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The Musicking Angels of the Lower Chapel of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château. Musical Instruments and their Symbolism

The murals of the Collegiate Church of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château (1416/1417) and the Virgin's Chapel of Le Mans Cathedral (1330–1338) feature musicking angels, notably playing the rabab, that reflect Marian devotion and celestial harmony. At Le Mans, the murals are extensive, depicting 47 angels and various instruments, while Saint-Bonnet displays eight musicking angels and emphasises 'low' instruments like the lute, psaltery and portative organ, all with symbolic religious meanings. Commissioned by Anne Dauphine, widow of Louis II of the House of Bourbon, the Saint-Bonnet chapel links Bourbon heraldry and Marian devotion with the motif of "Espérance" (Hope) reflecting Louis II's piety. The choice of instruments at Saint-Bonnet might also symbolise the Gregorian modes, while the murals overall honour Louis II and bring together political and devotional aspirations. Inspired by the murals at Le Mans, the restrained iconography at Saint-Bonnet uses angelic processions and celestial music to transform spatial limitations into an innovative tribute to divine harmony and an aristocratic legacy.

This article explores the vault decorations featuring angel musicians in the Lower Chapel of the Collegiate Church of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château (Loire, 1416/17) and the Virgin's Chapel of Le Mans Cathedral (Sarthe, 1330–1338). Both vaults are adorned with murals depicting various musical instruments included the rabab (Figs. 1 and 2). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Spain, Italy and parts of southern France, many angels were depicted playing this particular instrument.¹

The rababs in the vault murals of Saint-Bonnet and Le Mans have club-shaped bodies with relatively narrow necks that taper to a rearward bent pegbox with lateral pegs. The soundboxes are partly covered with skin (in the lower third) and the bridges are placed near the bottom of the instrument. In Saint-Bonnet, the rabab is equipped with two strings and played vertically, whereas in Le Mans, the rabab has three strings and is played horizontally. Both playing positions can be found for the rabab in many European pictorial sources.

1 See also the two articles by Thilo Hirsch in this volume, on the rabab in Spain (Hirsch 2025a, pp. 125–144) and in Italy (Hirsch 2025b, pp. 187–207).



Fig. 1 *Angel musician with rabab*, 1416/17, tempera and oil, Collegiate Church of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château, vault of Saint Michael's Chapel (Photo: Yuko Katsutani, with kind permission of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château).



Fig. 2 *Angel musician with rabab*, 1370–1378, murals applied directly on stone without a fixed layer of preparation, with wax used for some parts (encaustic painting), Le Mans, Cathedral of Saint-Julien, vault of the Virgin's Chapel (Photo: Yuko Katsutani, with kind permission of Le Mans).

Inspiration from the angel musicians of Saint-Julien Cathedral of Le Mans

The imagery of angel musicians does not have a precise basis in the Bible. Nor do these angels represent any specific parable or dogma, although their music evokes the harmony and perfection of Heaven.² By symbolising the praise of Heaven, this imagery is an auxiliary motif more likely to be associated with other, more important subjects, such as the Virgin Mary or Christ. Angel musicians seem to have become common in religious imagery towards the end of the Middle Ages, in other words from the latter part of the fourteenth century to the mid-sixteenth.³

We can undoubtedly attribute the success of this motif to the influence of new practices of private devotion, based on the idea that union with God is possible through meditation. The iconography of angel musicians is particularly suitable for evoking the celestial world through sounds and melodies. Both the imagery and the sounds evoked could arouse emotion in the observer and thus invite them to meditate in line with the devotional practices of the time. With this 'theatrical' effect, the angel musicians appear not only as a medium for private devotion like books of hours or portable altarpieces, but also on monuments such as the murals of Le Mans Cathedral.

This chapel was built at the beginning of the thirteenth century above the crypt where successive bishops were buried, and is located in the axis of the cathedral (Fig. 3). It is 16.10 m long, 6 m wide and 10 m high. There are three vaults of unequal length and a fourth covering the five-sided apse. Altogether, the chapel's 18 vaults cover nearly 200 square metres.⁴

² Regarding the concept of 'musica universalis' or the 'music of the spheres' in the Middle Ages, see MeyerC 2007.

