

The angel musicians of Giacomo Jaquerio from the Maccabees Chapel in Geneva



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Giacomo Jaquerio and the Maccabees chapel	1
2. The individual frescoes	1
2.1 Bombard or tenor shawm	1
2.2 Double flute, Jaquerio frescoes	2
2.3 Shawm	3
2.4 Lute	4
2.5 Psaltery	5
2.6 Viol	6
2.7 Cymbals	8
3. Conclusions	8
References	9

PHOTOS

Photo 1. Ceiling of the Maccabees chapel	1
Photo 2. Bombard or tenor shawm, Jaquerio frescoes	2
Photo 3. Double duct-flute, Jaquerio frescoes.....	3
Photo 4. Double recorder, Martini (1321).....	3
Photo 5. Double recorder, Castile, 15th century	3
Photo 6. Shawm, Jaquerio frescoes.....	4
Photo 7. Lute ca 1450, Louvre	4
Photo 8. Lute, Jaquerio frescoes.....	5
Photo 9. Tuning a triangular psaltery, Cantigas XXXX.....	5
Photo 10. Angel tuning a psaltery, Jaquerio frescoes.....	6
Photo 11. Viol played by the Virgin, Milan, 15th century	6
Photo 12. Lira da Braccio, Jaquerio frescoes	7
Photo 13. Long-handled cymbals, Fra Angelico	8
Photo 14. Cymbals, Jaquerio frescoes.....	7

ABSTRACT

The Italian fresco artist, Giacomo Jaquerio, created seven images of angel musicians for the Maccabees chapel adjoining the Cathedral of St. Pierre in Geneva. After the reformation, the chapel was re-used for secular purposes and the frescoes moved (eventually) to the Museum of Art and History in Geneva. They were photographed in November 2105 and the paper presents a study of the instruments represented. Several instruments have unusual features, especially the two string instruments shown being tuned.

KEYWORDS

Giacomo Jaquerio; angel musicians; Maccabees chapel

1. Introduction: Giacomo Jaquerio and the Maccabees chapel

The cathedral of St. Peter in Geneva hides the charms of its medieval iconography behind a neoclassical façade and a nineteenth century makeover in its adjoining Maccabees chapel. The main cathedral was constructed from 1160 onwards and a combination of political stability and lack of polluting industry has conserved its interior stonework and woodcarving to a remarkable extent. The Maccabees chapel was added on to the south side of the cathedral between 1400 and 1405 at the behest of cardinal Jean de Brogny, who intended it as his tomb and for the members of his family. The Piedmontese fresco artist, Giacomo Jaquerio (ca. 1375 to 1453) was commissioned to decorate the chapel. However, with the Reformation, the chapel was taken out of ecclesiastical use and subdivided into several floors. It was subsequently used as storage for salt, and then used for Academy lectures from 1670 onwards. On the whole, it is remarkable that anything survived from the early period. From 1878 onwards it was completely redecorated in flamboyant neo-Gothic style, respecting some of the original arrangement of the frescoes, and restored to ecclesiastical use. Photo 1 shows the ceiling of the Maccabees chapel as it appears today.

Photo 1. Ceiling of the Maccabees chapel



All that remains of the frescoes executed by Giacomo Jaquerio are seven angel musicians, thought to have been painted around 1410. These have been removed to the Museum of Art and History in Geneva (MAH), was born and died in Turin. Generally in good condition, the details of the musical instruments can be clearly seen. Since they contain several features not widely seen elsewhere, more detailed study is warranted. The photographs in this paper were taken in November 2015.

Published studies of the work of Jaquerio include Griseri (1966), Castelnovo (1979) and Canavesio (2000) but these concentrate entirely on his career in Italy and since his other paintings do not include musicians, we are little further forward in interpreting his representations of instruments. Several interpretative issues attach to the frescoes. Did Jaquerio reproduce instruments he saw in Geneva, or did he simply use standard Italian models? How accurate are the images and how far do they correspond to other known fifteenth century representations?

Ironically, the angels on the ceiling of the Neo-Gothic roof of the Maccabees chapel are also playing musical instruments, and some of these are rather imprecise copies of Jaquerio's angels. This can be seen from the highly unusual side view of a psaltery, discussed in §2.5 which is again seen in the Neo-Gothic paintings. However, the nineteenth century angels include other instruments, such as a portative organ, which are not part of Jaquerio's angels and must have been copied from elsewhere.

