



# An iconological reading of the eighteenth-century mural decoration at 52 St Stephen's Green

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THE PAINTED DECORATIONS IN THE APTLY NAMED MUSIC ROOM AT NO. 52 ST STEPHEN'S Green (now home to the Office of Public Works), a rarity in Dublin interiors, have long been attributed to the Flemish painter Pieter Balthasar de Gree (1751-1789). Completed sometime after 1785 for the banker David La Touche, they constitute allegorical interpretations of music and are painted in imitation of bas-relief sculpture (*grisaille*). However, although the subject matter of two of the three large murals has long been identified – 'Apollo and the Muses on Mount Parnassus' (above the chimney piece), and 'Orpheus escorting his wife Eurydice back from the Underworld' (on the wall opposite) – the largest scene (Plates 1, 2), on the transverse wall opposite the windows at the front of the house, has thus far remained obscure.<sup>1</sup> This short note advances one possible interpretation of that scene, suggesting that it represents the theme of the Creator, Time and Music.

## INTERPRETATION AND MEANING

SIMON LINCOLN, IN *MANSIONS, MUSEUMS AND COMMISSIONERS* (2002), STATES THAT 'The painting on the wall opposite the windows is of a young man receiving instructions from an older man while three girls dance in the background.'<sup>2</sup> However, on closer inspection, only one of these figures is shown dancing; the other two are merely standing and one of them leans against an ancient wall. Significantly, though smaller in scale, they appear behind the principal figures but on the same ground level – they are not in the background. Their smaller scale almost certainly serves a purpose; fig-

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1 – Detail of mural decoration in the music room at 52 St Stephen's Green, Dublin, c.1785  
(courtesy Office of Public Works)



ures in ancient art may be of different sizes, and smaller figures are often intended to represent characteristics or attributes of the principal characters.

In this painting, the main figure group consists of a richly dressed, bearded man and a youth. The hair of the older man, crowned by laurel, and his beard are shown as if being blown about by the wind. The youth at his side is shown almost naked; his hair is in short curls, he is crowned with a diadem and he carries a scroll in his hands. The old man steadies himself by placing his left foot on a rock. He holds an opened book on his knee and points to a passage with his forefinger. His eyes are in deep shadow and his lips are moving. The youth is shown looking directly at the old man's mouth; this indicates





2 – Mural decoration (c.1785) in the music room at 52 St Stephen's Green, Dublin (courtesy Office of Public Works)

that, in this instance, hearing is more important than seeing. This, of course, corresponds with the function of the music room, all the more so because in the open book we see the lines (staves) in readiness for a musical composition.<sup>3</sup>

All five figures – the old man, the youth, and the three maidens – are shown in classical surroundings. On the right, a tree partly covers a marble calyx krater (a large, two-handled bowl used to mix wine with water) perched on a high pedestal. In the lower left-hand corner, a decorated relief slab depicts two women dancing. Next to this is the base of an Ionic column. Roots of trees and plants grow over these ancient ruins. The dancing girl turns her head back towards her two companions, yet simultaneously looks down towards the slab. The fact that she is shown looking back and downwards is important, I believe, for understanding the meaning of this scene.<sup>4</sup> These three girls are probably sisters from Greek mythology, for example Charites or Horae. The Charites – in Latin, *Gratiae* (Graces) – appear in ancient art as three similar figures.<sup>5</sup> The same applies to early representations of Horae.<sup>6</sup> In the Hellenistic period, the Horae may carry several attributes; if there are four, for example, they may represent the four seasons.<sup>7</sup> The artist (or possibly the patron?) responsible for the Dublin painting preferred to illustrate a triad, but he distinguishes the dancing girl by placing a crown of flowers on her head. Although there are only three female figures, the floral crown may identify her as Spring.<sup>8</sup>

Horae are typically connected with the passage of time. The dancing Horae on the slab – Lincoln suggests convincingly



3 – Archelaos of Priene, relief known as ‘Apotheosis of Homer’