³ On the iconography of musician angels, see Bulit-Werner 1997; Clouzot 2002; Gillette 2015.

⁴ For the Virgin's Chapel of Le Mans, see Ache 1995; Guilbaut 1995 and 1997; Subes 1998; Buvron et al. 2005; GautierN 2015b; Granger 2015; Katsutani 2022 and 2023, pp. 120–133 (portions of the present paper have been translated from several sections of this work); Féraud/Katsutani 2024.



Fig. 3 *Angel musicians and the coat of arms of Gontier de Baigneux*, murals applied directly on stone without any fixed layer of preparation, using wax for some parts (encaustic painting), 1370–1378, Le Mans, Cathedral of Saint-Julien, The Virgin's Chapel (Photo: Yuko Katsutani, with kind permission of Le Mans).

The angel musicians of the Chapel are accompanied by texts of hymns and musical notation. In addition to the instrumentalists, there are other angels that hold a phylactery and a roll or a book with the incipit of a liturgical text dedicated to the Virgin Mary.⁵ The musical notation appears above the seven text incipits. Finally, the bottom of the mural is decorated with 54 coats of arms of Gontier de Baigneux (died 1385), the bishop who commissioned the paintings for the vault.

The mural of Le Mans is one of the most important decorations that covers the entire vault of a chapel with a painting featuring angel musicians. The upper parts of the building represent the space of Heaven. Both the vault of the choir and also the apse are decorated with this motif (the apse being otherwise normally reserved for more conventional, important subjects). The angels carry rolls and books on which are inscribed songs and texts celebrating the Assumption and Nativity. There are thus several doctrinal meanings present in the paintings. The arrangement of the decor in this chapel suggests that it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. If that was the case, the angels in the vault could be considered to be part of a broader, even more elaborate programme involving the windows of the Cathedral, which would be a major innovation in this context.

The cathedral of Le Mans was an important episcopal site, which is why the celestial concert depicted in it influenced other ecclesiastical sites in the fifteenth century and afterwards. The impact of the Virgin's Chapel has been the subject of several bibliographical studies and much field research, with other vaults entirely decorated with angel musicians after the example of Le Mans, including the Apsidal chapel of Saint Martin's Church in Aalst in Brabant, 1497;⁶ the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Chapel of Saint Peter's and Saint Guido's Collegiate Church in Anderlecht, 1401–1500;⁷ the Church of Notre-Dame in Cossé-en-Champagne in the Pays de la Loire in the fifteenth century;⁸ the Church of Saint-Martin-des Loges in Coudrecieux, Pays de la Loire, 1485–sixteenth century;⁹ the Maccabees Chapel of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Geneva, circa 1414;¹⁰ the Church of Notre-Dame in Kernascléden in Brittany, after 1453;¹¹ the Chap-

5 Buvron et al. 2005, pp. 14, 53–85 and 89–106.

6 Rousseau 1926, pp. 17–28; Robijns 1980, pp. 17–28; Bergmans/Buyle 1994, pp. 78f.; Heck 2003, p. 126.

7 Thomas et al. 1999; Dedobbeleer/Lenglez 2012; Jacobs 2004, p. 21.

8 Davy 2004.

9 Fleury 1902.

10 Naef 1937; Deonna 1951; Troeschler 1966, pp. 270–272; Lapaire 1977; Elsig 2004 and 2006.

11 Bonnefoy 1954, pp. 25 and 166; Deschamps 1957; Günther 1981.

el of the Château de la Clayette in La Clayette in Burgundy, 1380–1420;¹² the Chapel of Saint-Julien in Le Bourg-Dun in Normandy, fifteenth century;¹³ the Chapel of the Château de Montreuil-Bellay in Montreuil-Bellay in the Pays de la Loire, end of the fifteenth century;¹⁴ Saint Michael's Chapel of the Collegiate Church in Saint-Bonnet-le-Château in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, ca 1416/17; and the Church of Saint-Jacques in Tournai in Wallonia, 1405.¹⁵

Because these murals were all painted after the vault of Le Mans, and some of these murals are situated in the region around Le Mans, we may deduce that their murals with the angel musicians may have been directly or indirectly influenced by the vaults of the Virgin's Chapel in that city. The vault plans for Saint-Bonnet, which featured a type of rabab similar to that of Le Mans, were likely inspired by those of Le Mans, as both works contain a similar decorative programme, with a person from the nobility depicted in association with the angel musicians within a distinctly Marian context.

