THE GOLDEN HARPSICHORD AND
TODINI’S GALLERIA ARMONICA

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One of the outstanding examples of baroque decorative art in the Museum's collections is a musical instrument, a gilded harpsichord of fantastic form. The wing-shaped body of the instrument is supported by three fishtailed Tritons, gliding on softly swelling waves. Between them rise two sea nymphs, and riding behind is a putto, perched high on a sea shell and driving two dolphins. All these fishy folk move through the water with bold and cheerful gestures. The water itself, silvery green and shimmering, is enclosed by a massive ledge that repeats on a larger scale the outline of the harpsichord proper. And this whole oceanic phantasmagoria rests on lions' feet. The instrument has often been displayed and is at present the pièce de résistance of the exhibition of the Baroque Orchestra, opposite the Auditorium.

The right side of the harpsichord is decorated with an elaborate gilded frieze representing the triumph of Galatea. Sitting in a wheeled shell car drawn by fishtailed horses, Galatea travels over the waves; trumpeting Tritons herald her approach and follow her carriage. Putti, some of them winged, ride sea horses, and everywhere one can see a gay medley of fins, spiraling tails, and agitated horses. Even the clouds in the background participate in the interplay of moving curves. On the extreme left, next to a span of three wildly excited horses yet quite removed from all the watery commotion, sits the only tranquil figure in the frieze, an idyllic youthful musician on a rock. In contrast to the other creatures, who blow on trumpets, he plays a stringed instrument, the noble lute.

The harpsichord in its basin is flanked by two life-sized figures, each sitting on a rock. Both, like the harpsichord, are made of gilded wood. The one on the left represents Polyphemus, the right Galatea. Polyphemus plays a bagpipe. Galatea's instrument is missing, but to judge from the position of her arms and fingers she probably had a lute. Here Polyphemus is not
The harpsichord with its companion figures of Polyphemus and Galatea. At one time the instrument was in the Galleria Armonica, Michele Todini’s music museum in Rome. A detail of the frieze is illustrated below.

The fierce and rock-throwing giant of the Odyssey, who devoured Ulysses’ companions and crushed Galatea’s lover with a stone, but the longing, unhappy shepherd, saddened and dandified by his unrequited love of the nymph, as we find him in Alexandrian poetry and particularly in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, book xiii. “Behold, that savage creature, whom the very woods shudder to look upon, whom no stranger has ever seen save to his own hurt, who despises great Olympus and its gods; he feels the power of love and burns with mighty desire, forgetful of his flocks and of his caves. And now, Polyphemus, you become careful of your appearance, now anxious to please; now with a rake you comb your shaggy locks, and now it is your pleasure to cut your rough beard with a reaping-hook, gazing at your rude features in some clear pool and composing their expression.”

The representations in art of this one-sided love affair would fill a museum. They range from Pompeian wall paintings to the grandiose Caracci frescoes in the Palazzo Farnese in Rome. In the east loggia of the Villa Farnesina Raphael painted his exuberant procession of Galatea. (The frieze of the harpsichord is, as it were, a side view of the procession that Raphael depicted from the front.) Immediately to its left is Sebastiano del Piombo’s Polyphemus, sitting on a rock like our figure but holding a Panpipe, or pastoral syrinx, in his right hand and gazing tenderly out to sea, that is, towards Raphael’s Galatea.

The syrinx, made up of many small reed pipes, was the customary shepherd’s instrument in classical times and was depicted as such in sculpture and painting. The bagpipe, known to antiquity as tibia utricularis, was not a pastoral but a sophisticated instrument. According to Suetonius it was, for example, played by Nero. It appears for the first time in the hands of shepherds in medieval miniatures, although in a more primitive form than that played by our Polyphemus. What we see here is the elaborate sordellina, or musette, of the seventeenth century, equipped with one chanter and two drones. There is no blowpipe like that through which earlier pipers filled the bag with air; instead there are bellows attached by a leather belt to the right wrist. This was a technical improvement not found before the last quarter of the sixteenth century. One of the earliest examples of the improved form, an instrument mentioned as early as 1596 in the inventory of the Kunstkammer of Schloss Ambras in the Tyrol, is today
A small clay model of the harpsichord and its figures, made as a working guide. In the Palazzo Venezia, Rome. The illustration below shows the model when it was half assembled from pictures of the Museum’s harpsichord.

in the Vienna collection of old instruments.

Such an impressive piece as our harpsichord, evidently designed by a first-rate artist, provokes curiosity. What was its origin and what is its history? The instrument entered the Museum in 1889 as part of the monumental Crosby Brown collection. It was known to have once been in the possession of Viscount Sartiges, who was the French ambassador to the Holy See in the 1860’s, but here our information ended. However, two lucky discoveries have since provided answers to our questions.

