STUDIA PATRISTICA
VOL. IX

Papers presented to the Fourth International Conference on Patristic Studies, held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1963

Part III
Classica, Philosophica et Ethica, Theologica, Augustiniana, Post-Patristica

Edited by
F. L. CROSS

AKADEMIE-VERLAG · BERLIN
1966
The Symbolism of Musical Instruments
in the Psalterium X Chordarum
of Joachim of Fiore and its Patristic Sources

BEATRICE M. HIRSCH-REICH, OXFORD

The abbot Joachim of Fiore, who died in Calabria in 1292, was one of the most original thinkers of the Middle Ages. In his works, typology and symbolism, characteristic of both the patristic and the medieval mind, reached their climax. In his main works, the Concordia Novi ac Veteris Testamenti and the Expositio in Apocalypse, typology predominates, though there is also a great amount of symbolism. In these works he announced the coming of a new age, that of the Holy Spirit, for the 13th century. In the Psalterium X Chordarum, the first book contains chiefly symbolism, symbolism of musical biblical instruments. In his earlier Expositio he uses it for some interpretations of the Apocalypse. In the preface to the Psalterium the Cistercian abbot gives a highly interesting account of his vision of a psaltery figure on Whit Sunday Eve, after having turned from doubts about some Trinitarian doctrine to reciting psalms in honour of the Holy Spirit. In this forma Psallentii he saw a perfect and lucid solution of his difficulties. He places a figure of this ten stringed psaltery before his work, and describes in his writing the shape it had in his time: a (shallow) triangular wooden case with an obtuse top and a circular sound hole in the centre, with ten strings stretched parallel horizontally across, increasing in length down from the top. The figure is very simple with few captions only: the Three Persons by the angles, unus Deus omnipotens, una essentia in the centre. The same figure, but with many more captions occurs also in the Liber Figurarum, a supplement of elaborate illuminations to his main writings. This was lost, but was rediscovered after ca. 750 years in Reggio/Emilia in 1937, a few years later in Oxford. These illuminations are of outstanding quality; MS Corpus Christi College, Oxford, no. 255 A being very near the archetype, dates from the beginning of the 13th century and is superior to the later indirect copy of Reggio. Of the many additions regarding the captions of the Psalterium figure which is one of the most impressive and the most mystical, the nine choirs of angels with Homo on the highest string on the left side, and the Seven Gifts with the three theological virtues above them on the right side, are the most important ones. The first book of the Psalterium X Chordarum with the title: De contemplatione Trinitatis is devoted to the trinitarian exposition of the instrument, but nearly exclusively of its shape; only at the beginning the 10 Commandments are equated with the 10 strings and near the end some symbolism of the 10 strings and their sound is introduced. It has to be stressed that Joachim of Fiore’s trinitarian expositions of the psaltery are quite original.

