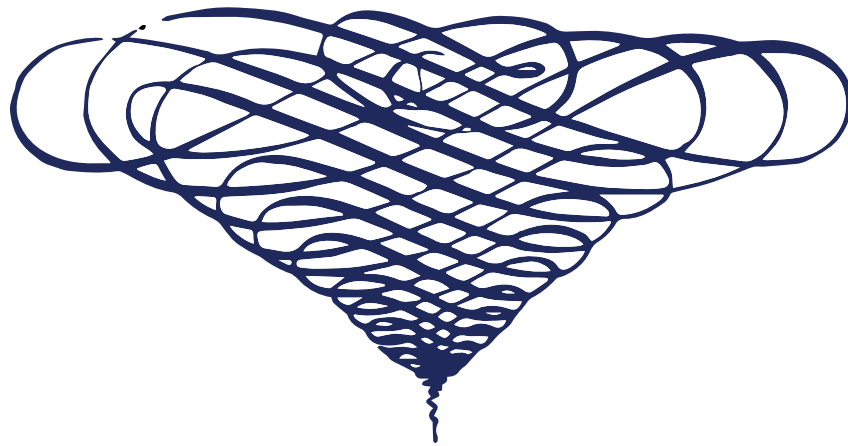


Alexander Mathias Winkler

The Musical Party by Johannes Voorhout  
• • •  
*Buxtehude's Representation and the Other Artists*



*fig. 1*

ABSTRACT

*Writers, philosophers, and artists have throughout the centuries attempted to get to the bottom of art to find its meaning, this painting by Voorhout explores this most intriguing question, through the personality of two of the great musicians of the day. Despite the many incredible works of Buxtehude, in which his personality is shown, we have only one portrait of him.*

THE CHARACTERS

In the year 1674 the Dutch golden age painter Johannes Voorhout painted a picture, depicting 4 musicians and other figures entitled “*The Musical Party*”.

In the foreground a scene with four musicians; a gambist, harpsichordist, singer, and lute player is seen. In the background an outdoor scene with two young people is seen. The first interesting question that arises is, who are these musicians and figures that are seen in the picture? Clearly some are put in symbolically, or for the sake of beauty.

The piece of sheet music on the knee of the singer is a useful clue as to the identity of the two musicians in the foreground of the painting. The sheet music contains a canon of psalm 133, the Latin text here translates to “*Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.*” Below the music it is written:

*“Canon in unison for 8*

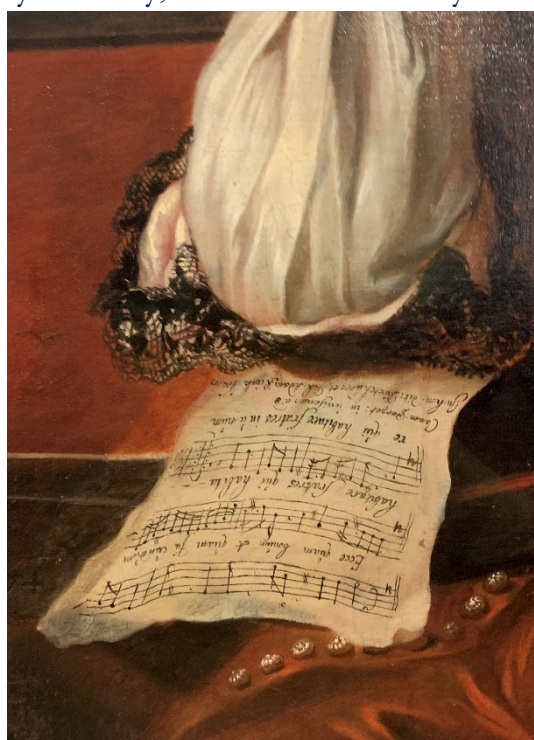
*In honour of Dit. Buxtehude and Job. Adam Reinken”*

The gentleman at the harpsichord has been clearly identified as being Johann Adam Reinken, as one can see that it is the same gentlemen as in this portrait by Gottfried Kneller painted around the same time



fig. 3 & 4

fig. 2



The fact that Reinken is mentioned on the sheet music and is additionally shown in the painting, makes it obvious that the same would be done for Buxtehude. There are no other portraits or paintings of Buxtehude that we know of yet. Nevertheless, there are clues in the painting. We know that Buxtehude is the character portrayed as either the gambist or the singer in this painting. At the time this painting was finished Buxtehude was 37 years old, being born in 1637. This would make it likely that the gambist is Buxtehude, and not the rather younger looking singer. Furthermore, other



evidence for Buxtehude being the gambist is also presented, such as it being he that is strumming two notes a 'D' and a 'B' on the gamba, Buxtehude's initials. It is thought that the singer may be Johann Phillip Förtsch, who became a tenor at the Hamburg opera in 1678, four years after this painting. It is possible that Förtsch was not even present in Hamburg at this time, as before his employment at the Hamburg opera he made visits to France and the Netherlands. Förtsch was however an important figure in the Hamburg opera, in 1680 he became the director. It is though unlikely that it is Förtsch that is depicted as the singer. It was previously held that the singer was Johann Thiele, but in 2008 a portrait of him showed up in the Lübeck city library.

