

Gaudí's Bassoon

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I recently had the pleasure of visiting Barcelona, and while there I went to see the Temple de la Sagrada Família by Antoni Gaudí Cornet (1852-1926). As I was walking through the rather fantastic temple, I came to the Nativity façade and looked up to see several angel musicians, including a bassoonist. The representation of musicians in iconographical sources has always been important from an historical point-of-view, and though the 20th century portrayal of performers does previous centuries, it can certainly be appreciated from an artistic perspective.

Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) was the leading exponent of Modernisme in Catalan Spain. This new style of art and architecture began towards the end of the 19th century in Barcelona and became the means of expression for Catalan nationalism. As an architect, his most celebrated building is the church of the Sagrada Família (Holy Family). It began in 1882 as a Neo-Gothic church under the direction of Francisco del Villar, but shortly after the work had started, Gaudí took over, changing everything and often improvising his own highly elaborate plan. A devout Christian, he worked on its creation for more than forty years. In 1925, he saw the first bell tower of the Nativity façade completed only a year before he was fatally struck by a trolley car. The work on this Temple continues today from the plans and ideas that Gaudí left behind.

Considering architecture a form of art, Gaudí designed not only the building, but also the details of decoration including ceramic tiles, wooden doors, elaborate wrought iron, etc. As a model of the Nativity façade was presented in Paris in 1910 and the work on the Nativity façade was done before Gaudí's death, it can be assumed that the design and details are his.

A portion of the façade is decorated with an anachronistic portrayal of musicians, which brings together an unlikely ensemble of six players divided into two groups. On one side are two trumpet players and a harpist. Examining the players on the other side shows an imaginative gathering of instrumentalists from as early as the beginning of the 18th century. There stands a violin player holding the instrument under the chin and using a modern bow which is recognizable from the late 18th century. A



plucked instrument player seems to be playing a four stringed mandolin similar to that of Bresciano (1733) or Stoccarda (1760), both of which have a longer neck and finger board than the typical mandolin. It is difficult to say precisely what model of bassoon Gaudí was trying to represent as the instrument is only viewed from the front. The visible Ab key indicates an instrument from no earlier than the beginning of the 18th century, while the absence of the recognizable changes to the instrument made by Almenröder date the instrument before the early 19th century. As the 18th century bassoonist would be more likely than a 20th century bassoonist to function in religious ceremony, Gaudí might have felt that this instrument would have more spiritual connections.

With the information that modern musicologists have gained, we can see the large pool of history that Gaudí has drawn from to create this façade and can recognize its inaccuracy in portraying early 20th century musicians - a time before 'period instrument performance'.

While this will not serve as a source of historical information, the work of the artist can be appreciated. Perhaps it can also serve to distinguish between the artist and the documentarian and act as a cautionary example to over-interpreting the accuracy of artists. ❖