130-120 BC, marble, 118cm h (detail below)  
(collection of the British Museum)



that it might be a grave monument – represent time that has passed.<sup>9</sup> If the dancing figure does indeed represent the Hora of Spring, she may be said to represent the present. She would therefore form part of the ‘flow’ emanating from the figure of the old man: his mantle resembles a sail and forms a nimbus (a cloud of light believed to surround a god or goddess while on earth). In spite of the classical setting, this bearded old man resembles the Old Testament figure of the Creator as illustrated in Michelangelo’s famous Sistine chapel ceiling.<sup>10</sup> He certainly does not correspond to figures in ancient art. We must remember that artists of the High Renaissance, such as Michelangelo, were just as important as ancient Greek and Roman models for the artists of the neo-classical period. If this figure was intended to illustrate the Creator, how does an Old Testament figure fit with a painting of classical Horae?

I suggest that the artist of this scene was commissioned to depict a figure that did not exist in ancient art – the Creator. In this case, a representation of Zeus, the highest Greek god, would not have been appropriate as he belongs to a later generation.<sup>11</sup> Greek myth and visual art do not know a Creator as in the Old Testament. We have to look into the world of philosophy to find something comparable. There is a supreme being in Plato’s *Timaeus*, a creator without a proper name.<sup>12</sup> Plato calls him *demiourgós* (creator, in English). That Creator is said to have made Time as a transitory portrayal of Eternity (*Timaeus* 37-39). In Greek, Chronos (Time)<sup>13</sup> and Aion (Eternity)<sup>14</sup> are male. Could the youth standing in the front of the bearded older

figure be the newly created Chronos?

Although we do not have ancient illustrations for Plato's *Timaeus*, the immortal model of Time, the young Aion, does exist in ancient art.<sup>15</sup> Some representations of Aion (Eternity) were already known in the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Depictions of Chronos, on the other hand, are extremely rare. One secure representation, however, does exist and was known during the neoclassical period. Chronos, accompanied by an inscription, appears on a Hellenistic relief of 130-120 BC that is signed by the sculptor Archelaos from Priene, son of Apollonios (Plate 3).<sup>17</sup> It entered the British Museum in 1804. Earlier, it had been in the Palazzo Colonna, Rome, having been found nearby in the Via Appia during the seventeenth century. Learned people throughout Europe were familiar with it. In his old age, Goethe wrote an article on the 'Apotheosis of Homer' (1827) – by which the relief was then known – and illustrated it with an engraving by the Florentine artist Giovanni Battista Galestruzzi (Plate 4).<sup>18</sup> The artist of this Dublin scene may have been familiar with this printed source.

In the upper and middle registers of the Archelaos relief, the nine Muses appear with their father Zeus, their mother Mnemosyne, and Apollo. The seated man with the long sceptre in the lower frieze is Homer. In front of him we see a round altar and sacrificial bull. Named figures greeting Homer stand on the right-hand side, among them personifications of Tragedy and Comedy. Behind him stands a woman wearing a high mural crown. She holds a wreath above Homer's head and is identified, by inscription, as Oikoumene, the



4 – Giovanni Battista Galestruzzi, *Archelaos relief engraving*

from Gisbert Cuper, *APOTHEOSIS VEL CONSECRATIO HOMERI* (1683) (detail below) (courtesy The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2579-621)





inhabited world. Her winged companion is Chronos (Time). The presence of these two characters indicates that Homer's fame is both general and long-lasting.

The image of Chronos in the Archelaos relief is similar to the youth in the Dublin painting. The two figures have short curly hair, both wear a diadem, and both hold scrolls in their hands. There are, however, some differences: Chronos is winged and carries two scrolls while the youth in the Dublin painting has no wings and carries only one, large scroll. The Dublin artist may therefore have been charged with illustrating Chronos, and in turn modelled his figure as a variation on that depicted on the famous Archelaos relief.