fig. 5



One can see here that this gentleman is not the same as the singer in the painting, which discloses Johann Thiele from being present in the painting. Although there is the possibility that the singer was an important musician of the time, like Buxtehude or Reinken, it seems most likely that the singer along with the other un-named characters merely is a

symbol. As Buxtehude and Reinken are the only mentioned in the "In honour of..." it is unlikely and would be strange if another well known musician was shown in the picture without being named as the others were. Voorhout himself faintly writes his name and the date 1674 on the lower front panel of the harpsichord. It is also possible that the man in the feather hat is a young Johannes Voorhout, as can be seen in a comparison below.



fig. 6 & 7

In the left portrait of Voorhout by Jacobus Houbraken he is 74 years old, being engraved in 1721. Whereas if the gentleman on the right is Voorhout, he would be 27, being born in 1647. Although there is a wide age gap between the two characters, one can clearly see that it is very much the same person. The inclusion of the painter in the painting also fits very well into the paintings theme, the passion of artists, the effect of arts, and the exotic nature of arts. The young African gentleman is also included for this reason, as he is a symbol of the exotic.



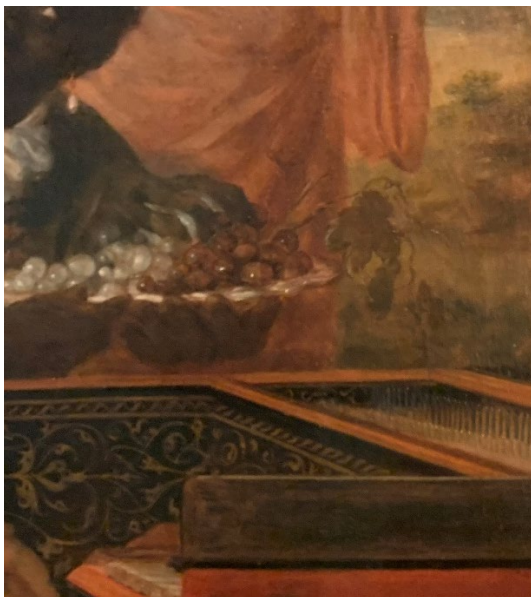
fig. 1

THE NARRATIVE OF THE PAINTING

Upon further analysis of the painting one will notice that there is a foreground where the musicians find themselves in what seems to be an indoor scene. Whilst there in the background is seen an outdoor scene with two youths in a paradise during sundown, possibly in a castle garden, indicated by the vase in the right corner. This is clearly a love scene, with the one holding her hand out to the other, ready to wander down through the gate. What is represented here so ingeniously by Voorhout is the continuity of the artists represented in the foreground and the effect of the arts which are represented in the background. The clear narrative here is that **the arts produce an atmosphere of perfection and love**, as is seen in the background. This painting is because of this narrative a reflective painting, as it is a piece of art that reflects on the creation of art. To add to this it is also possible, although hard to prove fully, that the painting also could be a representation of the five senses; to taste represented in the grapes held on the platter,

musicians, and to see represented in the many beautiful fabrics and the two youths looking at each other. The sense of smell is lacking in a manifest form. Although, one could argue that the sense of smell is represented in the trees and in the nature, depicted in the background. Another interesting feature is the cloth that shows up over by the lute playeress. This same cloth is also seen in one of Voorhout's other paintings entitled "*A lady with a servant washing her feet*". The same cloth is here seen with a lute placed on the top of it.

fig. 8



to feel represented in the outstretched hand of the young lady, to hear represented in the

fig. 9



In "*The Musical Party*", we also see a lot of things that simply defy the laws of physics, many imperfections that one could argue were put in intentionally. Although, one thing stands clear in the use of these imperfections; that they are only used in the foreground where '*the real world*' is represented. For example, one can observe the absence of the harpsichord's legs, the fact that the singer is leaning his elbow up against nothing, other than the vertical panel of the harpsichord, the sheet music too is also



hovering, and the fact that Buxtehude would have to have extremely long legs to hold the gamba in this position, given the fact that we do not see his legs. It is very possible that these imperfections were inserted into the painting, to add one clarification to the narrative. **It may be that the arts bring an atmosphere of beauty, perfection, and love into the world, but this world is imperfect, and the beauty, perfection and love that is in art, is merely a representation of a something that is not of this world.** It is now even clearer that the outdoor scene is a representation of that which is perfect.