1 Ib. 1, 1, f. 230 v 2.
2 Il Libro delle Figure dell’abate Gioachino da Fiore, 2nd ed., vol. 2, Turin 1938; ed. L. Tondelli, M. Reeves, B. Hirsch-Reich, Pl. XIII (MS Reggio); A. Crocco, Simbologia Gioschimita e simbologia dantea, Naples 1962 (which apart from some additions is identical with ch. VII of his book quoted above), facing p. 24 (MS Oxford).
3 By Tondelli, Il Libro delle Figure . . ., 2 vols, Turin 1939.
4 It was discovered by Dr. O. Pacht; Prof. Saxl drew attention to it as a Joachim MS in Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 5, 1942, 107–108. Dr. M. Reeves identified it as the Liber Figurarum, and asked the writer to cooperate; cf. her article: The Liber Figurarum of Joachim of Fiore, Medieval and Renaissance Studies II, 1950, 58 ff.
5 Cf. Il Libro delle Figure III, Eng. Introduction by M. Reeves and B. Hirsch-Reich, 18ff., 21, 25.
6 Psalt. 1, 1, f. 230 r.
7 Ib. 1, 4, f. 230 r; 1, 7, f. 242 r 2, v 1; 243 r 1.
8 Cf. on these the writer in Chas. II and V in M. Reeves and B. Hirsch-Reich, Studies in the Figurale of Joachim of Fiore which will be published in the series: Studies of the Warburg Institute, London.
and are partly similar to his own unique trinitarian exegesis of: I am the Alpha and Omega (he substitutes here on purpose for omega the circular omikron, while the alpha approximates to a triangle) which occurs in his Expositio in Apocalypsin (f. 34 ff.). There are no trinitarian expositions of the triangular shape of the psaltery in the Church Fathers, even though the term triangle does not occur; invariably the shape is described as that of the Greek letter delta following Ps.-Jerome’s letter ad Dardanum. In early Christianity the triangle had been a symbol of the H. Trinity. But it was swept from Christian iconography by S. Augustine’s attacks on the Manicheans who used the triangle for trinitarian speculations, in his Contra Faustum (20, 6). It seems that not before Gregory the Great was a symbolic relation established: i.e. that the soul accustomed to spiritual exercises might be called a ten-stringed psaltery being formed by the faith in the H. Trinity and instructed in the Ten Commandments. Joachim, however, sees in this musical instrument the decalogus et totius summa fidei. But, and this is the chief point, Joachim’s symbolism is not exhausted by the Trinitarian aspect. In the first part of the first book of the writing Psalterium X Chordarum, which must have been added later on, he seems most anxious to establish a link with tradition. This introduction has not attracted any attention so far. Its meaning has been obscured by the omission of the opening word: harmonie in the Venetian edition of 1527, which occurs in the manuscripts. Quite in contrast to his lengthy trinitarian expositions Joachim begins the first book of his work with the various kinds of harmony to which the ancient Greeks (the antiqui) devoted themselves “mysticaliter” and with which the moderni occupied themselves occasionally, but in vain. His embittered tone suggests attacks by those contemporaries who may have accused him of ignorance of ancient Greek (and perhaps also patristic) traditions and thus forced him to show that he was familiar with them. Harmony is the very essence of the traditional symbolism of musical instruments, but had no place in Joachim’s trinitarian symbolism which refers to the divine sphere.

Immediately after the reference to the genera harmonie the ten stringed psaltery is praised as the foremost and most famous musical instrument, but the cithara is mentioned as nearly its equal. The cithara which often occurs in the Old Testament together with the psaltery or by itself is not represented as a figure in Joachim’s works, but is described as a stringed instrument

1 Psalt. I, 1, f. 228 v: Harmonie genera plurra esse, et ultima traditio antiquorum qui in eis mystericiter inscribant, sanctissimae superstitiosisque exhibitis modernorum, qui ad hoc inscusum, quis imo impune, ut aliquando occupentur in eis, nullorum experientia facti esse commune. Quam plurra sint et nota pluribus . . . The epitheton superstitiosa was usually reserved by Joachim for the scholastics whom he often attacks, cf. Grundmann, Studien 130 (Conc. I f. 5 r): s. a. Crocco, I. c., 112 f. Joachim may perhaps identify these genera harmonie with the musica mundana (the harmony of the spheres), the musica humana and the musica instrumentalis which were based on neoplatonic conceptions and devised by Boethius, because the technical meanings of harmony of the ancient Greeks of which five only of the musica instrumentalis were adopted in the Middle Ages, e. g. musica, genos, melody, interval, concordantia, would not fit into the symbolism of musical instruments. Cf. on harmony and its various meanings throughout the ages the comprehensive article “Harmonie” by H. Häuschen in Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart V, 1806, 1588–1614, with full bibliographies for each part; e. g. part III, cols. 1594–1601, and part VIII on the technical meanings of harmony in Greek Antiquity and the Middle Ages, cols. 1609–1614; also the technical meanings of the musica humana, i. e. between body and soul, and its Platonico sources in part IV, cols. 1599 to 1600; s. a. the article of R. Wagner on Boethius, ib. II, 1952, 244.