In summary, I suggest that the Dublin painting shows Plato's *demiourgós* with his creation, Chronos. From the Creator's lips – to which the youth's gaze is directed – come musical sounds. *Music as Sounding Speech* (in German, *Musik als Klangrede*) is the title of a well-known publication by the conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt. He writes, 'In ancient Greece music, rhythm and tempo are the same.'<sup>19</sup> The Italian word *tempo* comes from the Latin *tempus* (time). In short, time and music belong together; the newly created Chronos will answer to his Creator singing, like in an opera. The open book and scroll suggest that the Creator is also a teacher, and Time is his pupil. The content of his teaching corresponds with the room's function. Lines for musical notes appear in the opened book, similar to the painted trophies of musical instruments that complement the figurative scenes in this room.<sup>20</sup>

The connection between time and music was already a theme of the French painter Nicolas Poussin, whose work in seventeenth-century Rome already anticipated the neo-classical style of a century later. In *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1634-36, Wallace Collection, London), Poussin shows four women moving to the music performed by a winged man with white hair and a beard.<sup>21</sup> He plays a lyre while the sun god drives his horses above the musical company. This painting is an allegory of the course of time, and for Poussin the old man represents *le Temps*, or Time. This figure reminds us of the Roman god Saturn, who is a personification of time in baroque art.<sup>22</sup> In this instance, Poussin did not provide his personification of Time with a scythe, the attribute of Saturn and of death in that period. Later, during the neoclassical period, Death was not shown as a skeleton with a scythe but as a youth with a torch pointing downwards.<sup>23</sup> The personification of Time changed too.<sup>24</sup> The youth in the Dublin painting is, likewise, a beautiful, neoclassical personification of Time.

In conclusion, the three large *grisaille* paintings in the music room at No. 52 St Stephen's Green are allegorically connected to the room's function. The muses above the chimney piece listen attentively to Apollo's lyre song; even the constellation Pegasus appears to listen to the sound.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes, too, the 'music' can be harsh, as in the bark of Cerberus in the painting depicting Orpheus and Eurydice.<sup>26</sup> The principal painting described here shows the Creator's cloak billowing in the wind. In ancient representations, known in the eighteenth century, wind instruments are held by wind gods.<sup>27</sup> In the Dublin painting, the dancing Hora of Spring is party to the sounding nimbus surrounding the

Creator. Dance and music also belong together. The musicians who would have performed in this room may have felt that they were abiding by the Creator's instructions. As J.S. Bach wrote, 'Die Musica von Gottes Geist angeordnet' ('Music is designed by the spirit of God').

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### ENDNOTES

- LIMC        *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, I-VIII (1981-1997); Indices 1-2 (1999); Supplement (2009).
- Lincoln     Simon Lincoln, *Mansions, Museums and Commissioners: an architectural history of the Office of Public Works on St Stephen's Green* (Dublin, 2002).
- Simon        Erika Simon, 'Zeitbilder der Antike', in *Ausgewählte Schriften II* (1998) 221-31.

