

INTRODUCTION

Swër die schrift verstên kan eben,
Der vindet künic Davîdes harpfen klanc.¹

‘He who can fully understand the Holy Scriptures,
will find the sound of King David’s harp.’

The above quotation from the didactic poem *Der Renner* by the German author Hugh of Trimberg, which was probably written shortly before 1300,² refers to the subject-matter under investigation in the present study, which can be defined as the question of the interpretation of the medieval harp as a Christian symbol. The biblical figure of King David has a special relevance in relation to the significance of the harp. He is pictured with a harp innumerable times and in many different guises. Contemporary researchers of musical iconography assume that the various modes of appearance of the medieval harp – modes of appearance that strike us, here in the twentieth one century, as stereotype – each had an individual meaning. These deeper meanings must be sought in the concepts represented by the various modes of appearance of the harp.

Although attributing symbolic significance to musical instruments in the Middle Ages was not in itself unusual, it was exceptional to treat a musical instrument then actually extant, as a symbol. In this respect the harp is unique among medieval musical instruments. The origin of the meanings which were attached to musical instruments in the Middle Ages was almost invariably religious with roots in the Bible exegesis of the Greek and Latin Church Fathers from the first centuries of our era.³ Their purpose was to endow the musical instruments mentioned in the Old and New Testaments with a higher significance. The immediate motive for this was the moral opposition of the Church Fathers to the use of musical instruments in daily life and in the worship of gods.

In view of the religious context in which the harp was depicted in the Middle Ages, it is easy to imagine that its significance also was influenced – either directly or indirectly – by the biblical exegesis of the Church Fathers. The opinions of those who have conducted studies into the symbolism of the harp diverge. It is unclear whether the harp in the Holy Scriptures is an interpretation of one particular instrument (for example the *cithara*, *psalterium* or *lyra*), or of a group of instruments (for example, stringed instruments). This gap in our knowledge complicates research on the significance of the harp. It makes it very difficult to draw a boundary-line between the harp as a symbol and as a real instrument in illustra-

tions and written sources from the Middle Ages. Contemporary musical iconographical literature has not identified any basic criteria for such a division. This study aims to make a contribution to enlarging our understanding of the transmission and significance of the symbolism of the harp. I have attempted, as far as is feasible and necessary, to indicate a border-line between the harp as a symbol and as a real instrument.

This study has an interdisciplinary character – it involves theology, music studies and the history of art and literature – and has two major pillars. The first is iconographical research into the themes of the illustrations in which harps figure in medieval art, the second is an examination of the facts as they have been handed down and the significance of the harp in texts surviving from the Middle Ages. Many sorts of texts have been consulted, including the Holy Scriptures, biblical exegesis, glosses, theoretical writings on music and secular literature.

In order to distinguish between the harp as symbol and as a real instrument, it is necessary to study statements from secular poetry and treatises on musical theory. In poetry, especially, representations of the ideal give some indication of reality. For instance, poetic statements tell us how the harp was played and tuned.

By combining the study of texts with that of iconographical themes, we can gain an insight into the symbolic explanation; this dual approach is still lacking in many studies on instruments.

I do not wish to give excessive attention to the concepts of symbol and attribute in this introduction. Nevertheless, a slightly more detailed definition of their meanings would seem appropriate at the beginning of a study in which they occupy such a key position.

The following abstract description can be given of the concept of symbol: a symbol is a concentration of a concept or of a composite of concepts in a single representation.⁴ In contemporary daily life the meaning of symbol is so diluted as to be synonymous with picture. But this is dangerous. We are not concerned with what a symbol is in a modern context but in a medieval one. The symbolism of the harp forms a part of the Christian allegory of instruments. The concealed meanings of the musical instruments reported in the Bible are the core of this allegory.⁵

In the *Studien zur Symbolik der Musikinstrumente im Schrifttum der alten und mittelalterlichen Kirche* by Helmut Giesel, which appeared in 1978, the concepts of allegory and symbolism are extensively discussed in connection with instruments. My descriptions of the concepts symbol and attribute are based on Giesel's study. A symbol is a sign or an object which can be experienced through the senses and which represents something spiritual or abstract. The significance of symbols in medieval instrumental allegory is not clear-cut. Exegetes understood a musical instrument as a sign (*significatio*), a proof of one of the

truths contained in the Holy Scriptures. This means that a sensually observable object (in other words, the form, the components or the sound which an object produces) is used to clarify a supernatural, spiritual idea. This applies particularly to the meaning of the harp in relation to David.

