‘Exulting and Adorning it in Exuberant Strains’: Music, Figuration and Ornamentation in Abel Schrøder’s altarpiece of 1667 (Skt Morten, Næstved, Denmark).

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'Exulting and Adorning it in Exuberant Strains': Music, Figuration and Ornamentation in Abel Schrøder’s altarpiece of 1667 (Skt Morten, Næstved, Denmark).

Abel Schrøder was unusual, perhaps even unique, in serving in two distinct capacities within an early modern Lutheran parish church. At Skt Morten (or St Martin’s) in Næstved, a market town and minor port in eastern Denmark, he was both the organist and the sculptor of the main altarpiece (figure 1) [Figure 1 here]. Born around 1602, Schrøder headed a large and active woodcarving workshop for nearly all his adult life and, from 1634 until his death in 1676, he also gave regular musical support to worship at Skt Morten.¹

The altarpiece for Skt Morten has always been in bare oak, unpainted.² It is around seven metres tall and four metres wide, a looming presence in the church, a brown mass against tall gothic windows, its sheer solidity one reason for its monumental effect (figure 2) [Figure 2 here]. But there is also the ornamental framework, an astonishing flow of architectural, organic and even whimsical detail (see, for example, figure 3). [Figure 3 here] This framework forms a substantial part of the work, roughly one half of the whole, while the other half is comprised of eleven narrative scenes and fifteen individual figures of varying sizes, the largest about half-length, the smallest around a quarter. This altarpiece, then, is an open challenge to anyone interested in how ornamentation and figuration, decoration and

¹ Mogens von Haven, Bogen om Abel Schrøder, 1602-1676 (Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, 1995), pp. 8 and 45. This small volume, by an enthusiastic and well-informed press photographer, is the only dedicated work on Abel Schrøder available to date, although the sculptor’s use of printed material is discussed in some detail in Hanne Jønsson, Grafiske forlægs betydning for konstitueringen af dansk bruskbaroks ikonografiske og ornamentale formsprog (University of Copenhagen: Magisterkonferensafhandling, 1978), 3 vols.

narrative, might all work together in one sculpture. How have the various parts been integrated physically and conceptually into a greater whole?

Before beginning to answer this, a few preliminary points should be made. Schröder was a prolific woodcarver and, on a general level, his numerous altarpieces and other ecclesiastical works fit within a much broader early modern tradition of elaborate Lutheran sculpture. But, at least in Denmark, the vast majority of these works were polychromed; there was an enduring predilection for colour inherited from the medieval period, which in turn fed into a more general Lutheran taste for richly decorated church furnishings. Indeed, Schröder seems to have left only two altarpieces wholly in bare oak, that in Skt Morten (figure 1) and the slightly earlier work in Holmens Kirke in Copenhagen (figure 4) [Figure 4 here]. That this was intentional becomes evident if one compares their fine detailing with the much rougher finish in works by Schröder that have later been stripped of their original polychromy (these less finished pieces were probably faster and hence cheaper to produce). So Schröder’s two unpainted works were clearly meant to stand out, emphatically to be carvings, not supports or frames for painting. As this essay proposes, in many ways they are sculptures about sculpting.

It is important to note here that the study of early modern Lutheran artworks is a relatively new phenomenon, especially in the Anglophone world. Until quite recently, there was a stubborn if erroneous assumption that all forms of early modern Protestantism were

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3 A good sense of the broader Lutheran tradition may be gained from Andrew Spicer (ed.), *Lutheran Churches in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) and the situation in Saxony and Brandenburg is discussed in detail in Bridget Heal, *A Magnificent Faith: Art and Identity in Lutheran Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017(a)).

4 The most recent and best overview of the changes wrought by the Reformation in Danish churches is Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen, *Ritual and Art Across the Danish Reformation: Changing Interiors of Village Churches, 1450–1600*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

5 There may originally have been a few more. For example, the altarpiece in Borre church in Norway of c. 1666 has been attributed to Abel Schröder junior and it was only polychromed in 1741. http://www.norgeskirker.no/wiki/Borre_kirke (last accessed 18 January 2019). But it is not possible to establish whether this was the sculptor’s intention or whether it was merely due to a lack of funding. Even if there were originally more, bare oak still remains the exception rather than the rule in Schröder’s oeuvre.

6 See, for example, the two photographs juxtaposed in von Haven, *Bogen om Abel Schröder*, p. 26.
religions of the ‘Word’ and thus iconoclastic or at least antithetical to imagery. Fortunately, several recent scholarly volumes have demonstrated that this was not so. Early modern Lutherans across Germany and Scandinavia positively embraced art, both in their homes and their parish churches. Yet, with some honourable exceptions, these works still tend to be studied as if they are historical documents, to be decoded for what they divulge about Lutheran habits, attitudes and identities. This kind of analysis remains focused primarily on narrative content and iconography, rather than on visual or sculptural forms. If addressed at all, ornamentation like that on the Skt Morten altarpiece tends to be dismissed with a style-label like ‘auricular baroque’ or explained away as merely subordinate to function, or else as a fashionable Italian import and, by extension, a marker of status.