- <sup>1</sup> Lincoln, 62-83. The two smaller overdoor paintings are also by the same hand. The painting over the door leading to the stair hall depicts the Greek poet Arion, who, according to Herodotus, was rescued by a dolphin. The second overdoor, leading to the adjoining first floor room, illustrates Orpheus. From an almost lost tragedy by Aeschylus we know that Orpheus climbed the Thracian mountains every morning in order to greet the god of the sun. In this painting he is about to begin a song in honour of Helios. See S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta III* (Göttingen, 1985) 138-40.
- <sup>2</sup> Lincoln, 79 and pl. 119.
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Hagg was the first to notice this and bring them to my attention. Wolfgang Marx (Dublin) gave a more accurate interpretation of them.
- <sup>4</sup> According to Lincoln, writing in 2002, 'The subject has not been identified'. Lincoln, 79.
- <sup>5</sup> *LIMC*, III (1986) 191-203, 'Charis, Charites', pls 151-57 (E.B. Harrison); 203-10, 'Gratiae', pls 157-67 (H. Sichtermann).
- <sup>6</sup> *LIMC*, V (1990) 502-10, 'Horai', pls 344-48 (V. Machaira).
- <sup>7</sup> The Horae are first mentioned as four in number in Athenaeus, 5, 198b (procession of Ptolemy II in Alexandria). In Roman art they may be three or four in number: see *LIMC*, V (1990) 510-38, 'Horae', pls 349-68 (L. Abad Casal).
- <sup>8</sup> For the Hora of Spring with a crown of flowers, see *ibid.*, 525, no. 130, pl. 361.
- <sup>9</sup> Lincoln, 79.
- <sup>10</sup> P. Luigi de Vecchi, *Michelangelo. Der Maler* (Stuttgart and Zürich, 1984) pls 28, 49, 51-53. William Blake (1757-1827) represents the Creator, as in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. See H. Gombrich, *Die Geschichte der Kunst* (London, 1959) 388, 390, fig. 310.
- <sup>11</sup> E. Simon, *Die Götter der Griechen* (Munich, 1998) 16-17.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Erler in H. Flashar (ed.), *Die Philosophie der Antike II* (Basle, 2007) 262-72.
- <sup>13</sup> *LIMC*, III (1986) 276-78, 'Chronos', no. 1, pl. 222 (M. Bendala Galán).
- <sup>14</sup> *LIMC*, I (1981) 399-411, 'Aion', pls 310-19 (M. Le Glay).
- <sup>15</sup> See Simon, 227-28.
- <sup>16</sup> For Aion as youth, see note 14 above, 402-05, no. 10-24, pls 312-15.



- <sup>17</sup> British Museum, London, 2191. See note 13 above; *LIMC*, VII (1994) 16, ‘Oikoumene’, no. 1 (F. Canciani); Simon, 226, fig. 17.9; J. Lacatz (ed.), *Homer: Der Mythos von Troia in Dichtung und Kunst* (Basle and Mannheim), (Munich, 2008) 21, fig. 1, and 297-98, no. 11 (T. Lochman).
- <sup>18</sup> E. Grumach, *Goethe und die Antike II* (Potsdam, 1949) 572-75. For help in finding the engraving by Giovanni Battista Galestruzzi, my thanks are due to Elke Böhr (Wiesbaden). In the inscriptions, Galestruzzi has made mistakes: for Chronos he writes ‘Kironos’ (Goethe has ‘Kronos’). Representations of Kronos, whose name in Rome was Saturnus (*LIMC*, VIII, Supplement 1078-1089, ‘Saturnus’) were models for the personification of Time in art made between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. M. Kintzinger, *Chronos und Historia* (Wiesbaden, 1995) 59-65.
- <sup>19</sup> For this quote, my thanks to Konrad Hampe (Munich). I used the third edition by Bärenreiter (Kassel, Basle and London, 1987) 64.
- <sup>20</sup> Lincoln, 68.
- <sup>21</sup> C. Wright, *Poussin. Gemälde, Ein kritisches Werkverzeichnis* (Landshut and Egolding, 1989) 80, fig. 19; 192, no. 115. Poussin’s drawing for this picture is today in the Christopher Lloyd Collection, Berkshire. See A. Blunt, *Les Dessins de Poussin* (Paris, 1988) 59, fig. 48.
- <sup>22</sup> Simon, 222-23, figs 17.1 and 17.2.
- <sup>23</sup> ‘Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet’, in G.E. Lessing, *Werke VI* (Darmstadt, 1996) 405-62, with engravings after Roman grave monuments.
- <sup>24</sup> Simon, 223, fig. 17.3. The scythe is not forgotten but is not in the hands of Time. For Chronos in the seventeenth century, see Kintzinger, *Chronos und Historia*.
- <sup>25</sup> Lincoln, 78, pl. 118.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 79, pl. 120.
- <sup>27</sup> *LIMC*, VIII (1997) 186-92, ‘Venti’, especially pls 129-30.