2 Psalt. I, 1, f. 228 v 1: directly after referring to the harmonie genera (nota pluribus) nullum tamem sortitum est solemnem nomen eque ut psalterium decachordum, quia audium quasdamque sunt alia, ut preponant en aut equare in acramentum. Est enim ipsa tamen quot vocatur psalterium epiurum et problem specialia aut omnia in super omnis musica instrumenta. Quod cum totum est arte mystica . . . nihil potest in eo esse, quod non assent spiritualis mysterium; s. a. f. 230 r 1.

3 Ib. cui tamen suppur est cithara in divina mysteria, then quoting Ps. 150, 3; s. a. Psalt. I, 1, f. 230 r 1, quia et ipsa in divina pagina saeculi celebris ed.

4 E. g. I Par. 15, 8; 15, 16; 25, 1; Psalms: 32, 2; 80, 3; 91, 4; 143, 9; 150, 3.
with a pear shaped body and three “general” strings.

Joachim refers to both instruments, though this would not seem necessary for his trinitarian symbolism, and equally, when quoting Ps. 150, 3, he points to the ten strings of the psaltery which designate the Ten Commandments, when expounding Apoc. 15, 2 in his Expositio in Apocalypsim (cf. 183 r 2), as we shall see later. But the confrontation of these two famous biblical musical instruments the symbolism of which forms the greater part of all the symbolism of musical instruments in the Church Fathers, particularly in the Commentaries to the Psalms, is one of its characteristic features. Usually the stress is on the superiority of the psaltery which had the sound box placed above the ten strings, radiating from the top, while the cithara had it below.

This statement was invariably repeated by most authors and even in the Middle Ages when the arrangement of the strings of the psaltery had changed. Joachim discontinues that comparison, for he knew the structure of these instruments in his time. But in the Psalterium he preserves the traditional superiority of the psaltery over the cithara, though to a less marked degree. (In his Expositio in Apocalypsim (f. 57 v) he calls the psaltery of ten strings an organum spiritus sancti.)

When interpreting the elect with citharas in Apoc. 14, 2 and 15, 2 in the Expositio in Apocalypsim he develops the symbolism of the cithara very fully. In the exposition of the first verses he lays the stress on the three strings designating faith, hope and charity. But these three virtues cannot be attained except in the “new Man” (Exp. f. 171 v 2). The latter symbolism is further developed in the exposition of Apoc. 15, 2: regarding the victors over the beast and his image ... who had the citharae Dei. There the Calabrian mystic advances the idea that the true monk possesses nothing except his cithara, i.e. the “new man” created.

1 Expositio in Apocalypsim, fol. 172 r; to Apoc. 15, 2, fol. 183 r 2; Qui ergo vere monachus est, nihil reputat esse eum nisi citharam, nisi novum hominem qui secundum Deum creatus est aut operatione spiritus sancti, in quibus res non tres chordae generalis ... fides, spe, caritas. Non enim potest illud cor absolvete laudare Deum, quod verum imaginibus et mundi sollicitudine occupatus ... unde victores illorum trium (i.e. beate etc.) habere Dei citharas describuntur, quia quae mundi cupiditatis vacua sua corda custodiant, digni sunt, qui celo adimplantur numeribus; et later an ... amorem Dei quem accipit per effusionem et infusionem spiritus sancti ...

2 Psalt. I, 11 f. 230 r 1. Nec tamen in descendo psalterio ... verum etiam et in cithara psallendum est ... et in sacris voluminibus non minus psalterio inveniatur. Quam multum dictat inter variaeque, ignorare non possimus, et illorum alia mysteria vigilantier penitus. Citharae novam hominem qui secundum Deum creatum (Eph. 4, 24), simul cum suo corpore, quod est ecclesia, manifeste designat; cuibus summa mysteria in tribus superextraneis chordis et concentatis consistit.