All of this may be broadly true yet it does not adequately account for complex and richly ornamental Lutheran sculptures like the Skt Morten altarpiece. Part of the problem is that such sculptures tend to be treated as if they are pictures, not three-dimensional objects, and certainly not as sculptures about sculpting. As a consequence, the role of the often considerable ornamental framework remains firmly subordinate to the narrative or other imagery that they surround. This is problematic given that, in most Lutheran parish churches, the majority of early modern artworks are richly sculptural. As this essay shows, they are as

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7 See, for example, Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Although this volume was, in many ways, pioneering, it remains wedded to the idea that ‘the Word’ reigned supreme in Lutheran art, perhaps because this category is understood reductively, mainly as comprising Lutheran prints and paintings.

8 See, for example, Spicer, *Lutheran Churches* and, most recently, Heal, *A Magnificent Faith*.

9 This unfortunately, remains a flaw in the otherwise substantial contribution of ibid.

10 To cite but a few examples: Jönsson, *Grafiske forlags betydning* is bound by the conventions of stylistic analysis; a subordination to the maxims of Lutheran theology bedevils Joseph Leo Koerner, ‘Confessional Portraits: Representation as Redundancy’ in Mark Roskill and John Oliver Hand (eds), *Hans Holbein: Paintings, Prints, and Reception* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 125-139. Heal, *A Magnificent Faith* posits the coming of Lutheran Baroque as rooted in patronal desires for new visual idioms imported from Italy (pp. 270-271). See also Bridget Heal, ‘Lutheran Baroque: The Afterlife of a Reformation Altarpiece’, *Art History* 40, no. 2 (2017b): 358-378, where style is again explained as an Italian import mediated by the Dresden court.

11 That is the case for the majority of studies cited in notes 3, 6 and 9 above.

12 This is evident, for example, if one browses through the magnificent recording project *Danmarks Kirker*, now available on-line at: http://danmarkskirker.natmus.dk/ (last accessed 18 January 2019).
much spatial as they are visual, and, as such, appeal to the whole body, not just to the eyes. This is a quality that they share with music, which in live performance is a great deal more than an appeal to the ears. More broadly, then, my point is that the category ‘visual culture’ is simply not sufficient for understanding Lutheran sculpture. It must be expanded to encompass the spatial and the sonic.\textsuperscript{13}

From this follows a third preliminary point: as a church organist, Schrøder was part of a well-established tradition of performing and listening to music in church, a set of habits also inherited from the middle ages.\textsuperscript{14} Music of some complexity was a general feature of early modern Lutheran worship, even in medium-sized urban churches like Skt Morten in Næstved. Like many such towns, Næstved had a Latin school for boys.\textsuperscript{15} Both before and after the Reformation, the standard curriculum for this type of school involved polyphonic singing – defined at its most basic as two or more distinct melodies performed simultaneously to form a harmonic whole – so that the boys could perform in worship and, it was hoped, as they reached adulthood.\textsuperscript{16} The rich Lutheran musical tradition that grew from this is perhaps best known through its late flowering in the works of Johan Sebastian Bach but it dates back to the earliest Lutheran churches and includes composers like Johann Walter, Heinrich Schütz, Michael Praetorius and Dieterich Buxtehude, as well as Georg Philipp Telemann and Georg Friedrich Händel. As a professional church musician, Schrøder was one modest voice within

\textsuperscript{13} This follows a pioneering article, where a Roman Catholic piece of music is brought to bear on a German sculpture even if the work of art is only analysed as the inspiration for a musical composition: Alexander J. Fisher, ‘A musical dialogue in bronze: Gregor Aichinger’s \textit{Lacrumae} (1604) and Hans Reichle’s crucifixion group for the Basilica of SS. Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg’ in Jeffrey Chips Smith, ed., \textit{Visual Acuity and the Arts of Communication in Early Modern Germany} (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 119-141.


\textsuperscript{15} On Latin schools in Denmark in the early modern period, see Kristian Jensen, \textit{Latinskolens dannelse. Latinundervisningens indhold og formål fra reformationen til enevælden}. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 1982).

\textsuperscript{16} Herl (2004), pp. 43-44. For a more extensive definition and discussion of polyphony, see the section entitled ‘Musical Knowledge’ below.
a grander chorus. The present essay seeks to honour this, using the Lutheran tradition of church music to explore the relationships between figuration and ornamentation in the remarkable sculpture that he carved for his parish church.

Carver and musician

First and foremost, Schrøder was a woodworker. He was born into the trade, the youngest child of a well-established Næstved master-carver, Abel Schrøder senior, and his wife Maren Abels. In 1602 Schrøder senior died in a plague epidemic together with his main journeyman. Accordingly, Schrøder junior was trained by his older brother Eiler under the supervision of his mother, who now ran the workshop. In the two years after her husband’s death, when she was also dealing with her new baby Abel, she oversaw the completion and delivery of a royal commission worth an incredible 500 daler (for some comparative sums, see the third paragraph of this subsection).\(^\text{17}\) By 1628, Maren’s youngest had clearly become a fully-fledged master-carver for in that year he formally took over the family business. He ran it for nearly five decades with considerable success, as is evident from his substantial oeuvre and from a number of textual sources held in the Næstved town archives.

