

Wojciech Odoj
(University of Wrocław)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8487-3225>

Musical Motifs
in Hans Memling's *Last Judgment*
(The National Museum in Gdańsk, c.1471)

Carol Purtle in memoriam

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Hans Memling's (c.1435–1494) *Last Judgment* is a classic example of the use of the motif from St John's Gospel and the Apocalypse in painting. The impressive triptych, with its 150 figures, is one of the most fascinating paintings of the fifteenth century that contains a richness of symbolic and theological elements. Its stormy and eventful history,¹ the controversy surrounding its attribution,² and the debate over the reason it was commissioned make it a great attraction for scholars and art lovers alike.³ The work also seems to be very interesting for musicologists, as the painting provides much information about instruments as objects with symbolic meaning, their

¹ Detailed history of Memling's painting is on the website of the Muzeum Narodowe in Gdańsk, see <http://www.mng.gda.pl/> and <http://jedenze100.pl/hans-memling-sad-ostateczny/> [accessed: 1.02.2018]. See also a comprehensive monograph on the work *Sąd. „Sąd Ostateczny” Hansa Memlinga* [Judgment. 'The Last Judgment' by Hans Memling], ed. A. Nowakowski, Kraków 2016.

² Initially it was associated with van Eyck. In subsequent centuries attempts were made to attribute it to other Flemish masters. It was in 1843 when Memling's name first became attached to the *Last Judgment*. The attribution was proposed by H.G. Hotho (the editor of Hegel's *Aesthetics*).

³ For a review of opinions on the triptych's commission, see B.G. Lane, 'The Patron and the Pirate: The Mystery of Memling's Gdansk Last Judgment,' *The Art Bulletin*, 73, 4, 1991, pp. 623–640.

function in practical performance, and the way in which they were played. Musical representation in painting, sculpture, and many other branches of the visual arts is of supreme documentary value to musical history. Therefore, it is understandable that the *Last Judgment* by Memling should draw the attention of musicologists.⁴

The triptych took its creator several years to execute. It was commissioned in 1465 by Angelo Tani, the senior representative of the Medici at Bruges, and it was completed in 1471. It is one of the earliest works by Memling (born in Seligenstadt, near Frankfurt am Main, Germany) who became a citizen of Bruges in 1465. It is known that he spent some time in Cologne. Little is known of his training, although it appears that he was strongly influenced by the style of the Flemish master Rogier van der Weyden,⁵ especially in his love for delicate detail and in his fine, precise drawing. Memling's work consists of altarpieces, devotional diptychs and triptychs, and portraits. His style changed little throughout most of his career and is characterized by an overall delicacy and harmony that result from a symmetrically balanced composition. His figures emanate devotion rather than the fervour so typical in the works of his contemporaries.

In his time he was considered to be the most accomplished and excellent of painters throughout the Christian world. Nowadays, the problem of evaluating Memling's art is more complicated. His works are sometimes seen as the summation of the art of his Netherlandish predecessors and as imitations of van der Weyden's works. The truth is that, even if there are some similarities between the paintings of these two artists, Memling's works are always different, and they introduce something new that is revisited in the art of later generations of Netherlandish painters.⁶

⁴ Memling is well-known for his works depicting instruments, see J. Montagu, 'Musical instruments in Hans Memling's paintings,' *Early Music*, 4, 2007, pp. 505–523.

⁵ Undoubtedly, Memling's work has many similarities with van der Weyden's *Last Judgment*. Panofsky states that Memling based his composition on that of his master. See E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Its Character*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press 1953, p. 272; A. Eörsi, 'From the Expulsion to the Enchaining of the Devil. The Iconography of the Last Judgement Altar of Rogier van der Weyden in Beaune,' *Acta Historiae Artium Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 30, 1984, pp. 123–159.

⁶ J. Snyder, *Northern Renaissance: Painting, Sculpture. The Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall 2005, p. 197. On the works and style of van der Weyden, see M.J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Rogier van der Weyden and the Master of Flémalle*, Leyden 1967; D. DeVos, *Rogier van der Weyden. The complete works*, New York 1999; L. Campbell, *Van der Weyden*, London 2004.

