

Early Double Bass Iconography

Having learnt to play the double bass as a schoolgirl and later becoming a violone player, I have long been interested in the earliest depictions of a large bowed instrument with the player standing upright.

A first glance at the double bass article in the recent edition of *MGG* lists:

1. 'Herod's Banquet', in Innsbruck (painting, **1516**),
2. 'Schembartbuch', in Nuremberg (drawing, **1518**),
3. 'Wedding of Henry II of France', in Florence (tapestry, **1533**).

Furthermore Alfred Planyavsky, the author of the article (1996, col. 582), mentions in a more recent paper in the *Sperger-Forum* the 'perhaps earliest depiction':

4. 'Vienna Court Chapel' (Vienna, Rabbits' House, wall-painting, **1509**), (2010, p. 9).

Puzzled especially by no. 4 of this list, I started to investigate these details myself and came to the following conclusions:

1. Group of four musicians including a double bass. As the Jakob Stainer catalogue points out (cat. no. 5), the extant picture is a copy of 1580, and the original is lost, so we cannot say how faithful the depiction in Innsbruck is. In one of his articles Planyavsky mentions the copy (1998, p. 299, with plate), but Walter Salmen (no. 707, pl. p. 36) sticks to 1516. In both versions of his double bass article Rodney Slatford writes: 'The earliest known illustration of a double bass type of instrument dates from 1516', but in the relevant picture captions he states that it is a later copy (1984, p. 591, pl. 1; 2001, p. 520, pl. 2). NB. his later version reproduces the wrong illustration, viz. no. 2 in this list.
2. Group of five musicians including a double bass. This depiction (before 1570) in fact shows an event that might have happened more than fifty years earlier. In his article about the *Schembartbuch*, Walther Matthey lists other similar drawings with carnival processions of bygone generations (p. 51, pl. 27; see illustration).
3. Group of five musicians including a female player with a double bass viol (she *might* be sitting). A wedding of 1533 is depicted in a tapestry of c.1582-5, so this again depicts an earlier event. Planyavsky (2010, pl. 1) shows a detail.
4. Rabbits' orchestra including *not a double bass, but two cellos*. The Rabbits' House in Vienna was erected at the beginning of the 16th century. The town caught fire in 1525, and the house was redecorated c.1600. This shows a rabbits' orchestra which was depicted in a watercolour of 1749, shortly before the house was demolished. The catalogue *Jagdzeit* (cat. no. 8.1) gives ample information on the Rabbits' House. In one of his earlier articles Planyavsky notes the name of the artist who did the watercolour, but no mention is made of the fact that the house no longer exists (1998, p. 301, with plate).

As we now know therefore, the correct dates for the four pictures are:

1. Copy after an anonymous artist (S. Germany, 1516) by an anonymous artist (Tyrolia, **c.1580**): Herod's banquet (painting), Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, inv. no. 96.
2. (?)Jost Amman (1539-91): The Venus Mountain, '1518' (drawing in the Schembartbuch, **before 1570**). Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Libr. MS 5664, fol. 59 r.
3. Antoine Caron (1520/21-99), Lucas de Heere (1534-84) and Frans Spiering (1551-1630) or Frans Swarts the Elder (recorded 1576-1616): Wedding of Henry II of France and Catherine of Medici, 1533 (tapestry, **c.1582-85**), Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. no. Arazzin. 495.
4. Salomon Kleiner (1700-61): 'Rabbits' House' (watercolour, gouache, **1749**). Vienna, Wien Museum, inv. no. 31.262.

As it stands, this is a very irritating situation. If a happening is depicted at a much later date (and with artistic licence), we have no proof of historical fidelity, and there is a great danger of misinterpreting such documents. Obviously Planyavsky is not aware of this danger and therefore (unwillingly) passes on misleading information.

From our own pictorial archives it would appear that the earliest pictures of large bowed instruments with the player standing upright date from the second half of the sixteenth century. I would be intrigued to know if other FoMRHI readers have other suggestions. May I invite other members' contributions so that we can shed more light into the matter?

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Schembartbuch, "1518" (detail)