The beautiful painting of St. Cecilia

In Raphael's famous painting "St. Cecilia," the early Christian martyr holds an organ and gazes toward heaven, where a choir of sketchily brushed angels serenades her with ethereal polyphony read from part-books. As the organ slips from her hands and its pipes start to fall, our eyes are drawn to the ground, where a realistically painted viol, triangle and tambourine lie scattered and broken. St. Cecilia's lips are parted as if she has been singing. The biographer Giorgio Vasari noted in 1568 that "in her countenance is seen that abstraction which is found in the faces of those who are in ecstasy."

The St. Cecilia altarpiece is a landmark in the history of the Catholic faith as well as in art. Before this altarpiece was placed in the church of San Giovanni in Monte in Bologna, Italy, in 1517, St. Cecilia was not honored as the patron saint of music. During the 1400s, artists began to depict her holding a portable organ, because of a phrase in the Golden Legend, the popular collection of saints' lives. But the organ was just an "attribute," an object that helped to pick her out from other virgin martyrs.

Indeed, in another Bolognese church, in 1504-1506, prominent local artists had frescoed the life of St. Cecilia, and not one of the scenes depicts music.

A secret Christian in a pagan noble family, Cecilia had vowed to God to remain a virgin. On the day of her betrothal to a young man named Valerian, "she was clad in royal clothes of gold, but under these she wore the hair," reports the Golden Legend. "Hearing the organs making melody, she sang in her heart, only to God," praying that her virginity be preserved. She persuaded her husband to convert to the Christian faith,

and both died as martyrs in the second century.

Raphael’s picture turned this narrative into a kind of icon, setting the model for countless future images of Cecilia as a musician, as well as poems and musical compositions dedicated to her on St. Cecilia’s feast day, Nov. 22.

Dive deeper

Read more about St. Cecilia, and about Raphael, the “ultimate Catholic painter,” here.