The *Last Judgment* by Memling is a large triptych consisting of three panels. It represents the events taking place on the day of Christ's Second Coming. The composition of the work and its symbolic meaning are very clear. On the outside of the panels there is a portrait of the donor, Angelo Tani and his 18-year-old wife kneeling in the company of their patron saints—Mary with the Child and St Michael the Archangel.

The interior central panel of the *Last Judgment* displays Christ seated on a rainbow with a globe beneath his feet. On his right side, there is the Virgin, on his left John the Baptist behind whom the apostles are seated. Above, in the top corners, there are angels from the *Arma Christi*. Directly below Christ is St Michael holding the scales of judgment surrounded by the resurrected. His eyes are lowered in an expression of care and sad benignity. The zones are separated by angels placed in the middle of the rainbow carrying instruments of the Passion. The left panel of the triptych represents the resurrected who are empowered to move towards the paradise of the elegant church. The steps of Heaven are crowded with the saved shaking hands with St Peter. A pope, two cardinals, and a bishop are revealed. In the tympanum, God the Father sits in majesty surrounded by the evangelists. Above, there is a representation of the creation of Eve. On the sinister, right side of the judge, a chaotic crowd of the damned stumbles to Hell.

Angels play trumpets on all three panels.⁷ The trumpet appears in almost all representations of the *Last Judgment*. It represents God's voice and is a symbolic harbinger of resurrection. The sound of the trumpets also symbolizes Christ's next coming. In the New Testament trumpets are often mentioned as the instruments that announce resurrection, which is why the trumpet is found so often in representations

⁷ On the motif of angels playing instruments in painting and other arts, see, for example, R. Hammerstein, *Die Musik der Engel: Untersuchungen zur Musikanschauung des Mittelalters*, Munich 1962; E. Winternitz, 'On Angel Concerts in the 15th Century: A Critical Approach to Realism and Symbolism in Sacred Painting,' *The Musical Quarterly*, 49, 1963, pp. 450–463; I. Godt, 'Ercole's Angel Concert,' *The Journal of Musicology*, 7, 1989, pp. 327–342; B.D. Boehm, 'Choirs of Angels: Painting in Italian Choir Books, 1300–1500,' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 3, 2009, pp. 6–64; O. Huck, 'The Music of the Angels in Fourteenth- and Early Fifteenth-Century Music,' *Musical Disciplina*, 53, 2003–2008, pp. 99–119; A. Rose, 'Angel Musicians in the Medieval Stained Glass of Norfolk Churches,' *Early Music*, 29, 2001, pp. 186–217; G. Kubies, 'Muzykujący Aniolowie na Obrazie Mistrza. Legendy św. Łucji z Galerii Narodowej w Waszyngtonie. Studium Ikonograficzno-Muzykologiczne,' *Muzyka*, 4, 2014, pp. 35–72.

of the *Last Judgment*.⁸ Trumpets appear on the Gdańsk triptych five times. On the central panel the angels, as God's messengers, announce the fates of the dead (Fig. 1). Dressed in long, colourful robes, they direct the trumpets towards different parts of the world waking up those who have not yet risen. On the right panel, above the representation of Hell, there is another angel in a white robe playing the trumpet (Fig. 3). In comparison to the central scene, this representation has a different meaning. Here the emphasis is on the irreversible situation in which the damned are found. The messenger of Heaven is only a passive witness to the whole event. The trumpet sounding over the chasm of Hell stresses the horrifying atmosphere of this place. St Augustine in the exegesis of the Psalms says that the trumpet is a symbol of ruling over sinful senses.⁹ It also symbolizes God's verdict of condemnation. On the left panel, the angel at the top of the gate announces triumph,



Fig. 1. Hans Memling, *Last Judgment*, c. 1471 r., Gdańsk, National Museum

⁸ G. Kubies, 'Tuba Dei. Motyw Anioła-Fanfarzysty w Ołtarzach Sądu Ostatecznego Jheronimusa Boscha i Jego Warsztatu,' *Polski Rocznik Muzykologiczny*, 2015, pp. 35–62.