The Lower Chapel of the Collegiate Church of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château

As part of the diocese of Lyon, Saint-Bonnet-le-Château is a small locality in the Forez mountains in the Loire, a French department in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region in the central eastern part of France. The entire collegiate church was built on a promontory in 1400 and incorporated elements from the church that had originally been on the same site. It includes a lower chapel dedicated to Saint Michael, all the saints and the Virgin Mary, with a floor measuring 8.70 m by 6.85 m. The walls and vault are painted with murals in tempera and oil (Fig. 3).¹⁶ The entire cycle consists of 12 scenes, taken mainly from the New Testament or inspired by it: the Four Evangelists, the Annunciation of the Holy Virgin, the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi, the Crucifixion, weeping angels, Pontius Pilate, the Entombment of Christ, the Appearance of the Resurrected Christ to Mary Magdalene, the Assumption, the Coronation of the Virgin, and hell. An original inscription, visible on the nave's north wall, notes the church's construction in 1400, which was thanks to two donors, Guillaume Taillefer and his friend Bonnet Greyset, both citizens of Saint-Bonnet who are also represented themselves in the scene of the *Coronation of the Virgin* on the west wall. Another important donor, though she is neither mentioned in the inscription nor depicted in the *Coronation*, is Anne Dauphine (1358–1417), the Countess of Forez and the wife of the Duke of Bourbon, Louis II (1337–1410). She financed the interior decoration of the chapel after the death of her husband in 1410, specifically for the vault featuring the angel musicians.¹⁷

The chapel vault is covered with a starry blue background on which eight angels play various musical instruments; four are positioned on either side of the barrel vault (Fig. 5). At the top, two groups of singing angels are represented with musical notation. The group of three angels in the east indicates a phylactery inscribed with the *Gloria*, which is sung on the occasion of the solemn feasts of the Virgin. The three angels in the west represent the introit *Gaudeamus omnes in Domino*, intended for the Mass of the Assumption. At the centre of the composition,

12 Thibout 1953; Troescher 1966, pp. 173–175.

13 Vesly 1912.

14 Thibault 1971; Leduc-Gueye 2007, pp. 142–147; Gras 2015.

15 Casterman et al. 2009.

16 About the murals of the chapel of Saint-Bonnet, see Barban 1858; Bégule 1879; Condamin/Langlois 1885; Durand 1886; Bégule 1886; Déchelette 1900; Enaud 1961; Troescher 1966, pp. 191–200; Guibaud/Monnet 2011; Ducouret/Monnet 2011; Katsutani 2022 and 2023.

