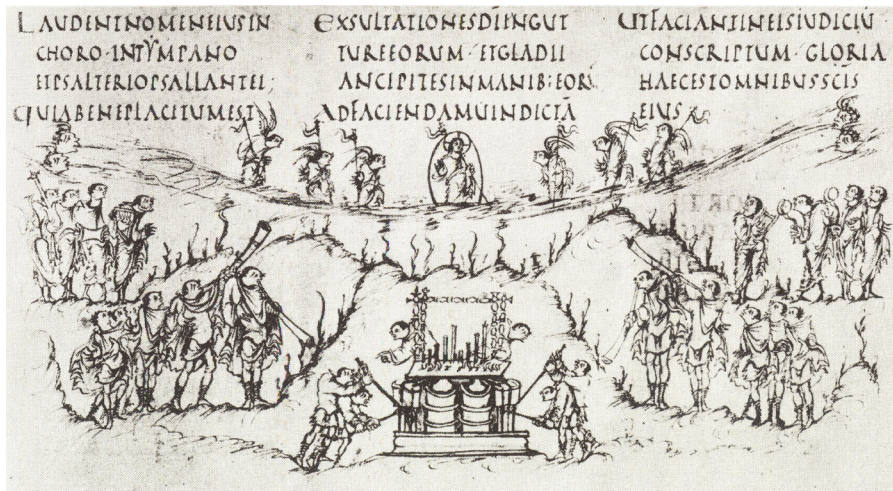


Figure 22
Utrecht Psalter, Illustration for Psalm 150,
Overall View (Hinks 1971: pl. X).

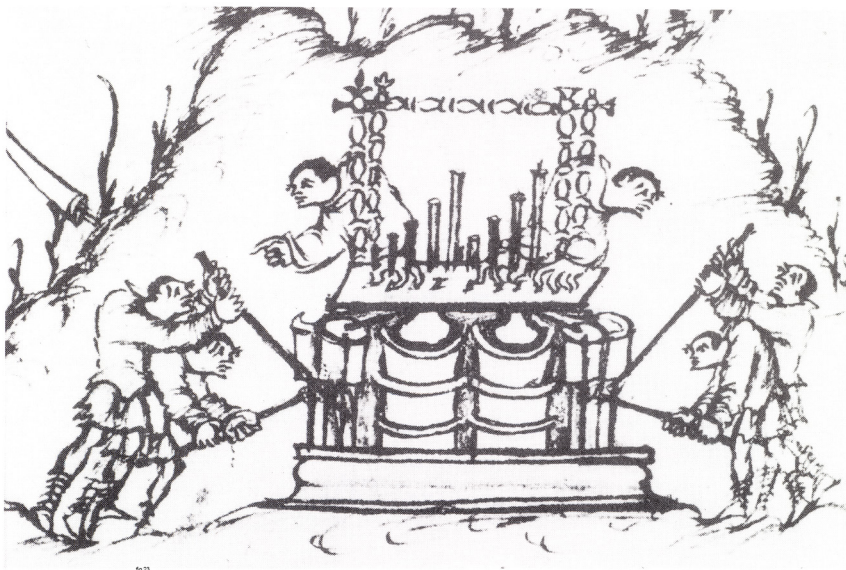


Figure 23
Utrecht Psalter, Illustration for Psalm 150,
Detail of Organ, Musicians, and Assistants
(Markovits 2003: pl. 33a).

In the preceding discussion, I have demonstrated how popular and diverse imagery of music and the dance was in Late Roman art. It reflected the *joie de vivre* and the aesthetic pleasure of antique listeners and spectators, who enjoyed these performing arts, in public and in private settings, and who celebrated them through mythological references or through true-to-life representations. It is a subject I intend to explore more fully in the future.

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