⁹ Św. Augustyn, 'Objaśnienia Psalmów,' in: *Pisma Starochrześcijańskich Pisarzy*, vol. 42, Warsaw 1986, p. 403.

fame, glory, victory, and the end of the world. It also announces the joyful message and the beginning of *Civitas Dei* (Fig. 2).¹⁰

The left wing of the triptych represents Heaven. On the gallery of the gate there are figures of angels playing instruments.



Fig. 2. Hans Memling, *Last Judgment*, c. 1471, Gdańsk, National Museum (left wing, fragment)

¹⁰ On the trumpet, see K. Polk, 'The Trombone, the Slide Trumpet and the Ensemble Tradition of the Early Renaissance,' *Early Music*, 17, 1989, pp. 389–397; P. Tröster, 'More about Renaissance Slide Trumpets: Fact or Fiction?,' *Early Music*, 2, 2004, pp. 252–268.



Fig. 3. Hans Memling, *Last Judgement*, c. 1471, Gdańsk, National Museum (right wing, fragment)

They greet the saved at the entrance to an architectural curiosity.¹¹ At the top of the gate, on the left side, is an angel in a dark tunic playing the shawm, a double-reeded instrument (Fig. 2). A few early accounts of the sound of the shawm suggest that it was extremely loud and powerful. They are 'good for making a loud noise, such as is needed for village feasts and large gatherings.' In 1636 Mersenne wrote of shawms that 'they make the loudest and the fiercest sound of all the instruments, with the exception of the trumpet'.¹² It is highly likely that the shawm in the Memling's *Last Judgment* stresses the crucial moment of entering into Heaven. Its sound symbolizes the joy of the saved.

Another instrument represented in the *Last Judgment* is the bell. It is an idiophone consisting of a hollow object, usually made of metal but in some cultures made of hard clay or even glass, which, when struck, emits a sound caused by the vibration of most of its mass. In general, the word 'bell' is often loosely applied to any device that produces a metallic sound of gradual decay. The angel, standing next to another one playing the trumpet, holds a hand-bell (Fig. 2). Like the organ, they gave mystical splendour to medieval music, and from the twelfth century, hand-bells were used at the Elevation. Therefore, its sound was associated with God's voice. The instrument itself reflects the trumpets of the Old Law. The bells mean joy, Paradise, a call to prayer, and the obedience of God's commandments. The shape of the bell became associated with the vault of heaven, and that is why it became its symbol. Every time bells are used, they signal something new.

Next to the angel holding a hand-bell there is another one with an instrument (it is hardly visible) called a *lyra tedesca* (also known as the hurdy-gurdy or *organistrum*)¹³ (Fig. 2). During the Middle

¹¹ The expression 'architectural curiosity' in reference to the building represented on the left panel is used by K.B. McFarlane, 'The Authorship of the Danzig Last Judgment,' in: *Hans Memling*, ed. E. Wind Oxford 1971, p. 21. McNamee states that the portal resembles the west portals of many French Gothic cathedrals which were thought of as the entrance into Paradise, and they were often decorated with a sculpture of the Last Judgment. See M.B. McNamee, *Vested Angels. Eucharistic in Early Netherlandish Paintings*, Leuven 1998, p. 194.

¹² *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, eds. S. Sadie, J. Tyrrell, London 2001, s.v. "Shawm" by A.C. Baines, M. Kirnbauer.