17 Barban 1858, p. 5.

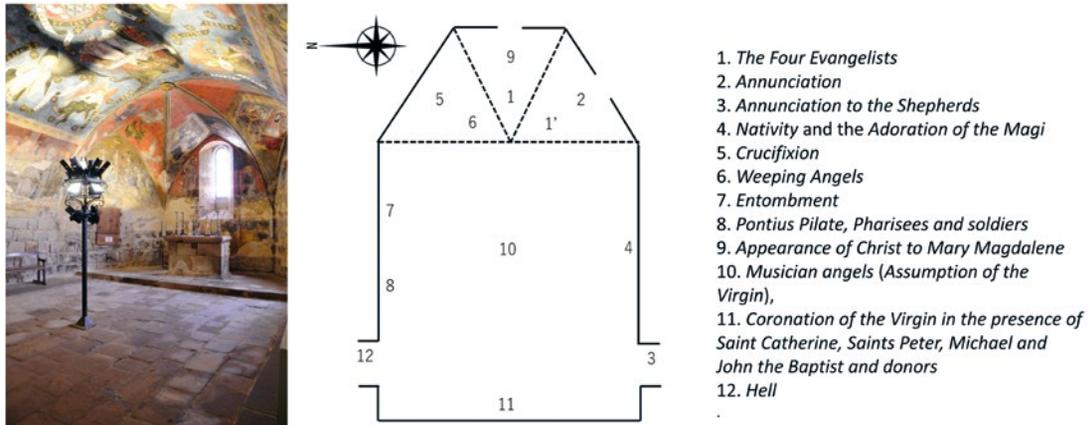


Fig. 4 Collegiate Church of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château, Saint Michael's Chapel, constructed after 1400 (Photo: Yuko Katsutani, with kind permission of Saint-Bonnet-le-Chateau).

the coat of arms of the Dukes of Bourbon is buttressed by two dogs and surrounded by two belts that are inscribed with the French word for hope, *Espérance*.

It is believed that Anne Dauphine may also have ordered the decorative elements on the belts in support of her deceased husband's motto, *Espérance (Hope)*, which was established by Louis II in circa 1367 and represents the Bourbon family's coat of arms. This act transforms the chapel into a private family oratory.

In support of this hypothesis, put forward by André Barban, we argue that this decoration evoked the private devotion of Louis II to the Virgin Mary. According to Laurent Hablot and Marc-Édouard Gautier, this seems likely, given that the belt of *Espérance* corresponds to the Holy Belt of the Virgin Mary that was supposedly given to Saint Thomas after his absence at her Assumption.¹⁸

Gautier also points out that Jean Froissart (circa 1337–1405) mentions a banner of the belt of *Espérance* representing the Virgin and Child associated with the Bourbon family's coat of arms.¹⁹ Furthermore, Jean d'Orronville (14th–15th centuries) relates that Louis II founded a college of 12 perpetual canons in Moulins as well as the hospital Saint Nicolas-lès-Moulins that was explicitly dedicated to the Virgin Mary.²⁰ Finally, the collegiate church of Montbrison, the principal church of Louis and Anne, is known to have been dedicated to the Virgin.

Louis II's devotion to the Virgin can also be seen in the decoration of the Chapelle Vieille in the Priory Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Souvigny (dating from the first decade of the fifteenth century) that Louis had developed from 1390 onwards with a view to it housing the tombs and effigies of him and his wife. The Coronation of the Virgin is carved on the back of the dais of their tomb's effigy. According to Marc-Édouard Gautier, this affirmation of the glory of Mary and her sovereign role was why the Coronation was carved above the epitaph of the deceased. Moreover, Gautier believed that the eighth statuette of the tomb effigy, which is no longer extant, was not of the Bosom of Abraham that is often depicted on similar architectural decorations but of the Virgin and Child. The seventh figure, his hands joined in prayer, is the Duke himself.²¹