One of these is in Schrøder’s own hand, a lengthy legal deposition dated 25 July 1659, written to deny an accusation from one Rasmus Kremmer that he could afford to pay higher taxes.\(^\text{18}\) Obviously Schrøder was literate, if only in the vernacular. Moreover, he had the trust of his fellow Næstved woodworkers, serving already in 1638 as dean of their guild (defined, like most early modern guilds, by materials and tools and thus including joiners and carpenters as well as sculptors). His reputation for trustworthiness went beyond the guild: the

\(^{17}\) Von Haven, *Bogen om Abel Schrøder*, pp. 23-27, from whence come all the biographical details in this section.

\(^{18}\) The whole document is transcribed in ibid., pp. 42-43.
town court frequently called him as a witness. Equally, he was considered a man of financial acumen, entrusted by the municipality to value houses and farms, and he was a property owner himself. Nevertheless, his reputation for probity was not impeccable. As the deposition from 1659 shows, he sought to minimise his taxes. Besides, in January 1652, he and one of his journeymen were accused of working during the Sunday service, in breach of town law – clearly urgent business took priority over religious duties. Schröder was also jealous of his personal and professional reputation, lodging several accusations of slander in the Næstved town court. All of this is quite typical of a successful early modern master craftsman in northern Europe, from growing up in the family workshop to tax evasion, a jealously guarded reputation and illegal Sunday work. But Schröder had two unusual qualities.

One was his enduring engagement with music. Whilst competent amateur music-making was far more widespread in early modern Europe than it is now, for the simple reason that this was the only way ordinary folk might hear music outside of church, not many sculptors of this period also worked as professional musicians. Admittedly, being an organist was Schröder’s secondary employment, even if he did play in church for over forty years. His annual wage for this was only 36 daler. This may not seem much if compared with the 200 daler with an additional residence allowance of 40 daler granted annually to the young Buxtehude, who in 1660 was appointed at Skt Mariae in Helsingør (Elsinore), also in eastern Denmark. But Buxtehude’s job was clearly full-time and at a more prestigious church. In fact, Schröder’s wages, some fourteen percent of Buxtehude’s, tally well with working on Sundays only, which comprise fourteen percent of a year. Very likely, there were

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19 A good sense of how such guilds worked may be gained from Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen and Hugo Soly (eds), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power, and Representation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).


additional duties during the main festivals of Easter, Whitsun and Christmas, which, by a royal decree of 4 August 1565, were to be celebrated in Danish town churches with some musical elaboration. This may explain why Schrøder felt entitled to work illegally one Sunday in January 1652, perhaps to cope with a back-log of carving accumulated whilst playing in church during the Christmas season.

That Schrøder worked as a musician by choice is further evident from his legal deposition of 1659. First, he assures the authorities that he does not earn a great deal from his ‘honest craft’ of sculpting, even if he has always been able to afford ‘my poor children’s keep and schooling.’ Then he sarcastically invites his accuser to take over his other job as organist at Skt Morten, taunting him that he ‘neither can nor will do it’. Schrøder underscores that he himself ‘does not despise the low wages set by the authorities according to ecclesiastical means’. The deposition then closes with the wish ‘That this my declaration against his pointless accusation may be read and endorsed and recorded, if it is put to the court’ and it is signed ‘Abbell Bildsnider [literally: ‘Image-carver’], in his own hand.’ Clearly Schrøder was conversant with the elaborate language of early modern legality but, beneath the stock phrases, there remains a quiet pride in his craft, his musical skills and his willingness to support parish worship.

The organ that Schröder played at Skt Morten is unfortunately no longer extant but it is possible to reconstruct something of its nature. It was made in 1587 by Hans Brebus, organ builder royal to King Frederick II of Denmark-Norway, and, fortunately, was described in

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23 For the text of this decree, see Niels Jespersson, Gradual: En Almindelig Sangbog (Copenhagen: Laurentz Benedicht, 1573 [facsimile edition: Copenhagen: J.H. Schultz Forlag,1935]), unpaginated prefatory matter. For the required musical sequences for these three holidays, see ibid. pp. 36-71, 187-215, 244-268. On the value Jespersson’s Gradual as a source for liturgical practice see Erik Abrahamsen’s unpaginated introduction to this facsimile edition.

24 The full document is transcribed in von Haven, Bogen om Abel Schröder, pp. 42-43. Generally, in the seventeenth century, ‘image-carvers’ sculpted, whether figuratively or ornamentally, in contrast to joiners, who built furniture, even if both belonged to the same guild.
some detail by the parish pastor in 1759 and then again in 1832.\(^{25}\) These two sources portray a fine if small and now sadly worn instrument of the swallow’s nest type, meaning that it was set on a cantilevered platform above the heads of the congregation and, on that platform, there was probably only space for the organist.\(^{26}\) The organ came with the monograms of King Frederick and his Queen, Sophia of Mecklenburg-Güstrow, and with a donor inscription naming Eskild Gøye of Skjøringle (who had actually died in 1573), his widow Sybille Gyldenstierne and their sons Mogens and Harald Gøye, together with their unmarried relative Hilleborg Gyldenstierne, all members of the Danish high nobility.\(^ {27}\) And the panels constituting the balustrade around the organ bore further names and coats of arms of prominent donors including Arild Hvidtfeldt, also of the high nobility and at that point Lord Chancellor of Denmark. Although elite patronage was common in early modern Lutheran churches, Brebus’s organ at Skt Morten would still have demonstrated that the parish was exceptionally well connected, able to elicit both royal and noble support.\(^ {28}\) In keeping with this, Brebus’s organ was carefully decorated: ‘On the inside of the lower shutters was the Annunciation, on the upper shutters the Adoration of the Shepherds, on the outside the lower [shutters] had [the royal] monograms and the upper Moses and the Brazen Serpent. On the narrow sides of the organ case: [St] Martin dividing his Cloak, Orpheus amongst the Animals, on the balustrade Temperance, Prudence, Innocence, Charity, Faith […] and] female


\(^{26}\) On this type of organ and its history, see ibid, pp. 546-547.