2. The individual frescoes

2.1 Bombard or tenor shawm

Photo 2 shows a double-reed shawm, usually identified as a bombard. The term bombard appears as early as the fourteenth century (Jean le Fevre mentions *bombardez nouvelles* in 1386 according to Baines et al. 2014:493), but the standard instrument was introduced in the fifteenth century as a tenor shawm. It had a cylindrical cover, the fontanelle, protected a key mechanism enabling the player to reach the seventh hole. The flared bell, characteristic of the shawm, was then below the fontanelle, as in those illustrated in a later period by Praetorius (1619). The particular interest of the instrument in Jaquerio's representation is the

peculiar composite ‘pepper-pot’ bell. Polk (2004: 51) says; ‘In the late fourteenth century some instruments were constructed with a flare which ended three or four inches before the end of the instrument, the final segment (from the end of the flare to the bell) being cylindrical’. He says that this shape fell out of use by 1420, which coincides with the date attached to the frescoes. From this we can conclude this is not a true bombard, but an early form of tenor shawm. This also suggests the origin of the fontanelle was originally the bell, and was repurposed as a key-protector by being moved up the stem of the shawm. A clearly inaccurate aspect of Jaquerio’s fresco is the position of the fingerholes, which are unrealistically close to the mouthpiece. As Praetorius shows, they should be farther down the pipe towards the bell. The instrument also is lacking an obvious pirouette, and it is unclear whether these were in use at the period.

Photo 2. Bombard or tenor shawm, Jaquerio frescoes



2.2 Double duct-flute, Jaquerio frescoes

Photo 3 shows a double recorder. The double recorder is an ancient folk instrument, probably patterned on the double idioglot clarinets still in use around the Mediterranean. No longer played in Europe, it still thrives in India, especially in Rajasthan, where it is known as the *satara*¹. Exactly when it first appeared in European iconography is unclear, but the much-reproduced fresco of Simone Martini (1321) from the ‘Investiture of St Martin’ in Assisi (Photo 4) suggests it was well-established by the early fourteenth century. Martini’s image with the two equal tubes held apart at a wide angle is probably inaccurate, as it would be extremely difficult to play in this position. Other images, where the flutes are held at a much narrower angle, such as the fifteenth century image from Castile (Photo 5) are probably more likely. This also agrees with present-day performers in India, and with modern attempts to reproduce the medieval double recorder². Many double flutes with equal-length pipes seem to have melody holes on both pipes, but the angel in

¹ <http://www.double-flute.com/infos-sur-les-flutes-doubles-du-subcontinent-indien.php#1123>

² <http://www.flute-a-bec.com/flute-doublegb.html>

Jaquerio's image seems to be playing a melody on one pipe and a drone on the other, to judge by the position of the fingers. In India at least, this is usually confined to flutes with unequal-length tubes.

Photo 3. Double duct-flute, Jaquerio frescoes

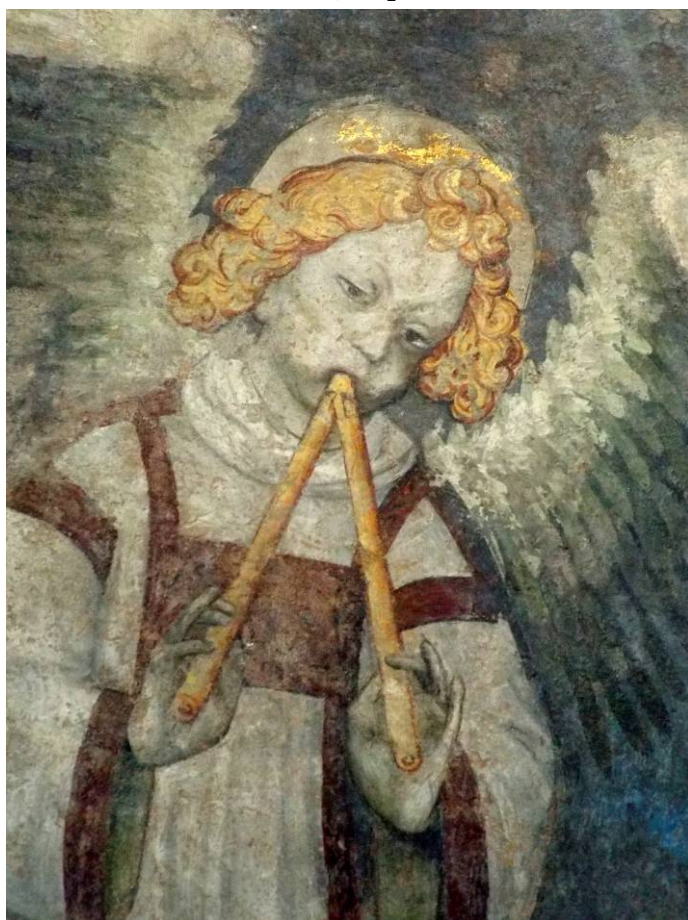


Photo 4. Double recorder, Martini (1321)