18 Hablot 2001, p. 94.

19 GautierM 2006, p. 62. See also Froissart 1872, p. 223.

20 Orronville 1876, p. 318.

21 GautierM 2006, pp. 60–63.

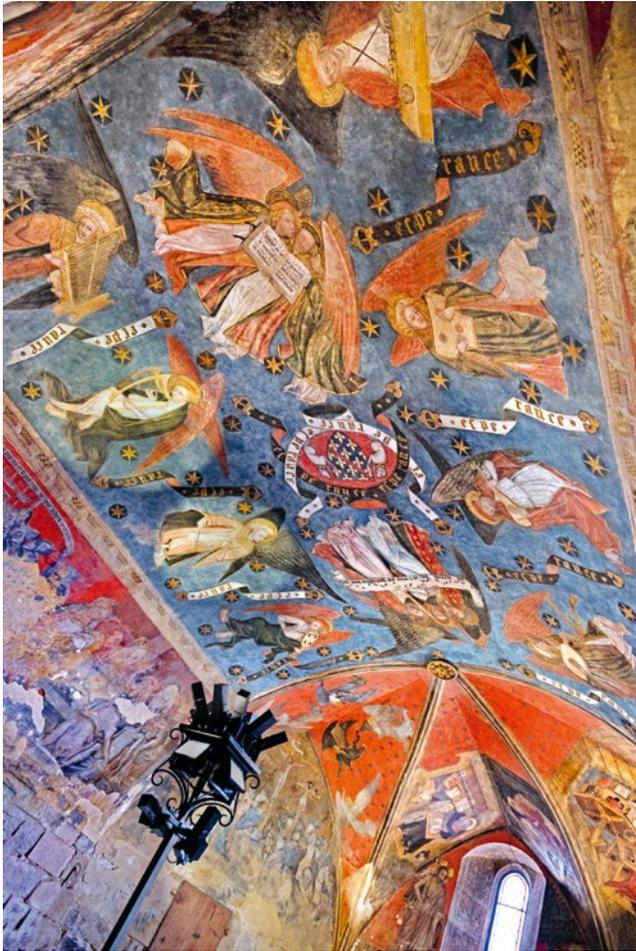


Fig. 5 *Musician angels and the coat of arms of the Dukes of Bourbon and the belts of Espérance, 1416–1417, tempera and oil, Collegiate Church of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château, vault of Saint Michael's Chapel (Photo: Yuko Katsutani, with kind permission of Saint-Bonnet-le-Château).*

On the chapel vault of Saint-Bonnet, a musical excerpt from a Mass of the Assumption is linked to the belt of *Espérance*, underlining the link between the two. This music is presented here, not just because in chronological terms the Assumption precedes the Coronation of the Virgin that is depicted on the western wall, but also because it honours Louis II in the context of his Marian devotion.

In this case, the iconographic programme overall would have been intended as a similar homage. This scenario would have allowed Anne Dauphine to glorify her family and husband by creating something new in those parts of the church that had as yet remained undecorated. Including Saint Michael was important here, as he was a patron saint of the Valois dynasty.²²

The vaulted ceiling of Saint-Bonnet, like in Le Mans, thus reveals an association between the donor's emblems and an angelic procession, underlining the Bourbon prerogatives and indicating how Forez had been absorbed into the Bourbon heritage. The decor of Saint-Bonnet's lower chapel also fits this political context. Artistic commissions during the troubled times of the Hundred Years' War were used to bolster rank or to strengthen dynastic claims or personal ambitions, particularly among the upper echelons of the aristocracy and those of royal lineage. The artist of the Saint-Bonnet paintings came to Forez at the request of the town's burghers Taillefer and Greyset, but stayed on to complete the work commissioned by Anne Dauphine, widow of Louis II, Duke of Bourbon and uncle of King Charles VI. This commission was of greater prestige and must be understood from this perspective.

22 Dehoux 2012.

An Iconographic Particularity in the Vault of Saint-Bonnet

Despite the similarities with the angel musicians of the Virgin's Chapel in Le Mans Cathedral, the decoration of the vault of Saint-Bonnet betrays great originality and is a testament to the painter's ability to add further layers of meaning within a religious context. We shall now consider the choice of musical instruments used for decorating Saint-Bonnet and the symbolism of the number of musicians involved.

In Le Mans, the painted surface of the vault is more than double the size of that in Saint-Bonnet. As many as 47 angels are shown, whereas Saint-Bonnet boasts just fourteen angels, six of them singing. In Le Mans, 54 coats of arms can be found, whereas Saint-Bonnet has only one coat of arms and ten belts of *Espérance*. Finally, compared with the eight musical instruments at Saint-Bonnet, 24 musical instruments can be found in the chapel at Le Mans.

In the latter case, the string instruments we find are a gittern, a harp, a chekker, a rabab, two psalteries with different forms, a lute and a hurdy-gurdy. In the category of wind instruments, there is a portative organ, a shawm, three bagpipes, a buisine trumpet, an olifant or horn, and a flute with a drum, as well as a double flute. There is also a percussion section including cymbals, a dichord, a tambourine, a triangle, and an unidentified instrument. There are two further instruments whose form and function are impossible to recognise due to their loss of colour over time.