\(^{27}\) For the Gyldenstierne and Gøye families, see the relevant entries in Dansk Biografisk Leksikon: http://denstoredanske.dk/Dansk_Biografisk_Leksikon/Samfund._jura_og_politik/Slaegter/Gyldenstierne (last accessed 19 January 2019) and http://denstoredanske.dk/Dansk_Biografisk_Leksikon/Samfund._jura_og_politik/Slaegter/Goeye (last accessed 18 January 2019). Sybille Gyldenstierne seems to have felt particularly attached to Skt Morten, perhaps because she owned a prestigious property in Næstved. In 1598, personalised pews were constructed in the church with her own and her dead husband’s coats of arms and, in 1602, their names were inscribed on the newly installed pulpit. ‘Næstved S. Mortens kirke’, pp. 148-149.

\(^{28}\) See, for example, Heal, A Magnificent Faith, pp. 53, 61, 72, 83, 85-86, 142-143, 151, 161, 166-187.
figures making music. [...] The paintings on the outer shutters are in grisaille.\textsuperscript{29} From all this it may be inferred that, despite the organ’s small size, it was a prestigious, well-made and richly decorated instrument. In many ways, it was a sculpture in its own right.

The scenes on the inside of the shutters were singled out by being in colour. They are from the first two chapters of St Luke’s gospel, part of the same narrative, the conception and birth of Christ. Moreover, each alludes to joyous musical worship, to the \textit{Magnificat}, the Virgin Mary’s exultant song of praise after conceiving, and to the angelic chorus singing \textit{Gloria in Excelsis Deo} for the shepherds before they go to adore the newborn Christ. In a church like Skt Morten, in the early modern period the \textit{Gloria} was sung during every Sunday service whilst the \textit{Magnificat} was a Lutheran staple of Saturday and Sunday vespers.\textsuperscript{30} In keeping with post-Reformation practice, both the \textit{Gloria} and the \textit{Magnificat} were usually sung in the vernacular or, on chief holidays, in Latin, in support of the local Latin school, from whence usually came a substantial part of the performing choir. Both these biblical songs must have been familiar to organist Schrøder; comforting assurances that, even if not terribly well paid, music-making to praise God came with full biblical sanction, exemplified in the songs of Mary and the angels. Of this he was reminded every time he opened up his instrument to play in church.

The original swallow’s nest organ hung on the north side of the chancel arch, opposite the pulpit on the south side (see figure 2); a pulpit most likely supplied by Schrøder senior just before his untimely death. That the two functioned as a pair is evident from the pastor’s (in fact erroneous) claim from 1759: ‘Since one finds the same coats of arms and names on the pulpit, it may be deduced that they were built at the same time.’\textsuperscript{31} This pairing must have

\textsuperscript{29} ‘Næstved S. Mortens kirke’, pp. 150-151.
\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{Gloria} is given in vernacular and Latin versions in Jespersøn, \textit{Gradual}, pp. 7-8 and 41-42. On the role of the \textit{Magnificat} in Lutheran vespers, see Herl, \textit{Worship Wars}, pp. 63-64.
\textsuperscript{31} ‘Næstved S. Mortens kirke’, p. 150.
been even more evident when the pulpit still had its extensive early modern colouring, matching that of the elaborately painted and decorated Brebus organ.

Now, as is well known, preaching, the lengthy expounding of God’s Word, was one of the defining features of the early modern Lutheran liturgy. Accordingly, a Lutheran pulpit served a crucial role: in churches like Skt Morten it was the spatial, visual and conceptual hinge between nave and choir, between laity and clergy (see figure 2). So, when pulpit and organ were paired, as they originally were at Skt Morten, this implied a certain equivalence between preacher and organist. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that, in the early modern period, music was as important as preaching to Lutheran worship. Thus, by the eighteenth century, Lutheranism came with the fully-fledged notion that music was the ‘viva voce evangeli’, ‘the living voice of the gospel’.

At Skt Morten, this idea was implied already in 1602 by the organ’s alignment with the pulpit and also by the two paintings inside its shutters. Moreover, both objects were originally integrated into a larger sculptural ensemble amassed at the east end. They stood on either side of – and were thus visually and spatially connected by – a substantial chancel screen, probably also by Schrøder senior. It seems that this, too, was unpainted although it was surmounted by a large polychromed crucifix from c. 1520 (this now hangs in the easternmost vault of the nave, see figure 2), originally with two angels suspended by chains from the lateral beam. And, from 1667 onwards, behind the screen and this crucifix stood Schrøder junior’s altarpiece, a looming presence only properly visible to those assembling in the choir during communion. Thus the entire east end of Skt Morten, the liturgical heart of

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32 On the role of the pulpit in the Lutheran church as one of three crucial ritual loci, see Margit Thøfner, ‘Framing the Sacred: Lutheran Church Furnishings in the Holy Roman Empire’, Spicer (ed.), Lutheran Churches, pp. 97-131, especially pp. 119-122.
the Lutheran parish church, was given over to elaborate woodwork, much of it supplied by
the Schrøder dynasty: it was a heart of oak.