Photo 5. Double recorder, Castile, 15th century



2.3 Shawm

Photo 6 shows a shawm, presumably the alto shawm in g'. The representation is very sketchy, since the image shows neither the reed nor any type of staple, it lacks the extra resonance holes in the bell, and again has the fingerholes close to the embouchure rather than the bell. One point of interest is the lack of a sharply flared bell. The pipe swells gradually at the far end, rather like some modern Greek and Turkish *zornas* (Picken 1975).

Photo 6. Shawm, Jaquerio frescoes



2.4 Lute

Photo 8 shows a characteristic medieval lute, with a bent neck, five double and one single course of strings. Jaquerio's image resembles closely other instruments from the same period, such as the painting in the Louvre from around 1450 (Photo 7). No actual medieval lute survives, but a scale drawing by Arnout van Zwolle from around 1450 has been used as a model for modern reconstructions. The most surprising aspect of this image is that the angle appears to be tuning the lute rather than performing. The angle at which the instrument is held and the fingers on the pegs all point to this extremely rare image. Jaquerio must have had some special interest in string instruments, since the psaltery (§2.5 is also being tuned).

Photo 7. Lute ca 1450, Louvre



Photo 8. Lute, Jaquerio frescoes



2.5 Psaltery

The representation of the psaltery shown in Photo 10 is definitely the most unusual of all the images in this set. The angel is shown tuning the instrument with a very large key. The instrument is shown side-on so that the strings are not visible and even the overall shape can only be guessed. However, it is extremely unlikely that the instrument rested on arches as the image appears to show. I suggest that the painter was trying to represent a trapezoidal or 'pig-snout' psaltery and the arches are in fact the inner curves seen in more conventional images.

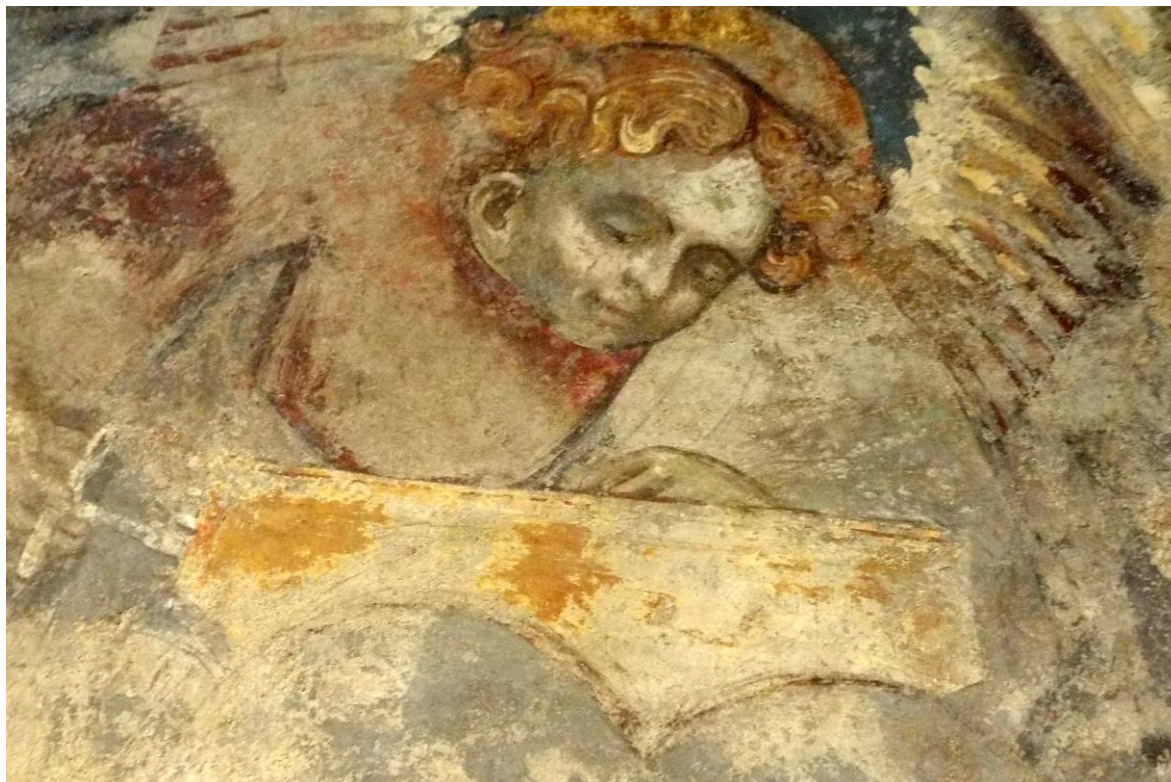
The multiple strings of a psaltery and the poor-quality materials in the medieval period must have necessitated regular tuning of instruments. However, tuning is rarely shown, especially as performance is part of the iconic aspect of angel musicians. However, one other famous image of a psaltery, the triangular instrument in Cantiga XXXX (Photo 9) also shows an instrument