In medieval art the harp is the attribute of David. An attribute is an emblematic token which accompanies a depicted person. The harp ensures that David can be distinguished from others. Although at first glance an attribute does not seem to be a symbol in the real sense, and in fact it is not, the concepts of attribute and symbol are often very close.

I make a contrast between the harp as a symbol and the harp as a real instrument. I am aware that, due to the fact that there are virtually no extant harps dating from medieval times, every statement about the actual characteristics of this instrument is, in fact, hypothetical. Investigations into these characteristics imply an attempt to approximate reality, and sometimes non-medieval material has been used for comparison. However, despite this impediment, it is possible, on the grounds of the insight that has been gained into the symbolism of the harp, to adjust contemporary opinions on such matters as the form and placement of the tuning-pegs on the medieval harp.

An abundance of information on the medieval harp has come down to us via illustrations and writings. However, the amount of this material contrasts with the number of modern publications specifically devoted to this medieval instrument. We may even speak of a discrepancy between the extensive source material and the small number of detailed studies on the subject. This can be partially explained by the inaccessibility of the source material. Studies based on quantitative data, like the present one, are possible only by virtue of large collections of photographs, such as that of the *The Index of Christian Art* of the Faculty of Arts Library of Utrecht University. The iconographical source material used in this study is virtually all drawn from the above-mentioned Index, and would have remained largely out of reach without such an extensive photographic collection.

If we make a chronological inventory of the most important studies in which the symbolic meaning of the harp in the Middle Ages has figured, then Hugo Steger's *David Rex et Propheta* of 1961 should be mentioned first. Steger carried out fundamental research into the iconographical representation of King David in medieval art. His broadly-based study covers a long period and touches many aspects of David. The fourth chapter gives an exposition on musical instruments; the harp of David is also discussed. Taking his own research as a starting point, Steger makes some assertions about the harp as an attribute of David and about the triangular shape of the harp.

The dissertation of Rosalyn Rensch which appeared in 1964 was the first study which took the medieval harp specifically as its subject. Her book, *Sym-*

bolism and form of the harp in western European manuscript illuminations of the ninth to the sixteenth century, may be considered as the first publication completely devoted to the early harp. Using a large number of illustrations, Rensch sketches a picture of the development and transmission of the form of the harp. In doing so she pays much attention to the various hybrid forms of the harp from the ninth and tenth centuries. She makes a number of general statements on the symbolism of the harp.

In his study *König Davids Harfe in der abendländischen Kunst*, published in 1968, Hans Zingel gives a short description of the development, the designation and supposed symbolic interpretations of the harp of David. The book is a more complete version of his article, *Die Harfe als Symbol und allegorisches Attribut* which appeared in 1957.

In her article *Zum Problem der Klassifizierung von Harfendarstellungen in der Buchmalerei des frühen und hohen Mittelalters*, written in 1969, Dagmar Droysen presents her own classification system. The aim of this system is to make it possible to distinguish between the real and symbolic characteristics of harps found in illuminations. Her method makes it possible to formulate certain laws, but it does not explain them.

Frederick Pickering is one of the few authors to attribute an entirely symbolic significance to the harp. In the chapter *Harp and bow*, in *Literature and art in the Middle Ages*, published in 1970, Pickering maintains that the harp is a symbol of the crucifixion. He supports this by reverting selectively to one particular explanation which is given in biblical exegesis.

The study of Tilman Seebass, *Musikdarstellung und Psalterillustration im früheren Mittelalter*, which, like that of Steger, appeared in 1973, is also broadly conceived. Seebass gives details of the symbolic significance of King David from different iconographical angles. A large number of musical instruments are discussed in this way, including the harp.

The excellent dissertation of Genette Foster, *The iconology of musical instruments and musical performance in thirteenth-century French manuscript illuminations*, which dates from 1977, is a major work. She handles the combinations of instruments pictured in French manuscripts fully. The appendix listing descriptions of combinations of instruments which appear in these manuscripts is very useful. Foster ascribes a symbolic meaning to the theme of David tuning the harp.

In his treatise *Harfen Westeuropas im Mittelalter* of 1977, the organologist Leopold Vorreiter adopts the approach of Rosalyn Rensch. He also tries to give a picture of the development of the form of the medieval harp. He links form and symbolic meaning. However, Vorreiter's conclusions show that he is not conversant with recent opinions, such as those of Steger and Seebass, concerning the symbolism of instruments.

The unpublished thesis *Anglo-Saxon Hearpan: Their terminology, technique, tuning and repertory of verse 850-1066* of 1981 by Christopher Page, is entirely devoted to the harp in the Middle Ages. It follows the development of the harp in English-speaking regions before the Norman conquest.