The eight musical instruments depicted in the lower chapel at Saint-Bonnet are as follows: a lute, a gittern and a psaltery – all three played with a plectrum – plus a clavichord, a rebec, a rabab, a harp and a portative organ.

Le Mans includes almost every category of musical instrument: wind, string, and percussion. Conversely, the Saint-Bonnet instruments belong to the 'bas' or 'low' category, producing a relatively low and soft sound compared with the 'haut' or 'high' instruments that produce sharper and louder sounds.²³ There are symbolic reasons for this choice.²⁴

When Pope Gregory I (ca 540–12 March 604) wrote about the organ, he contrasted it with the cithara. The sound of the former is produced differently from that of the latter, which is a string instrument. We can signify good deeds with the cithara, he wrote, and holy preaching with the organ. The organ pipes represent the voice of the preachers, the strings of the cithara the intentions of those who live honourably.²⁵

Baldric of Dol (1045–1130), Archbishop of Dol-de-Bretagne from 1114 to 1130, commented that just as the different pipes of an organ could produce a single melody from the high, middle and low notes they made, so all men could come together when united by the Holy Spirit.²⁶ The organ may thus be understood as a metaphor for the Church.

String instruments were similarly viewed in a favourable light on a religious level. Because of their generally anthropomorphic shape, they can serve as a metaphor for the human body. Saint Augustine (354–430) averred that string instruments were made of incorruptible flesh.²⁷ Honorius of Autun (ca 1080–ca 1130) declared that the psaltery represented the body of Christ because of its shape, and because the lower part was struck while the sound rang out from the upper part.²⁸ Saint Nicetius of Trier (sixth century) said that the young David had chased away

23 Clouzot 2002, p. 495.

24 On this subject, see Gérold 1931.

25 Migne 1878, col. 186.

26 Du Monstier 1663, p. 230; see also Rokseth 1930, p. 7.

27 Augustin 2007, p. 1478.

28 Migne 1878, col. 271.

the evil spirit that had troubled Saul thanks to the shape of his wooden cithara and the stretched strings that mystically represented Christ's cross.²⁹ And some Fathers of the Church reminded people of the religiosity of 'low' harmonic string instruments.³⁰

For John Chrysostom (344/349–407), the cithara (sometimes also translated as harp) was a symbol of harmony. He contended that “the sounds are diverse, not the harmony, and they all together give out one harmony and symphony”. He also says that the

musician is the Might of Love: it is this that strikes out the sweet melody, [...] singing (withal) a strain in which no note is out of tune. This strain rejoices both Angels, and God the Lord of Angels; this strain rouses (to hear it) the whole audience that is in heaven [...].³¹

It was because of these religious connotations that string instruments and the organ tended to be introduced into holy scenes in contrast to the 'high' instruments that often have profane, temporal, diabolical, or disturbing connotations like the trumpets of the Last Judgment.³² The association between string instruments and the organ is clear, as the latter has soft sounds and can accompany singing without overpowering it and is ideal for Marian scenes.³³ For example, we find this association in a miniature of the *Hours of King René* (atelier of the Rohan Master of Hours, 1435–1480)³⁴ and again in *The Hours of Jean de Boucicaut* (Master Boucicaut, ca 1405–1408? and ca 1413–1415).³⁵ This iconographic tradition of the 'low' instruments influenced the choice of musical instruments depicted in the Saint-Bonnet vault.

The symbolic dimension of the instruments here is also emphasised through their number. Twelve instruments have been identified in the Saint-Bonnet chapel in total – thus four more besides the eight on the vault decoration. A bagpipe is placed in the hands of a shepherd in the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* in the vault and the tympanum of the cloister at the south entrance. The square tower, set back and rising over several floors, is likely to house a wooden framework designed to support carillon, as depicted in a scene of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, where the Virgin receives Her crown from the hands of the angels beside Christ whose colours have largely faded over time. Three angels sing the antiphon *Ave regina caelorum*, and two are playing a wind instrument, probably a shawm. Finally, there is a curved horn in the scene of *Hell* on the vault of the corridor at the north entrance.

