

Extemporaneity and Social Hierarchy as expressed in the Decoration of a Double Virginal by Hans Ruckers, Antwerp, 1591

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Abstract:*

***EXTEMPORANEITY AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY AS EXPRESSED IN THE DECORATION OF A DOUBLE VIRGINAL BY HANS RUCKERS, ANTWERP, 1591**

One of the oldest instruments in the Yale University Collection of Musical Instruments is a double virginal made by Hans Ruckers in Antwerp in 1591. The larger instrument is an 8-foot spinet. The smaller instrument is a 4-foot ottavina which slips into the left side of the larger. This so-called mother/child (moeder/kind) virginal bears extensive decoration in the form of painted scenes on the lid, keywell, left panel, flap and fallboard of the mother and on the four sides of the rectangular case of the child.

There is a hierarchy to the placement of these painted panels that underscores the supremacy of heavenly deities to earthly mortals, of the aristocracy and/or bourgeoisie to the peasant class, and of adults to children. This paper examines the allegorical significance of the paintings while seeking to identify a common bond among them. The portrayal of extemporaneous activities and improvisational feats suggests that the instrument may have been commissioned by a person who was appreciative of or inspired by the creative arts.

The intended function or purpose of this handsome instrument bears consideration. It may have served as a practice instrument for a professional musician and composer. Or, it may have had an instructional purpose in the home, where it might have been used as a teaching instrument so that members of a household could learn to read, play and enjoy music. Then too, it could have functioned as a figurative tutor or preceptor that enabled family members to learn something about the moral constructs that define human character – constructs inclusive of (but not limited to) truth, justice, honor, obedience, self-respect, humility, charity, discretion and fair play.

This presentation will touch sparingly on constructional aspects of the instrument and focus primarily on decorative elements.