In his article *The Trecento harp* published in 1983, Howard Mayer Brown gives an exposition of the iconographical representation of the harp in fourteenth-century Italy. Brown regards the theme of David with the harp in illuminations as a tradition adopted from France and quite unconnected with the Italian musical tradition.

The book, *Harfenbedeutungen*, by Bernd Kalusche dates from 1986. The subtitle, *Ideale, ästhetische und reale Funktionen eines Musikinstruments in der abendländischen Kunst – Eine Bedeutungsgeschichte*, indicates the wide scope of the study. Proceeding from a number of illustrations and artistic objects, the author treats the harp as a "Bedeutungsträger" in western art. As far as the significance of the harp in the Middle Ages is concerned, Kalusche refers principally to the often out-of-date opinions of Hans Zingel. He rarely quotes from important regenerative publications, such as those of Steger, Seebass and Foster. The main value of Kalusche's book with respect to the symbolism of the medieval harp is his inventory of existing opinions. His study does not make any significant contribution to pioneering research into the meaning of the harp.

Of additional interest is the article *The Image of King David in Prayer in Fifteenth-Century Books of Hours* (1990) by Margareth Boyer Owens. Although the subject is beyond the scope of this book it supplies further information about the continuance of certain illustration themes in medieval Psalm illuminations discussed in Chapter 4 of the present study.

The 'harp bag' can be regarded as the iconographical representation of a real object within a religious symbolic context. Its dual function is discussed at length in my article *The Harp Bag in the Middle Ages*, published in *Aspects of the Historical Harp* in 1994.

It is essential to define the area of investigation in any study into the symbolic aspects of the medieval harp. The first limitation is the boundaries in time. For a number of reasons my research has been chiefly directed to the harp in the period from c. 1000 to c. 1400. The prime one is that, from the eleventh century, there is steadily more evidence of a positive link between the name harp and the object harp. The number of surviving illustrations featuring harps increases notably in this period, to such an extent, in fact, that it is impossible to give a complete survey. Besides, this is not necessary. The conclusions are supported by a maximum number of sources with more or less the same themes. These are indicated in the pictorial material included in the appendices. A second reason for limiting research to this period is that it is possible to draw parallels between iconographical

and written source materials in Latin and in the vernacular. A reliable picture of the significance of the harp can be gained by studying not only the surviving interpretations of the illustrations from the same period, but also the illustrations themselves. The choice of the period 1000 to 1400 does not mean that no useful information on the harp survives from before the year 1000. On the contrary, it has been necessary to turn repeatedly to older, primarily written, sources. The reason is self-evident when we consider that the basis for the medieval interpretation was laid hundreds of years earlier.

A second limitation was the number of aspects of the harp in the Middle Ages which were researched. I have selected five subjects which may at first seem rather unconnected. Virtually nothing was known about some of these subjects until now ("Name and object", "The delta harp", "The harp in the initials of the Psalms"). Others have only been partially investigated and opinions on their significance are divided ("The harp and David", "Ὄνος λύρα: The ass with the harp"). Despite the various chapter headings, the harp in relation to David provides, to a greater or lesser extent, the connecting thread throughout the study. The current state of research into the subjects discussed is dealt with separately in the introduction to each chapter. The chapters end with a "Conclusion" in which the most important conclusions are summarized. An excursion is added after the last chapter in which the *mensura* symbolism in the Psalm illuminations is considered.

The third limitation was geographical in nature, since the source material originated chiefly in France, England, Germany and Italy. The illustration centers in these countries were leaders in the art of illumination.

This book is a revised and updated version of the 1992 edition. It is most encouraging that since the first edition was completed no radical changes in the main text were necessary. Nevertheless, some new finds and approaching in the field of etymology and the symbolism of musical instruments occurred. The essence of it has been added to the notes. After twelve years it also seemed to be necessary to update the bibliography. Accordingly new references have been integrated with the notes. I fondly hope this revised edition may prove a stimulus to further study again.

During the investigation it was continuously necessary to digress beyond the boundaries of music studies in the strict sense, making it possible to approach the problem areas in an interdisciplinary way. The result is a study with a rather unconventional set-up. However, in my opinion, the intertwining of iconographical, music historical, theological and literary aspects results in a better understanding of the symbolism of the harp. Leaving the boundaries of one's own discipline is always a perilous undertaking. There are problems, especially practical ones, for example how to extract the required information from other disciplines, and

dangers, such as misinterpreting the information, or not being able to interpret it at all. Fortunately, I received support in tackling these difficulties from many medievalists within Utrecht University, and elsewhere. I would, therefore, like to conclude this introduction with a word of thanks.

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Martin van Schaik
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