According to Roger Cotte, Manfred Kelkel, Renée Camou and Welleda Muller, these twelve instruments correspond to the signs of the zodiac.³⁶ On the western mural, moving from south to north, we find a lute (Aquarius), a gittern (Pisces), a psalterium (Aries), a clavichord (Taurus), bagpipes (Gemini), a carillon (Cancer), two shawms (Leo), a curved horn (Virgo), a portable organ (Libra), a small harp (Scorpius), a rabab (Sagittarius), and a vielle (Capricornus). This interpretation depends primarily on the similarity between the form of the instruments and the signs of the zodiac, and it should be noted that the studies cited provide no comparable examples.

There is a different possible symbolic interpretation of these instruments if we focus on the eight depicted in the vault. The number eight is also the number of the Gregorian modes. The

29 Gerbert 1784, p. 10.

30 Charles-Dominique 2000, p. 109.

31 Chrysostom 1889, p. 249.

32 See Charles-Dominique 2000, p. 115.

33 Bulit-Werner 1997, p. 51; Clouzot 2002, p. 516.

34 René n.d., f. 23.

35 Boucicaut n.d., f. 46v.

36 Cotte 1969; 1980 and 1988, pp. 101–112; Kelkel 1988, pp. 105–113; Camou 2012; Muller 2014.



Fig. 6 *Third tone*, in: *Tropaire d'Auch*, f. 106v (ca 990–1010, with kind permission of BnF).



Fig. 7 *Second tone*, in: Aurelian n.d., f. 137v (end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century, with kind permission of BnF).

fact that eight jugglers on two capitals at the Cluny Abbey (ca 1100) symbolise the eight tones has already been highlighted by several scholars.³⁷ Kathi Meyer lists various examples of sculptures and illustrations of manuscripts bearing traces of the same symbolism, such as the illustrations in the *Tropaire d'Auch* (987–996; Fig. 6),³⁸ in the *Musica Disciplina* of Aurelian of Réôme (late eleventh or early twelfth century; Fig. 7),³⁹ in the *Sermones Dominicales* (last quarter of the thirteenth or first quarter of the fourteenth century)⁴⁰ and in a Byzantine psalter (eleventh century).⁴¹ For observers familiar with the principles of liturgical chant, a depiction of eight musicians could thus have suggested the eight Gregorian modes in use in the music of the time.⁴²

In the case of Saint-Bonnet, the eight angel musicians depicted in the vault are arranged with four angels on each side. These angels appear to be approximately a third larger than the figures painted on the other walls. This could of course be explained by the space given to them. It would also seem that the painter (or the donor) had prioritised the number eight for a very specific reason – such as the symbolism of the Gregorian modes in evoking the harmony of the spheres.

The Saint-Bonnet artist was possibly influenced by the angel musicians in the Cathedral of Le Mans when painting his own in the lower chapel's vault. Given the size restrictions in Saint-Bonnet, the artist was probably forced to reduce the number of motifs when compared to his model. He would appear to have transformed this restriction into something positive by

37 Schrade 1929; MeyerK 1952; Chailley 1985; Salet 1995; Biay 2011.

38 *Tropaire d'Auch*, f. 106v.

39 Aurelian n.d., f. 137v.

40 Algrin n.d., f. 297v.

41 Psalter n.d., f. 449v.

42 MeyerK 1952.

only retaining ‘low’ musical instruments, all the better to evoke the divine harmony in the iconographic tradition of the Marian cycles; and, as suggested above, by choosing the number eight he could represent the modes of liturgical chant. He associated them with two pieces of music dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the coat of arms of the Dukes of Bourbon in recognition of Louis II’s Marian devotion. It is also possible that the Saint-Bonnet artist benefited from the wisdom or advice of members of the chapter.

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