Photo 9. Tuning a triangular psaltery, Cantigas XXXX



being retuned, so Jaquerio's image has precedent. As noted in §2.4, the lute is also shown being tuned.

Photo 10. Angel tuning a psaltery, Jaquerio frescoes



2.6 Viol

Photo 12, showing a *lira da braccio*, is probably the most poorly conserved of the frescoes. It may also be the most careless of representations, since the player appears to be bowing the strings below the bridge. The early history of bowed instruments is covered in Bachmann (1969) and Woodfield (1988) and in papers by Polk (1989) and Rault³ (2002, 2007). By the fourteenth century, this type of bowed instrument held against the upper chest was well-established. Strikingly though most instruments of this type were played vertically, whereas bowed instruments played against the chest often had an ovoid or piriform body, which betrays its origins in the rebec. The slightly waisted profile of the instrument in the fresco resembles that played by the Virgin Mary in a painting in the Pinacoteca de Brera, from the late 15th century⁴ (Photo 11) although the Jaquerio fresco shows a position more perpendicular to the chest. Bachmann (1969: plates 65-76) has an array of similar instruments with round pegboxes and held against the neck or chest, but his system of referring to pictorial sources makes the exact dates unclear. However, the Cantigas ms. shows a very large instrument of this type played vertically across the chest. Woodfield (1988: 48) illustrates a number of other similar instruments from Spain (an angel playing a similar fiddle in an early/mid fifteenth century instrument in a

Photo 11. Viol played by the Virgin, Milan, 15th century



³ <http://www.christianrault.com/fr/publications/how-when-and-where-the-specific-technological-features-of-the-violin-family-appeared>

⁴ I am unable to trace the exact source of this image

painting of the Aragonese school now in the Museum in Zaragoza) and a late fifteenth century Retable of St.

Photo 12. Lira da Braccio, Jaquerio frescoes



Nicholas of the Valencian school (now in a Barcelona private collection) showing a similar instrument, although held directly downwards rather than perpendicular to the body. In the light of this, the instrument depicted by Jaquerio is an early example of its type.

2.7 Cymbals

The cymbals shown in are most unusual for this period, as they have very long integral handles, held to clash them together. The great majority of instruments in illustrations have loop handles made of cord. However, one clear parallel is the angel musician shown in the diptych attributed to Fra Angelico (1395-1455) in . Similar cymbals are still used in ‘outdoor’ ensembles in India today, so it can be assumed this rather unusual style was imported from further east at some period. Blades & Montagu (1976: 16) illustrate a detail from The Assumption of the Virgin by Matteo di Giovanni in the National Gallery, London, which also shows an angel playing long-handled cymbals of this type.

3. Conclusions

The frescoes of angel musicians which formerly adorned the Maccabees chapel in the Cathedral of St. Pierre, Geneva, and were created ca. 1410, are the work of the Piedmontese artist Giacomo Jaquerio. As such they probably represent instruments from the Italian tradition and do not necessarily tell us much about musical instruments in Switzerland at the period. Despite some striking errors in representation, especially in playing technique, they do have some unusual features, the most significant of which is that two of the seven angels are shown tuning their instruments.

Photo 13. Cymbals, Jaquerio frescoes



Photo 14. Long-handled cymbals, Fra Angelico



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