In 1949 I heard various rumors about a very large private collection of musical instruments in Italy, brought together by Evan Gorga, the Rumanian tenor who performed the title role in the first performance of Mascagni’s *Amico Fritz* in 1891. I visited Mr. Gorga in Rome, and he told me enthusiastically about his collections of various objects. Before the Fascist period he had collected several thousand musical instruments and had later sold them to the Italian government. Much to his regret, they had never been exhibited, and he had only vague information about the places, mostly basements, where they were stored. He could, however, show me a mountain of photographs, all signed by Ottorino Respighi, who had taken part in the sale to the government, and also a small booklet that he had printed many years previously as a condensed description of the collection. Among its few illustrations there was one that, blurred and yellowed as it was, could be recognized at first glimpse as a model for our harpsichord. Mr. Gorga remembered that he had once owned such a model, made of clay, but had no idea what had become of it.

A little later, deeply saddened by the war damage in Subiaco and other old familiar hill towns, I revisited the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, whose director, Antonino Santangelo, kindly showed me storerooms where heaps of fragments salvaged from Genzano, Albano, and other bombed sites were temporarily stored. In one of these rooms was a wooden box filled with small reddish clay fragments. Among them I recognized a tiny bagpipe, about the length of a finger joint, closely resembling the sordellina of our Polyphemus. When the head of Polyphemus also emerged I was able to convince my slightly dubious host that this was a terracotta model closely related to our harpsichord. We quickly fitted the pieces together, and there was no doubt. A photograph taken at that time shows the half-assembled model. Soon afterwards, I
sent photographs of our instrument to the Palazzo Venezia as a guide for the final reassembling of the fragments and received in turn pictures of the assembled model. Only minor details like fingers were missing, and still are today.

At first glimpse the little sculpture looks like a bozzetto, or model, made for the person who commissioned the instrument or as a guide for the woodcarvers who were to execute the real instrument. It is of the finest workmanship, elegant in its proportions and finished to the smallest detail. Yet, although it agrees with the instrument in the shapes of the figures and the relief, there are some puzzling divergencies. In the model the putto almost touches the end of the harpsichord, joining with the central mass of the body and its carriers, while the flanking figures sit so far away that the spaces between make symmetrical shapes. In the large sculpture these proportions are lost.

There are even more subtle stylistic differences: the figures of the model have a soft roundness and a classical restraint lacking in the large sculpture, which shows more animation and “baroque” exuberance. However, the problem of the relationship must be left open for the moment. One thing seems fairly certain: the large sculpture suggests the circle of Algardi, possibly his pupil Domenico Guidi, or perhaps Ercole Ferrata. Similar monumental wooden sculptures, designed as carriers, were not infrequent in Rome at the time. A pair of table supports in the form of winged Tritons in the Palazzo dei Conservatori may be the work of the sculptor of our figures, or another of the same circle.

While the discovery of the model was a welcome surprise, it still left in darkness the history of the harpsichord. By good luck this has been clarified. In the library of the Palazzo Corsini I found one of the rare copies of the Galleria Armonica by Michele Todini, published in Rome in 1676. The full title is Dichiaratione della Galleria Armonica eretta in Roma de M. Todini Piemontese di Saluzzo, nella sua habitazione, posta all’Arco della Ciambella Roma 1676. This amusing little book is the description of a museum of musical instruments by its enthusiastic founder and owner. The house that harbored this museum, in the
One of the Tritons at the front of the harpsichord, beneath the left end of the keyboard
Schematic view of an exhibition room in Todini's music museum in Rome, with a musician, perhaps Todini himself, playing one instrument and, magically, three others at a distance. From Kircher's “Phonurgia nova,” 1673

Arco della Ciambella, a small street near the present Largo Argentina, does not exist anymore. But from the text of Todini’s treatise we learn that it contained all sorts of music machines, which were extremely popular in the baroque period, not only in Italy but also in southern Germany and Austria. With understandable pride, Todini describes his treasures and his efforts to assemble them.

Todini, a Piedmontese, lived in Rome and made his living by playing the violone, the large bass fiddle of the time, in concerts and the trumpet in the wind band at the Castel Sant’Angelo. His real interest, however, was the construction of music machines. Some amusing details of his life are to be found in J. G. Walther's Musicalisches Lexikon (1732), Filippo Buonnani's Gabinetto armonico pieno d'istromenti indicati, Rome (1722), and the first book of the Phonurgia nova (1673), by the versatile, learned Jesuit father Athanasius Kircher, who knew Todini.

