

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Leonardo's Lira

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Orpheus Charming the Animals about 1505. Marcantonio Raimondi (Italian, 1470/82–1527/34). Engraving; 21.4 x 17.3 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1930.579

When drawings curator Heather Lemonedes asked me to look at images and captions for the museum's *Themes and Variations: Musical Drawings and Prints* exhibition, I was excited to do so. As a music historian, my task was to confirm that the musical subjects depicted were accurately described. Dealing with art from earlier historical periods is always a pleasure. Music historians have no physical artifact of our subject—only modern re-creations based on surmises about performance practice—and with visual art, we get to look at actual artistic creations from the same time as the music we study. It's enough to make a musicologist envious! So, I've always reveled in opportunities to work on the connections between art and music, and teaching at Case Western Reserve University

for several decades has given me easy and frequent access to the Cleveland Museum of Art's unparalleled collection. Twenty-five years ago, for example, I published a catalogue of musical subjects in pre-1900 Western art at the museum,¹ so I knew the collection and its musical contents well—or thought I did.

One of the works in the current exhibition is Marcantonio Raimondi's *Orpheus Charming the Animals*, an engraving from around 1505. The draft caption described the instrument being played by Orpheus as a "lyre," and that certainly made sense. There is even a novel by the Canadian author Robertson Davies entitled *The Lyre of Orpheus*, so to our modern sensibilities, the instrument and the name just seem to go together. During the Renaissance, however, the Italian term *lira* referred both to the harp-like instrument of classical antiquity (the lyre) and to a bowed string instrument about the size of the modern viola—the *lira da braccio* ("lira of the arm").² The *lira da braccio* is often shown with a spade-shaped frontal pegdisc, rather than a pegbox with lateral pegs (like the violin or viola da gamba families). It also apparently had drone strings off the "bass" side of the fingerboard (a feature of the very few surviving instruments), though these drone strings are not always visible in works of art. Orfeo's instrument in the Marcantonio print was clearly a *lira da braccio*, so I was happy to make the identification.



Portrait of Leonardo early 1500s. Francesco Melzi (Italian, 1491/93–about 1570). Red chalk on paper; 27.5 x 19 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle

When I wrote to Heather, I also mentioned that one of the most famous players of the lira da braccio in the Renaissance was Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), a detail that made it into her final caption. Interestingly, the last book published by Emanuel Winternitz (1898–1983), longtime curator of musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was *Leonardo da Vinci as a Musician*,³ and there we discover that although Leonardo connected with music in myriad ways, there is no surviving record of any music that he played or composed: nothing beyond the fact that he was a renowned virtuoso on the lira da braccio and loved to accompany himself as he sang improvised poetry. This information comes from Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574). Vasari was a mere seven years old when Leonardo died, and made his still-visible mark on Medici Florence with his painting and architecture, but his book, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (*The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*), is recognized as the very first attempt to document the history of art. In that 1550 book, Vasari tells us that in 1494:

Fu condotto a Milano con gran riputazione Lionardo a'l Duca . . . , il quale molto si dilettaua del suono della lira, perche sonasse: & Lionardo portò quello strumento, ch'egli aueua di sua mano fabricato d'argento gran parte, accioche l'armonia fosse con maggior tuba & piu sonora di voce. Laonde superò tutti i musici, che quiui erano concorsi a sonare. Oltra cio fu il migliore dicitore di rime al' improuiso del tempo suo.

*Leonardo was led in great repute to the Duke of Milan, who took much delight in the sound of the lira, so that he might play it: and Leonardo brought with him that instrument which he had made with his own hands, in great part of silver, in order that the harmony might be of greater volume and more sonorous in tone; with which he surpassed all the musicians who had come together there to play. Besides this, he was the best improviser in verse of his day.*⁴

With this as a background, I went to see the *Themes and Variations* exhibition and, facing the Marcantonio engraving in person for the first time, I had an epiphany. While examining the image earlier, I had been so concerned with properly identifying the instrument played by Orpheus that I failed to look at the player himself. It was Leonardo. It had to be Leonardo.

