

Of Visible and Invisible— Sometimes Only Imagined—Things

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The almost unlimited intellectual cosmos of Leonardo could not exclude music. Since he lived out most of his life during the second half of the 15th century, it was the music of that period that he was most familiar with—particularly given that in terms of music, nothing of much note occurred at the beginning of the 16th century—the world was yet to see Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, who was not born until a few years after Leonardo’s death, and who is considered one of the most prominent composers of the European Renaissance.

One of the most notable composers active in the 15th century was Guillaume Dufay (1397–1474). It is very likely that Leonardo knew his *Missa L’homme armé* (the armed man). It may be pure coincidence that the notes and intervals written by Leonardo as a musical commentary on his statement that music is “la figurazione delle cose invisibili” (the description of invisible things) on a five-line system bear a close resemblance to the beginning of the song “The Armed Man” on which Dufay’s famous mass is based.

Another prominent composer was Johannes Ockeghem (died 1497), who was also, incidentally—like many other composers of that time —author of a mass based on the song of the “armed man” (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: **Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of a Musician*, (identified by some art historians as Josquin Desprez), ca. 1485, Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. akg-images / De Agostini / A. Dagli Orti**

Leonardo himself composed music, although his musical creations of a popular character bore no comparison to his genial creations in other fields. It seems as if composing is a very demanding mistress who does not tolerate other mistresses. The same is true of other distinguished personalities (admittedly not as distinguished as the incommensurable Leonardo), who also composed, but did not produce anything of substantial note (see Adorno, or Ezra Pound, or Friedrich Nietzsche).

Leonardo was, however, an ingenious inventor of musical instruments. He lived through a time known for the invention and construction of many new musical instruments. Some of the instruments we take for granted as mainstays of music, such as the violin, simply did not exist in his time. It was not until the mid-16th century that Andrea Amati, teacher to Antonio Stradivari, created the first violin in Cremona. A glorious time in which many things were invented, imagined, built and dreamed, on which we still feast today. A Polish musician recreated such an instrument, the “viola organista,” which seeks to combine the possibilities of a keyboard and a string instrument (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: **Sławomir Zubrzycki playing the “viola organista” invented by Leonardo. © Sławomir Zubrzycki / Photo: Klaudyna Schubert**

I could well imagine a concert performed on recreations of instruments invented by Leonardo. Music inspired by the spirit of the Renaissance, anchored in the present, projecting into the future. Because Leonardo is a man of the past, the present, and the future, all at the same time.

With that in mind, I am currently thinking about a composition that aims to be a sonorous encounter between Master Leonardo and Master Josquin Desprez. They will meet on the occasion of this exhibition dedicated to Leonardo, organised by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. What will they say to one another? I wonder Perhaps they won’t talk about music and musical instruments at all, or even about Leonardo’s paintings or his inventions; perhaps they’ll talk about the hope he once expressed in these words: “Fin dalla più tenera età, ho rifiutato di mangiar carne e verrà il giorno in cui uomini come me guarderanno all’uccisione degli animali nello stesso modo in cui oggi si guarda all’uccisione degli uomini” (From an early age, I refused to eat meat, and the day will come when people like me will look at the killing of animals in the same way as the killing of people today). Leonardo, brother, that day will come—but how much longer must we wait for it? How much longer will it be before the “armed man” stops waging war on his own kind and on other animals, indeed on the whole of nature, of which he is a part?!

Recommended Reading And Listening

Desprez, Josquin. ca. 1490. *Missa L'Homme armé super voces musicalis*. <https://youtu.be/BKhSYH27Cr4> ("The Tallis Scholar").

Metzger, Heinz-Klaus, and Rainer Riehn, eds. 1982. *Josquin des Prés*. Musik-Konzepte 26/27. Munich: Edition Text + Kritik.