Schrøder junior had another unusual quality. He seems to have been artistically
ambitious despite declaring himself an ‘honest craftsman’ for tax purposes. This point may be
pursued by returning, once more, to the wholly bare wood of two of his altarpieces, made for
Holmens Kirke in Copenhagen (figure 4) and for Skt Morten in his home town (figure 1).
The carefully detailed oak carving, never intended to be painted, inserts these two works into
a specific early modern sculpting tradition, that of visibly artful woodwork, as identified by
Michael Baxandall in his now classic *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany.* Only,
in northern Germany and Scandinavia this tradition did not work through lime but through
oak (for a good example, see figure 5). This seems to have been a matter of
deliberate choice; other hardwoods like beech were available as were softwoods such as pine,
birch and lime. Oak, however, is the most durable because most densely grained European
hardwood, and therefore in many ways a more taxing medium than lime. Oak can only be
partially carved whilst green, that is, fresh and therefore soft; and a carving roughed out in
this way must be dried with great care to prevent splitting. So the difference between oak
and flimewood is not unlike that between granite and alabaster. Fine detailing is hard won
(see, for example, figure 3) and hence all the more impressive. Nevertheless, one of
Baxandall’s key points remains relevant: works like these were evidently made as much for
aesthetic enjoyment as for religious edification.

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35 Michael Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven/London: Yale University
Press, 1980).
36 An excellent sense of the history of woodlands and of natural resource management in early modern Denmark
may be gained from Thorkild Kjaergaard, *The Danish Revolution, 1500-1800: An Ecohistorical Interpretation*
37 For a good overview of the many skills involved in working oak see Esmond Harris, Jeanette Harris and
It is because of their virtuoso carving that Schrøder’s two extant unpainted altarpieces may be understood as sculptures of ambition. In the case of the first, that is hardly surprising (figure 4). The piece for Holmens Kirke was a royal commission for an important church in the middle of Copenhagen, frequented by the shipwrights and other workers at the royal arsenal, professional connoisseurs of fine oak and precise woodwork. This was an audience likely to delight in Schrøder’s finely honed carving skills. Accordingly, he did his utmost, likely driven by a combination of business acumen and artistic aspiration. Six years later, he would install a similar work in Skt Morten, where the congregation encompassed high-ranking nobles, local burgomasters, town scribes and well-to-do merchants but also craftsmen like goldsmiths and bakers. As a whole, they were not as professionally homogenous as the parishioners of Holmen. Yet Schrøder could safely assume that a few of them had an eye for fine woodwork because, by 1667, he had supplied ornately carved epitaphs for at least three members of the parish. Moreover, at least the merchants in the congregation must have had some knowledge of decent woodwork, profoundly dependent, as they were, on shipping.

Finally, there is one piece of later evidence to show that Schrøder’s altarpiece for Skt Morten was appreciated locally. In 1753 one citizen of Næstved, the pastor of the other parish in the town, described it as: ‘a superlative piece carved of pure oak with the most artful sculptor’s work and it remains, as is well, without a stroke of colour.’

Musical knowledge


39 This list has been constructed on the basis of early modern epitaphs and gravestones still extant in the church. See ‘Næstved S. Mortens kirke’, pp. 156-159.

40 Ibid., pp. 152-155.

41 Ibid., p. 160, note 15.
Although Schröder’s two professions were distinct, they were related in at least three ways. First, both entailed great manual dexterity combined with strength – for that is what it takes to carve oak as well as to play an organ, especially an early modern one, where the action is often heavy. And both involved working with an instrument, whether a keyboard or hammer and chisel, to produce a final result, music or sculpture. That there was an overlap between these two skillsets is further evinced by the fact that larger Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia expected, as a matter of course, that organists kept their instruments in good tune and repair; in some case organists were even expected to finish off incomplete instruments. Besides this, both of Schröder’s employments involved a certain spatial acuity: whether to music unfolding acoustically (of which more presently), or to the physical environments of the many churches for which he sculpted. For him, these two forms of spatial acuity must have seemed to converge at Skt Morten with peculiar intensity; it was the church where he played the organ, where his father had likely carved the pulpit and the now-lost chancel screen, and where he, in turn, would supply the altarpiece. Third, Schröder the organist and sculptor had a rich and refined sense of how ornamentation and figuration can work together within a greater whole – it is no coincidence that the terms ornamentation and figuration have currency within both music and art, even if they have distinct valences.