3 On homo novus or spiritualis cf. Concordia II 1, 5 v 2; imitari novum et celestem hominem qui secundum Deum creatus est, et reformari ad imaginem eius; cf. H. Grandmann, Studien über Joachim von Floris, 112.
of the *cithara*, the latter is associated with the renunciation of all possessions according to Christ’s challenge (Matth. 19, 21 and 6, 20, 21). The concavity is to symbolize voluntary poverty, an idea which is also advanced in the passage of the *Expositio in Apocalypsin* (fol. 172 r) quoted above. It is not of patristic, but of mediaeval origin; but in this way Joachim harks back to his conception of the elect who are keeping voluntary poverty. Both symbolical expositions, the one touching the divine sphere, the other the exalted human one, appear side by side. But variations of this kind, as played on the same theme, are one of Joachim’s characteristics which often make it difficult to establish his views precisely.

As we shall see later, all those mystical conceptions which in the *Expositio in Apocolypse* are associated with the *cithara*, are transferred to the strings of the elaborate *Psalterium* figure of the *Liber Figurarum*, meaning Man transformed and attuned to God. This conception, though with some difference, is foremost in the Church Fathers; it is the conception of Man becoming or being a musical instrument.

The Jews had used musical instruments in their cult until the destruction of the Temple. Most of the early Fathers, however, were strongly opposed to their liturgical use because of their place in secular, festival music. They were therefore forced to resort to symbolical, apologetical expositions and aspired to present man’s body and soul as living psaltaries (and citharas). For working it out they drew from poetico—musical, philosophical conceptions of the Greeks. S. Clement of Alexandria was one of the first to compare man with a musical instrument, his soul and his body. Eusébius in his commentaries to the psalms stresses the point: We sing God’s praise with living psaltary. S. Athanasius in his *Epiitola ad Marcellinum* sees man who is in control of his body and soul become like a psaltery; and similarly S. Basil in his Homilies on the Psalms. Some of these comparisons are reminiscent of Pythagorean ideas when transferred to the microcosmic harmonies of the human soul and body and to the Platonic conception in Phaidon (85 E) that a (human) body resembles a lyre by which the harmony of the soul finds its expression. This symbolism passed from the Orient to the West together with some expositions of the *cithara*.

It may be noted here that it is still contested, whether or not Joachim of Fiore knew some of the Greek Fathers. There were Baslian monasteries in the neighbourhood of Cosenza and other places where he stayed in Calabria and which he visited in Sicily.

The foremost of the Latin Fathers to use elements of this symbolism and to add some new ones was S. Augustine. In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* he repeats his symbolical expositions with some variations, wherever the psaltery and the *cithara* occur. Invariably the 10 strings are associated with the ten Commandments. S. Basilio and S. Isidoro of Seville he

---

1 PG 27, 39 ff.; his words: ... *ipse homo quasi psalterium effectus et spiritus omnino intentus omnia membris motibusque suis obedient inservitutie Dei voluutati ... further membra corporis, *indar chordarum rite composita esse*; cf. et nulli spiritus hanc omnium monere et utere (during reciting psalms suggest not only control of the body, but perhaps its participation in the performance; Eusebius I. c. even identifies the *cithara* with the whole body by the movement and action of which the soul sings a ... hymn to God, while the 10-stringed psaltery is the veneration of the H. Ghost.

2 PG 209 ff., 327 ff.


4 Cf. Gérol, 125 ff.


6 Cf. H. Grundmann, in Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters, 16, 1890, 184; see also E. Buonaiuti, G. da Fiory, Rume 1931, 60 ff.

7 E. g. *Enarratio in Psalm. 32, PL 38, 290, n. 5; 291 n. 6.

8 Ib. 281, also 275; to Ps. 91, 4, 1174.

9 Homilia in Psalm. 32, PG 29, 327:

10 Orig. III 22, n. 7.

---

1 PG 27, 39 ff.; his words: ... *ipse homo quasi psalterium effectus et spiritus omnino intentus omnia membris motibusque suis obedient inservitutie Dei voluutati ... further membra corporis, *indar chordarum rite composita esse*; cf. et nulli spiritus hanc omnium monere et utere (during reciting psalms suggest not only control of the body, but perhaps its participation in the performance; Eusebius I. c. even identifies the *cithara* with the whole body by the movement and action of which the soul sings a ... hymn to God, while the 10-stringed psaltery is the veneration of the H. Ghost.