¹³ This is the first stringed instrument to which the keyboard principle was applied. This is a mechanically bowed chordophone with three basic elements: a set of melody and drone (or bourdon) strings, a resin-coated wooden wheel which when made rotate by a crank acts as a bow, and a keyboard with tangents that bear on the melody string

Ages, this instrument was used as a melodic instrument in dance music, especially during festivities and church holidays; it was found in the 'orchestra' at mystery plays; it was played by pilgrims, and above all by itinerant minstrels, peasants, beggars, and blind musicians. In the fifteenth century it lost its position in regular music, but since paintings depict it in the hands of angels, it cannot have passed entirely into disrepute but was rather considered to be archaic. Mersenne in his *Harmonie universelle* (1636–1637) referred to the ignoble nature of the instrument in the hands of beggars and blind musicians. Paintings by Brueghel and Bosh also reflect the negative symbolic value imputed to the *lyra tedesca* (hurdy-gurdy) by emphasizing a supposed connection between physical and moral blindness. It seems hard to explain the symbolic meaning of the instrument in Memling's painting, but it might symbolize the joy and happiness of the saved.

The fiddle appears in the painting twice. The instrument is used by an angel placed on the main gallery of the gate and by one of the Old Testament figures on its left pillar (Fig. 2). The connection of the bow with strings was regarded as the union of divine and earthy elements. The fiddle was very popular in contemporary Bruges, as it was the most popularly represented instrument besides the lute, harp, or portative.

A portative (or minimized organ) is depicted in the painting twice. It is in an angel's hands and on the knees of the Old Testament figure at the right pillar of the gate. The organ accompanying the chant symbolizes harmony and the equality of all creatures glorifying God in the church. Despite having a wide variety of pipes, it sounds harmonious. This signifies that the organ represents the whole church, while the pipes represent all true believers. Pseudo-Hieronymus sees the organ as a reflection of the Gospel which sounds over the whole earth. In general, it is considered to be the angelic instrument, often

or strings when depressed. The *lyra tedesca* was represented in art before the twelfth century, when it was depicted, among other places, in sculpture over the portico of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The most important role of the *lyra tedesca* was its function in secular music. During the thirteenth century the instrument was completely altered into a much smaller, portable device known as a *symphonia*, played by a single musician. See *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. "Hurdy-gurdy" by F. Baines, E.A. Bowles, R.A. Green. A comprehensive study on the hurdy-gurdy in painting is Kahren Jones Hellerstedt, *Hurdy-Gurdies from Heironymous Bosch to Rembrandt*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh 1981; also C. Page, 'The Medieval organistrum and symphonia: Terminology,' *Galpin Society Journal*, 36, 1983, pp. 71–87.

appearing in representations of angelic orchestras. It was, therefore, placed in the choir of the Last Judgment among the other instruments.

Three angels are on the right balcony crowning the gate. One of them plays the harp. The Old Testament figure also holds this instrument (Fig. 2). Playing the harp expresses joy, gratitude, and adoration. It is a very powerful instrument. When played skilfully, evil spirits flee, rivers stop flowing, and cattle forget to eat.¹⁴ When the prophet Eliseus was told to pass some of God's instructions to the people, he asked for harp music in order to be filled with the gift of prophecy. The harp also symbolizes sadness, longing, and nostalgia. It is a medicine against melancholy. In medieval art triangular harps were recognized as symbols of the Holy Trinity. According to Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus (c.485–c.580), the harp signifies Christ's glorious martyrdom. Paintings with harps and the Crucifixion are sometimes associated with Orpheus. The stretched strings of the harp are linked with psychic strain and suffering. St Augustine compares the Ten Commandments with the ten strings of David's harp. The harp announces peace and the sweetness of future life.¹⁵

The heavenly lutanist is on the balcony between a harpist and the angel playing the fiddle (Fig. 2). In the Middle Ages the lute, like the fiddle, was a personification of Music. It is a symbol of happiness and God's glory.

On the inner arch of the tympanum, among the angels, one angel plays the psaltery, a kind of plucked stringed instrument with a resonator at the top.¹⁶ Like the lute, the psaltery is an instrument of God's glory. Isidore of Seville says that it was invented and named by Tubal. St Nicetius, the bishop of Trevir, mentions that the instrument was used by David to drive out the devils that haunted Saul because the psaltery has the shape of Christ's cross. By playing it, God's spirit defeats the devil. Guido d'Arezzo ascribed healing powers to the psaltery. The angel with the psaltery among other praying figures, stresses

¹⁴ C. Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments*, New York 1940, p. 264.