To explore how music helps one to develop such a refined sense it is useful to consider the duties of an early modern Lutheran church organist. Unfortunately, it is not possible to be precise about the level and complexity of musical performance expected of

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44 Note the different proportions of the altarpieces for Holmens Kirke (fig. 4) and Skt Morten (fig. 1). Each fits with the distinctly different proportions of the choirs in these two churches.
Schrøder. But his many years of performative experience imply a certain steady competence, as does the fact that he was salaried, not merely a well-meaning amateur. In addition, Skt Morten’s first documented organ dates to as early as 1587 and was built with royal and noble support, which suggests that it was a parish of some musical aspiration. But it must be noted that Lutheran organists were not expected to lead congregational singing. Until the early eighteenth century that was usually the cantor’s duty. Instead, organists supported the choir, improvised fugues and preludes on the tunes of well-known hymns and supplied incidental music ‘according to the mood of the liturgical season’. In larger churches, this sometimes meant including and supervising string ensembles and town musicians like drummers and buglers. As this suggests, Lutheran musical tastes tended towards the elaborate, towards richly textured rhythms and sounds.

Consequentially, one of the absolutely core skills of an early modern Lutheran church organist was the ability to supply a *basso continuo*, a particular kind of bass line. A *basso continuo* is a partially improvised set of chords played to accompany and supply harmonic structure to choral or solo song or to instrumental performance. In 1673 one Lutheran organist, Johann Jacob Hamischer of Danzig, ranked the ability to do this as being ‘of equal importance’ to the entirety of skills recounted in the previous paragraph. On keyboard instruments a *basso continuo* can be performed with the left or both hands and it can be simple or of considerable complexity according to skill and circumstance (see figure 6 and listen:). The example given here is an early modern copy of the first page of the organ part

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45 Admittedly, there were great variations in this. Herl, *Worship Wars*, pp. 131-138.
46 Ibid., p. 131
47 See, for example, the use of additional instruments in the Marienkirche in Lübeck under Buxtehude’s direction. Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude*, p. 377-380.
49 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxLpbQDr5TU (last accessed 18 January 2019). The organ is the *basso continuo* in this case, discreetly audible beneath and behind the strings and voices. On Buxtehude’s use of *basso continuo* see Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude*, pp. 380-385.
for a short cantata by Buxtehude composed around 1685. As it shows, a competent organist was expected to develop the *basso continuo* through structured improvisation. The only fully scored part is the basic tonal framework of all the lowest notes, that is, the bass line proper. However, this is supplemented by notation above each stave to become a kind of crib for improvising a fuller harmony, with the various numbers standing for specific tonal intervals. In relation to such notation, it is hard to be precise about original performance practises. But it seems that early modern organists were free to supplement the various given harmonies of a *basso continuo* with whatever rhythmical texture and tonal ornamentation they deemed appropriate, albeit always keeping in mind that they were accompanying, not competing with, the other voices or instruments.

So, to supply a *basso continuo* on the organ is, on the one hand, a subordinate because accompanying role, playing to subtend a greater musical whole. Yet, on the other, it is also crucial, essential in constituting this musical whole by bringing to it volume, structure, texture and harmonic depth; it is like an architectural framework. For example, Michael Praetorius, a prominent Lutheran composer and music theorist, noted in 1619 that the ‘best and most effective use’ of the *basso continuo* is to serve as ‘an artful compendium’ of the whole composition. Hence it is not coincidental that early modern choirs and ensembles were often conducted from the keyboard. In other words, to supply a *basso continuo* entailed being exquisitely attuned to part-whole relationships.

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50 The cantata drew on poetry by the medieval writer Arnulf of Louvain but translated into German and then back into Latin in the seventeenth century. Ibid. p. 140.
If, as is likely, organist Schrøder had to perform in this way to support a choir, however small, he would also have had to engage with polyphonic song, to which early modern Lutherans were exceedingly partial. Within the Lutheran repertoire of this period there are simple hymn settings for two, three or four voices, comfortably within the reach of competent amateurs, as well as more demanding works combining many voices, instruments and soloists. And the standard Latin term for polyphony, whether simple or elaborate, was ‘musica figurata’, ‘figured’, ‘shaped’ or even ‘sculpted music’.54 Here the term ‘figure’ does not mean a human or animal form, as it might in an art-historical context, but rather something like ‘ornament’, ‘secondary melody’ or even ‘orchestration’. So it is at least in part a spatial concept, a careful layering of sounds and rhythmical textures as they unfold across time, a point more readily grasped in musical performance than when reduced to language (consider, for example, the cantata given in note 49).55

‘Musica figurata’ was an indispensable aspect of the Lutheran musical tradition in part because Martin Luther himself had insisted that, after theology, polyphony was one of the most important means of grasping something of the divine:

It is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music. Here it is most remarkable that one single voice continues to sing the tenor [the melody or *cantus firmus*], while at the same time many other voices play around it, exulting and adorning it in exuberant strains and, as it were, leading it forth in a divine dance, so that those who are the least bit moved know nothing more amazing in this world.56

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54 Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, p. 98.
Luther understood polyphonic music to have a distinct structure. There is one chief voice, the main melody, often conveying a sacred narrative. In Lutheran music, this can either be gospel truth sung liturgically or the melodies of hymns and other devotional poems.

Luther's distinction between the ‘tenor’ and the other voices fits with the standard rhetorical hierarchy between ergon (‘work’) and parergon (‘by-work’), a term which may be translated as ornament or framing.57 A less sophisticated thinker might have argued that the subordinate voices within polyphonic song are merely additional and thus contingent, even dispensable. Yet for Luther that is not the case. Instead he describes the other voices as leading the tenor into a dance (‘chorea’), into disciplined yet exuberant movement.58 They bring liveliness to the melody and, crucially, structure and sustain the harmony – the kind of task that is also fulfilled by a basso continuo, especially when in support of a solo voice or instrument. In this manner hierarchy becomes joyful collaboration, the making of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts: the living voice of the gospel. ‘Musica figurata’ is not merely a spatial concept, it is an animating principle. Without it, the melody cannot dance; it becomes pedestrian, earth-bound. Or, put differently, ornament is absolutely intrinsic to any given composition, essential if one is to taste the divine through musical harmony.