#### THE THEMES IN THE PAINTING

It is known with confidence that such an event as the one that is seen in the foreground, a musical party has taken place. We know that Reinken and Buxtehude were good friends and probably enjoyed each other's company, not only as fellow organists but also as leading composers of the time. Reinken is almost surely the commissioner of this work, who is represented front and centre looking at one. One question remains; what happened at these musical parties that we know so surely took place?

One can only guess, but what is known is that these two characters have enjoyed each other's company, and they have in some capacity spent time by exchanging musical ideas. A clue that supports this hypothesis is the fact that Voorhout choses a garden scene, in the back and a chamber music scene in the foreground. Reinken did in fact compose chamber music to a garden theme, his "*Hortus Musicus*" meaning "*Garden Music*" in Latin, published in 1688, fits under this.

Buxtehude too composed an undated sonata for gamba and continuo. These may be works that they were trying out in front of each other, giving each other ideas and healthy critique. Reinken's "*Hortus Musicus*" is practically speaking one of the only works that even is alike Buxtehude's trio sonatas Op. 1 and Op. 2, although they can still not be let categorise together. Buxtehude was truly a composer that did not sound like any of his contemporaries. It would be interesting to know what Reinken, a more average 17<sup>th</sup> century composer, thought of Buxtehude's unique style. It would be likewise interesting, and provide a great historic perspective, to know what Buxtehude and Reinken discussed at these musical parties. It may seem an overstatement to call such a gathering of two musicians a party. However, that was in fact what these events were. They were high moments in European cultural history. This too is represented in this painting, which is typical in its baroque elegance, and in its representation of that which is exulted. We see the passion of the musicians especially in Buxtehude's expression. It is very possible that these ideas are things Voorhout represented in the painting because these were ideas that Buxtehude and Reinken actually held in their art creating. Especially two of the represented ideas in the painting can be associated with the two composers. The main narrative: that the arts exist so as to provide an atmosphere of perfection and love, can easily be observed in the music of Buxtehude. All the way from the "*Membra Jesu Nostris*" BuxWV 75 to the cantatas such as "*Mein Gemüt erfreuet sich*" BuxWV 72, and further through to the chamber music. All this music is music that reserves a special

place for the expression of beauty and perfection first and foremost. A work such as “*Membera Jesu Nostris*” BuxWV 75 is a grand example of an expression of perfect love. The work more specifically handles the theme of Christ’s perfect love. This was a very popular theme at the time, in the orthodox Lutheran circles where Buxtehude found himself in, as the organist at the Skt. Marienkirche in Lübeck.

This picture is unfortunately our only depiction of Buxtehude, however this certainly is a really good single depiction, for it tells us so much about his personality, and puts what we know about his character from his music into perspective. An interesting sociological fact can from the friendship of the two also be made. Reinken was at the time the musician of higher estate, he held a finer post, than the already prestigious post as the organist in the Lübecker Skt. Marienkirche. Reinken had enough resources to commission fine paintings from Dutch golden age painters. Although it is today possible to see clearly, which of them was the superior composer. This illustrates the still important reality in the arts; that talent is more important than personal prestige or the bearing of fine positions.

#### CONCLUSION

This picture although being the only one of Buxtehude gives indispensable information and insight into the musical world of Buxtehude. It is possible through various clues to identify Buxtehude as the gambist and Reinken as the harpsichordist. It also becomes obvious upon further reflection that there are some intrinsic ideas and

associations to the actual works of Buxtehude and Reinken. One thing is depicted rather clearly in the painting; that these were two musical brothers that one could imagine often enjoyed each other’s musical and intellectual company. Clues are given as to what was played at these aforementioned musical parties. The garden scene in the background could be an association with Reinken’s work “*Hortus Musicus*” Latin for “*Garden Music*”. The actuality of Buxtehude playing the gamba may be associated with the fact that he wrote a gamba sonata. We can not know whether these are the exact pieces that Voorhout had in mind while painting this. However, we can with a certain confidence claim that these were pieces that they certainly showed each other, and experimented with in compositional ways in each other’s company, for there is documentation for the numerous trips to Hamburg made by Buxtehude so as to visit his dear friend, Johann Adam Reinken. A very interesting narrative about art is made in the painting, and it is very possible that these were sentiments that these two musical friends shared. This being the main narrative of the painting so clearly made visual by the painter Johannes Voorhout, namely that the arts exist to bring perfection and love into the world. This can be seen in the way that the artist in front supply the art, for the perfection and love seen in the background. Although there are certain physical features of the foreground that bear with them a certain odiousness. It is believed that these perhaps were painted into the painting, so as to contrast the perfect background paradise, with the imperfect world in which artists find themselves.

LIST OF SOURCES:

1. Snyder, Kerla: "*Organist in Lübeck*", pub. University of Rochester
2. Holm, Theodora: "*Johann Philipp Förtsch*", pub. Schleswig-Holstein Biographical Encyclopaedia

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