¹⁵ On the symbolic meaning of the instrument see, M. Morrow, 'The Renaissance Harp: the Instrument and its Music,' *Early Music*, 7, 1979, pp. 499–510; M. van Schaik, *The Harp in the Middle Ages: the Symbolism of a Musical Instrument*, Amsterdam 1992.

¹⁶ J.W. McKinnon, 'Musical Instruments in Medieval Psalm Commentaries and Psalters,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 21, 1968, pp. 3–20.

the activity of praying. In addition, an angel making music adores Christ who is seated among the apocalyptic creatures.¹⁷

There are three singing angels on the left balcony.¹⁸ They bend over the choir book lying on the windowsill (Fig. 2). In his comments about singing the Psalms, St Basil the Great writes: 'A psalm implies serenity of soul; it is the author of peace, which calms bewildering and seething thoughts. For, it softens the wrath of the soul... A psalm is the work of angels, a heavenly institution, the spiritual incense.'¹⁹ Psalms were especially favoured because they were inspired by God and signing them provided both pleasure and help. St Jerome also advocated singing psalms as they affected 'the seat of ethos' and determined a person's moral conscience.²⁰ St Hieronymus commenting on St Peter's letter to Ephesus states that we should sing melodies thanking God more with our hearts than with our voices. This idea is linked to a distinctive Pythagorean statement which says that inaudible singing can get closer to the harmony of cosmos or can even be identified with its impression—'this that investigates the harmony of the world, the order and coherence of the whole creature, raises the holy singing.' Singing and musical harmony are the essential elements of thinking about eternal life. St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, 'recognized and affirmed the usefulness of music in the worship service. Realizing that he was actually moved by the sung words and not by the music itself, St Augustine stated that he approved of the use of signing in the church as a means of strengthening weak minds and developing greater religious devotion.'²¹

In Memling's *Last Judgment*, the angels bending over the open choir-book represent God's messengers and symbolize heavenly music. The singing angels are painted in figure groups of three. Analyzing this representation, one might find a connection to the Holy Trinity.

¹⁷ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. "Psaltery" by J.W. McKinon; S. Marcuse, *A Survey of Musical Instruments*, New York 1975, pp. 209–215.

¹⁸ The representation of the signing angels is so suggestive here that it seems plausible that Memling might have been inspired by the moving and beautiful antiphon sung after the Requiem Mass: '*Deducant te Angeli in Paradisum*' [*May the angels of God conduct you into paradise*]. Singing, welcoming, and playing angels recall other verses from the requiem service: '*May choirs of angels welcome you, and with Lazarus, who was once poor, may you have everlasting rest.*' See M.B. McNamee, *Vested Angels*, p. 194.

¹⁹ See: <https://trinityinyou.com/st-basil-on-psalm-1/> [accessed: 1.02.2018].

²⁰ K.M. Stolba, *The Development of Western Music. A History*, Dubuque 1990, p. 23.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

Three angelic figures can also be a symbol of vocal music, and they also announce the heavenly harmony into which the resurrected enter.

The Old Testament figures mentioned above and painted in the zone of the entrance to Paradise can be identified with the 24 Apocalyptic Elders. In this context they simultaneously represent heaven and praise God. The representation of the Apocalyptic Elders in this specific place stems from a certain convention; they are often presented on the portals of the cathedrals, e.g. in Strassbourg (1230–1235), Santiago de Compostela (1168–1188), and in Moissac (1130).

Memling's triptych has three meanings. First, the painted instruments show philosophical and theological foundations of the epoch. Secondly, it links the figures represented and the dramaturgy with deep spiritual expression; it is the union of theology and mysticism. Thirdly, by presenting these instruments Memling connects their symbolism with their musical meaning. A careful analysis of the instruments presented by Memling assists in decoding their symbolic meaning, and it turns out that they all have one common idea—praise for the Creator.