Interest in the Orpheus legend of classical Greece had intensified in Europe after Poliziano turned the story into a proto-opera in Mantua around 1480, although no music survives from the first production or its planned revival a decade later (for which Leonardo's pupil Atalante Migliorotti was to play the title role).⁵ One other phantom early production may date from 1506–7, at the home of Leonardo's Milanese patron, Charles d'Amboise (French ambassador and governor of Milan),⁶ and it has been suggested that some of the theatrical set drawings in the Codex Arundel relate to that production.⁷ The lack of surviving music for these early versions of *Orfeo* notwithstanding, the image of Orpheus charming the beasts with the beauty of his playing became a popular subject for artists throughout the rest of the Renaissance. Often, Orpheus is shown playing the lira da braccio, or less often a lyre or even a lute, but one thing that is extremely consistent is that Orpheus is shown as a clean-shaven youth—the young husband of the tragic Euridice.



Orpheus Charming the Animals early 16th century. Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano (Italian, about 1460–about 1517). Black chalk. Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence

In the Marcantonio print, however, Orpheus is a man in late middle age, with a beard and centrally parted hair with long curls. Around the time Marcantonio created the image, which dates to about 1505, Leonardo was in his early 50s. Only two contemporary portraits of Leonardo have survived: the famous red chalk self-portrait as an old man (Biblioteca Reale, Turin), and a second drawing by Francesco Melzi (above), who joined the 54-year-old Leonardo's household as an assistant in 1506 and eventually became his principal heir. Melzi's portrait shows a man with a beard and long curls, and the very slight bump in his nose and the ridge above the brow are an excellent match for the long-haired, bearded Orpheus in the Marcantonio engraving.

We do not know for certain whether Marcantonio crossed paths with Leonardo,⁸ but his engraving of *Orpheus Charming the Animals* seems clearly to be an *hommage*, intended to honor the musical skill of Leonardo da Vinci by depicting him with the instrument he was known to play incomparably, and which he shared with the greatest of all musicians.⁹

Notes

1. Ross W. Duffin, *The Cleveland Museum of Art* (Répertoire Internationale d'Iconographie Musicale: Inventory of Musical Iconography, no. 8) (New York: Research Center for Musical Iconography, 1991).
2. For an overview of the instrument, its history and technique, see Sterling Scott Jones, *The Lira da Braccio* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). On the lira da braccio in Renaissance depictions of Orpheus and Apollo, see Lisa Pon, "Further Musings on Raphael's *Parnassus*," in *Imitation, Representation and Printing in the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Roy Eriksen and Magne Malmanger (Pisa: Serra, 2009), 191–207.
3. Emanuel Winternitz, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Musician* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).
4. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (Florence, 1550), part 3, p. 568. The 1568 edition (part 3, p. 5) adds a note about the instrument being in the shape of a horse's skull (*un teschio di cavallo*), but as a later insertion it seems less credible.
5. On the early productions, see Elena Povoledo, "From Poliziano's *Orfeo* to the *Orphei tragoedia*," in *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, ed. Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, trans. Karen Eales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 283–98.
6. See Povoledo, 290.
7. British Library, Codex Arundel 263, fols. 224r and 231v. See Carlo Pedretti, "Dessins d'une scène, exécutés par Léonard de Vinci pour Charles d'Amboise (1506–1507)," in *Le Lieu Théâtral à la Renaissance*, ed. J. Jacquot (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1964), 25–34. Carmen C. Bambach dates the *Orfeo* drawings to August 1507, so that may narrow the date for the production. See "Documented Chronology of Leonardo's Life and Work," in *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, ed. Carmen C. Bambach (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 236.
8. If the two did meet, the Milan *Orfeo* production in 1506–7 seems logical as a *terminus ante quem non*, and this might suggest revising the date of the Marcantonio engraving slightly, and even positing that Leonardo himself portrayed Orpheus at that event, though the depiction may simply be symbolic. It also seems possible that the two met during one of Leonardo's trips to Florence in 1509, though there is no documentary evidence for this. In fact, Marcantonio may have used a contemporary portrait of Leonardo for details of his features.
9. Almost all of Marcantonio's early engravings have connections to the work of other artists, such as Dürer and Raphael, but the composition for *Orpheus Charming the Animals* seems to have been his own design. This may help to explain the original—almost whimsical—depiction of a revered contemporary artist/musician as a figure of legend.

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- 1930.579 Marcantonio Raimondi (Italian, 1470/82-1527/34), [Orpheus Charming the Animals](#) ^[1]

Themes and Variations [2]

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