For many years Todini designed and built musical clockworks, mechanical fiddles, novel types of organs, and harpsichords. He exhibited them in three large rooms of the Palazzo Verospi, probably to secure an income during his later life by charging admission. It was, as far as I can see, the first museum exclusively devoted to musical instruments. As he says in the preface of his book, he was urged by connoisseurs to publish a description of the objects in his collection and the difficulties he had to overcome in building his machines. Chapter 3 is called Descrittione della machina di Polifemo e Galatea and is concerned with the second room of his museum, where the story of Galatea and Polyphemus was represented by a gilded harpsichord rich in carving and carried by life-sized Tritons, by large figures of Galatea and of Polyphemus “in the act of playing a sordellina to please Galatea,” and by a putto driving two dolphins. He even mentions that the marine monsters in Galatea’s procession carry frutta di mare, evidently referring to the fish, turtle, and large crab in the
Another view of the room shown opposite, evidently drawn on the spot. Four keyboard instruments are attached to a structure hiding their mechanical connection. From Buonanni’s “Gabinetto armonico,” 1722.

frieze of our instrument. He also states that Polyphemus was “sitting on the slope of the mountain where he had his home.” Our figure has a flat back, which must have fitted against the background of the exhibition gallery. Thus it seems that our harpsichord was the central feature of a musical machine that, like each of the others, filled an entire room and that the whole decorative scheme was continued to the ceiling by means of stucco mountains and a painted landscape.

With these facts in mind we can now return to the clay model, in which the flanking figures are united to the instrument by the common base and by the harmonious design of the whole group. Why and when were the two figures separated from the central piece? If the little sculpture was a presentation or working model preceding the execution of the large group, we may assume that when the finished group came into Todini’s possession he had it broken up to fit his scenic arrangement. Another possibility should perhaps also be considered: the model may have been commissioned by a visitor to the gallery who wanted a replica of the harpsichord and its figures for the music room of his palazzo or villa. Here we must leave the problem, trusting that future research may furnish more facts for its complete solution.

Todini’s harpsichord group, like most of his machines, had a hidden mechanism that provided a surprise effect. Polyphemus’s bagpipe played real music, sounding together with the harpsichord and thus achieving a combination of winds and strings. The one-man orchestra was an old dream of musicians that was realized over and over again in renaissance and baroque instruments, one example being the claviorganum. The sound of Polyphemus’s bagpipe was actually produced by a set of pipes hidden in the mountain behind the figure and connected with a special keyboard concealed beneath that of the harpsichord. In chapter 20 Todini tells in amusing detail his troubles in building this...
mechanism and how difficult it was to get bagpipe experts to make metal pipes without cheating on the metal. Unfortunately, no illustration of the complete arrangement in the exhibition room has come to us.

However, another of Todini’s tricky machines, described by him in chapter 4, is also found in the *Appendix de mirifica phonurgia* to Kircher’s book and is illustrated there as well as in Buonnani’s *Gabinetto armonico*, plate xxxiii. This was a group of no less than seven instruments, four with quills, two bowed, and one organ. The player of one of these instruments, the *archiclavicymbalum*, could make the other six sound from afar, or so it seemed to the listener. The engraving in Kircher’s book shows Todini playing the *archiclavicymbalum* at the left and three indefinite stringed instruments without keyboards standing freely in the middle before the organ. This schematic illustration was clearly not made on the spot but was done either from memory or hearsay. The engraving in Buonnani’s book, however, seems to be a faithful portrait of the same machine, showing the three clavicymbals attached to the large organ case in the back. Still, Kircher complains in his awkward, seventeenth-century Latin that Todini did not give his secret away, although we can say in retrospect that any one familiar with late baroque organs and their several compartments and complex tracker machinery would not have been puzzled. The baroque décor of the whole enormous structure reached to the ceiling, like the machine of Galatea and Polyphemus. On the organ case is the suggestion of a landscape, which according to Todini was painted by “Gasparo Poussin,” evidently meaning Poussin’s brother-in-law Gaspar Dughet, who was working in Rome at the time and who, by the way, also decorated a beautiful harpsichord in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection.

Neither the artistic nor the musical aspect of Todini’s machines exhausts our interest in them. For the historian of art they reflect a world passionately devoted to the theatrical effects inherited from the late Renaissance but vastly expanded through the new progress in the mathematical sciences. These are, however, only the artistic trappings, overlaying a deeper stratum of the mind. In a more profound sense, these musical machines were part and product of a world where—in theology and philosophy—the image of the automaton with its secret, hidden operator was often taken as the symbol of the Creator, mysteriously and incessantly imparting motion to the universe.