2 PG 209 ff., 327 ff.


4 Cf. Gérol, 125 ff.


6 Cf. H. Grundmann, in Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters, 16, 1890, 184; see also E. Buonaiuti, G. da Fiory, Rume 1931, 60 ff.

7 E. g. *Enarratio in Psalm. 32, PL 38, 290, n. 5; 291 n. 6.

8 Ib. 281, also 275; to Ps. 91, 4, 1174.

9 Homilia in Psalm. 32, PG 29, 327:

10 Orig. III 22, n. 7.
stressed the necessity of keeping the 10 Commandments in which Man possesses the psalteries. He associates the first three strings with the first three Commandments dealing with God, with the love of God; the seven other strings with the seven other Commandments dealing with Man, with the love of one's neighbour.

It seems highly probable that Joachim adapted this symbolism, but with a difference. Not the strings, but the whole psalter is to designate the greatest commandment: Dilige Deum, while the cithara is joined to it as meaning the other one: Dilige proximum. He even repeats the same idea, when confronting the two famous biblical instruments in the general trinitarian discourse (fol. 230 r2): there the psalter, as a symbol of the triune God, is associated with the love of God, the cithara which means the "new Man" with the love of one's neighbour. As an original thinker Joachim usually transforms his sources. But the element of love is conspicuous in both S. Augustine's and Joachim's interpretations, and touches the mystical element, if we may call mysticism the art of loving God. In addition there is a deep spiritual relationship between them, as both belong to the few mystics who experience (infused) contemplation (the medieval term for mysticism) in the sphere of transcendental music which is incomparably more beautiful than any earthly music. Only

1 Enarratio in Ps. 32 1. c., 281, n. 6: In deoem precepta legis habes psalterium. Perfecta res est. Habeo ibi delectionem Dei in tribus et delectionem proximi in septem. The three first commandments belong ad amorem Dei, in the other seven is the caritas proximi.

2 Psalt. I, 1, f. 228 v 1: Quare cithara psalterio singitur, nisi quia maximo illi precepto, quod est: Dilige Deum, necessario coniungis oporito albid mandatum, quod est: Dilige proximum.

3 In S. Augustine the love of God was a consuming passion; in Joachim of Fiore it broke through in his visionary experience which he describes in the Preface to the Psalterium X Chordarum (f. 227 f.).

4 S. Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos, to Psalm 52, PL 36, 481: ... audit rationale carmen intrinsecus. Ista enim desuper in silentio sonat quiddam, non auribus sed mentibus, ut quicumque audit illud melos, teodie officiatur ad strepitum corporalem et tota ista vita homina tumulata et quiddam ut impediens auditum superius causam autiniendum sunt nonnulla delectabilia et incomparabilia et ineffabilia. Dom C. Butler, Western Mysticam, London 1927 quotes in extenso as the only example for "the imagery of music to express mystical experience" known to him the Enarratio in Psalm. 41 about the sweetness of an inward spiritual sound (pp. 29-34); see PL 36, 476.

Joachim, Psalterium I, 1, f. 228 vi speaks of the modulatio dispositione of the psalters which ... animos auditorum rapiat ad excessum mentis, but then continues: Sed voci omne melos exterius, cum interna percepitur castitiana,