While Schröder the organist may not have conceptualised all this in as sophisticated a fashion as Luther, a professor of theology as well as a keen amateur singer and musician,59 he would still have known much of it practically and experientially, from his years of performative experience, from working with and supporting polyphonic song. For example, he would have known that polyphonic song is profoundly embodied, a laryngeal, respiratory, oral, aural, visual, spatial and temporal practice. Just to keep good timing, from his swallow’s

58 For the full Latin text of this passage, see Leaver, Luther’s Liturgical Music, pp. 323-324.
59 Ibid., pp. 21-64.
nest organ he had to be able to see the various members of the choir as well as any other participating musicians, and they had to be able to see him.  

Resonant tendrils and imperfect consonances

How, then, does Lutheran musical culture help us to understand Schrøder’s ambitious Skt Morten altarpiece (figure 1)? The sculpture, of course, had one clear purpose: a backdrop to and framing for the Eucharist. In the early modern Lutheran church this core liturgical event was still considered a sacrament and was taken in both kinds, first bread and then wine. Moreover, Lutheran communion was an aural as well as a visual, tactile, olfactory and gustatory experience. For example, according to the ritual specified in the standard Danish hymnbook of the period, the required gospel passages, including the words of consecration, were to be sung ‘in a loud voice’. And there was a pervasive sense that the Eucharist was simply not complete without musical accompaniment, whether choral or instrumental, one reason why it is appropriate to use early modern Lutheran musical traditions to interrogate an early modern Lutheran altarpiece like that at Skt Morten.

In this altarpiece, one may detect a ‘tenor’ or main melody: the central biblical narrative, the eminently recognisable unfolding of the Passion narrative in a number of scenes distributed across space (figure 7) [Figure 7 here]. But that is less than half of the work. Around the narrative scenes there is also a type of ‘musica figurata’: a carefully wrought and

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62 Hans Thomisson, Den danske Psalmebog met mange Christelige Psalmer (Copenhagen: Laurentz Benedichts, 1590), unpaginated liturgical rubric, beginning on f. [372r]. The whole sequence contains clear musical notation to guide chanting across the entire service.
63 See, for example, Herl, Worship Wars, pp. 61-2, 73 and 75.
exuberantly rich ornamental framework of multiple voices supported by a *basso continuo*, all composed to structure and animate the main melody.

To show that this is a productive way of addressing the Skt Morten altarpiece, the rest of this essay mainly focuses on certain, particularly telling sculptural qualities and passages. First, there is the intricate surface of the sculpture, veined and textured by the tree-rings of the once living oak, its brownish-grey colour subtly changing with the light (compare, for example, figures 3 and 11). This surface – with its overall tripartite vertical framework, further partitioned into six horizontal sub-divisions – works like a *basso continuo*, a subordinate part which nevertheless structures and offers an ‘artful compendium’ of the whole. At the same time, the vertical framework gives urgency and direction to the main flow of figural scenes, from the ‘Last Supper’ in the predella and upwards through the ‘Passion’ and ‘Burial of Christ’ to the ‘Resurrection’ and the topmost figure of Christ Pantocrator (figure 5). The directional thrust of the ‘tenor’, the gospel narrative, is thus structured by the underlying framework, in particular by the vertical division articulated by means of Solomonic columns.

This overarching logic is neatly exemplified in one particular passage. The tripartite structure of the whole altarpiece is reprised in miniature in the threefold division of the scene of ‘Christ Washing the Apostles’ Feet’ (figure 8) [Figure 8 here]. It is worth examining this passage in some detail since it encapsulates how, in the Skt Morten altarpiece, pictorial narrative and decorative framework may be understood as relating to one another polyphonically.

In ‘Christ Washing the Apostles’ Feet’, the central narrative scene is framed on the left and right by two larger figures, the evangelists Matthew and John. This already gives polyphonic nuance to the ‘tenor’ or main voice, a reminder that the gospels, in fact, are comprised of four male voices. John looks raptly inwards, witnessing his own involvement in
the gospel story as the beardless youth with ewer and basin behind the kneeling Christ. This framing figure, then, is also a kind of consonance, all the more so because the direction of John’s gaze is the same as that of the four apostles in the niche on the right. Resolute attentiveness is first modelled inside the gospel narrative and then both reiterated and expounded in its setting (and, of course, with a further resonance in the gospel passages that were regularly chanted before the altarpiece, including the opening of John’s gospel as part of the communion ritual).64

John’s hand is poised above his book, as if about to write what he sees. In many ways, he is an outwards bridge towards the viewer, a classic sprecher figure, for it is through John’s evangelical writings that we too may witness Christ. At the same time, John’s focused gaze is a model for ours, encouraging concentration on the narrative. In a nicely judged contrast, on the left Matthew looks away, towards his attribute, the angel, source of divine inspiration, the guarantee of his gospel’s authenticity. Again, Matthew’s gaze reprises a detail in the central gospel narrative of the washing of feet, where one apostle in the left niche looks away from Christ.