the soul of the English mystic, Richard Rolle 1, was frequently exalted to this sphere, while others, e.g. S. Francis 2 and Ruisbroek 3, S. John of the Cross Spiritual Canticle, Stanza XIII-XV, had only one or more particular experiences of this kind. Thus the idea of the disciplined soul which has curbed its passions and achieved harmony being attuned to God and transformed by love seems to be the chief characteristic of all these symbolical expositions of musical instruments. Of course there are also others. But Joachim of Fiore has spiritualized them by concentrating on the soul, on the mystical (and divine) aspects only. With some essential variations the Calabrian mystic transfers the conception of Man created secundum Deum (Eph. 4, 24) from the cithara (in his Exposito in Apocalypsiim) to the elaborate Psalterium figure of the Liber Figurarum, though not to the whole instrument, but to the ten strings only. In contrast to his first conception of Man placed on the lowest string in the text of the work 4 he elevates Man in the Liber Figurarum figure (Pl. XIII) to the highest string above the three angelic hierarchies on the left side of the instrument. (By the way this thought is not patristic); I have traced it only in Honorius Augustodunensis 5, the enigmatic reclusus of Regensburg, an encyclopaedic writer and representative of Platonism of the first half of the 12th cent-

cum spiritualis incidit membra. Quem enim potest esse suavissima contemplatione divina?

1 See Incendium amoris I, 15, 16; cf. also The Melos amoris ed. E. J. Arnold, Oxford 1967; p. XXXVIII; "the melos represents the final stage of the soul's elevation".

2 Fioretti; della istituzioni II, conclusion.

3 On Ruisbroek, also S. Francis, Richard Rolle and musical imagery in general see also E. Underhill, Mysticam, London 1930, 77, 336.

4 Psalterium I, 4, f. 236 r.


6 S. Maximus (Confessor) stresses in his Ambigua the deification of Man made possible by the Incarnation. Man becomes equal to the angels, Honorius may well have adopted this conception from John Scotus Erigena who translated that work into Latin and whose De Divisione naturae shows its definite influence. In his Clavis physicam Honorius reproduces parts of John Scotus's De Divinatis. Cf. M.-Tch. d'Alverny Le cosmos symbolique du XIIe siècle in Arch. d'Hist. doctrinale et litt. du Moyen Age 20, 1954, 53, 53. In his Liber XII questionum ch. VI, PL 172, 1182 he states Homo per Christum precordi angelum dignatus.

Meanwhile I have come across the following references: Irenaeus, Adv. haereses, 5, 36, 3, PG 7, 1224; Tertullian, Adv. Marcion II 8: sed image et similitudo
ury). *Homo* corresponds to *caritas*, the greatest of the three theological virtues, on the highest string on the right. Faith, hope and charity are transferred to the upmost strings of the psaltery, having been associated with the strings of the *cithara* (*Expositio* f. 172 r1; 183 r2) and are placed here above the seven Gifts on the right side of the strings! Perhaps these conceptions assigned to the ten strings may not appear symbolic in the strictest sense; but they are closely associated with them by two particular analogous qualities: 1) the number ten, 2) the ascending order. This symbolism in a wider sense is not patristic as a whole, because it is based on ten strings being horizontally stretched across the body of the psaltery, while, as mentioned before, the strings were radiating from the top in patristic times. But patristic sources can be traced for the chief elements of this symbolism, though they are not connected with the psaltery. As to the *homo nous* and also to the Seven Gifts it may well be assumed that the Calabrian mystic adopted from S. Augustine or S. Ambrose important conceptions: 1) the reversal of their order in Isaiah 11, 2 and 3 as beginning with the fear of God and ending with wisdom (s. a. Psalm 110,10); 2) their significance as successive grades of Christian perfection. The addition of the three theological virtues to the Seven Gifts in order to reach the perfect number ten, may well have been influenced by S. Gregory the Great. The order of the three hierarchies of angels follows him, as it occurs also in other medieval authors.

Thus we realize that more traditional ideas are introduced into the ten strings of the psaltery figure of the *Liber Figurarum* in which the divine, the celestial and the exalted (mystical) human spheres are perfectly united.

The very nature of musical instruments inspires a most sublime symbolism. It is perhaps one of the most poetic and harmonic and, at the same time, one of the most mystical; it is conceived in the sphere of music, the most celestial of the arts.

---