These twin acts of looking in and away may be taken as a reminder that polyphonic music has spatial and visual dimensions; it involves a reciprocity of gazes. In a way, these gazes serve as a sophisticated yet appropriate ornamental framework for the ‘tenor’ voice, the central narrative, a point also evident in the scene below, the ‘Last Supper’ (figure 9) [Figure 9 here]. Seated on the left, Judas’s outward gaze follows that of St Matthew above (figure 10) [figure 10 here]. Judas, however, contemplates a very different reality: the moneybag proffered by the imp at his feet (figure 9). And Judas’s gaze is reiterated by the apostle seated diagonally behind him to the right. Meanwhile, on the far right, two apostles face each other,

64 Jesperssøn, Gradual, p. 69.
echoing the poses of John and Matthew above (figure 10). This scene, then, holds the saintly and the sinful in tension, as if to challenge the viewer’s own conscience.

Besides the framing evangelists, there are further supporting voices of considerable complexity. The first is the flowing ornamentation, which encourages the viewer to link up the two distinct scenes of the ‘Last Supper’ and the ‘Washing of Feet’ imaginatively and, in the process, to recognise much more than the well-worn gospel stories. For example, the oval basin in which Christ is washing feet, the narrative heart of the upper scene, is set atop a sort of cartouche which both repeats and elaborates its shape (figure 10). Below, this cartouche morphs into the crowning feature of the canopy above Christ’s head and this deft sculptural segue is but one of many to be found across the altarpiece. In musical terms, these may be understood as interludes, connecting devices between two discrete passages. By such means, narrative and ornament, sculptural figuration and decoration, flow into one another and, as in polyphonic music, the framing is simultaneously playful, enlivening and explicatory.

This point may be further expounded by attending to the quasi-organic ornamental detail: Matthew and John perch on seats growing out of forward-arching fronds tied into those that encircle the ‘Last Supper’ below (figure 8). And, from behind the two Evangelists, similar fronds sprout upward. These then grow into the three canopies above the ‘Washing of Feet’, where they connect this scene with the ‘Crucifixion’ above. As one traces this flow – a set of legato but lively interludes bridging the discrete passages of the Passion narrative – a new voice emerges.

The central canopy rewards attentive viewing with a surprise, a cheerful but strangely horned and bearded grotesque face looking back (figure 11) [Figure 11 here]. This face is one of several hiding in the ornament across the altarpiece (see also figure 3). They may stand for what Schröder would have known as imperfect consonances, that is, tonal intervals such as minor and major thirds, which bring tension and texture to a polyphonic arrangement. Or they
may even imply full dissonances, intervals such as seconds and sevenths, which were increasingly used for dramatic effect in polyphonic music from the sixteenth century onwards.\(^6\) Definitely, the faces come with a certain tension; some seem to laugh (figure 11) but others could be construed either as singing or screaming (figure 3). One possible reason for this conundrum, at least from an early modern Lutheran point of view, is the anxiety attendant on approaching the Eucharist. One was meant to do so in the right frame of mind, in a shriven state, with a humble faith in and desire for salvation. That, of course, would be grounds for joyous singing, for exulting with the angels in the *Gloria*. But what if the right frame of mind was not forthcoming or could not be maintained? Then, as many orthodox Lutherans worried, one risked eating and drinking one’s way to perdition.\(^6\)

At the same time, the grotesque above the ‘Washing of Feet’ (figure 11), with its half-ornamental, half-architectural form, draws attention to the equally complex but less unsettling herms below (or are they terms, as their busts are really scrolls?) (figure 8). Their faces are at least recognisably human but their headdresses mimic Ionic volutes, with which they support the three canopies. The ornamental and the figural flow into one another, it is barely possible to prise them apart. As in ‘musica figurata’, the polyphonic framing is carefully constructed to work with and set off the main scenes.

As should be clear by now, an energetic yet disciplined play between overall structure, narrative and ornament – as if between a ‘tenor’, its polyphonic framing and a supportive and simultaneously structuring *basso continuo* – may be observed across the altarpiece. One important facet of this is the creative tension between the monochrome wood and its richly wrought carving. The flowing ornament is amazingly exuberant but never quite

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\(^6\) The classic and most accessible account of these attitudes and developments remains Knud Jeppesen, *Counterpoint: The Polyphonic Style of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), transl. Glen Haydon, see especially pp. 10-17 and 97-103.

undisciplined, always subject to oaken solidity; the medium itself may be understood as the anchoring bass beneath the highly textured polyphonic composition. At the same time, especially in the Solomonic columns, there is a sense that the felled oak has come back to life, resurrected by accomplished human artifice into the form of a fruiting vine (figure 1). Master Schröder’s signature hides in amongst these vines. That, in turn, may be taken as an artistic metaphor for Christ’s salvific labour as ‘the true vine’, the fount of sacramental grace as it flows during Lutheran communion. With a nicely judged admixture of pride and humility, the sculptor-musician has added his own quiet voice, presenting his work as a lesser version of God’s.

It is in the nature of this kind of sculpture to generate a certain tension. Like a piece of well-orchestrated polyphony, it entails unceasing care for the overall effect as well as meticulous attention to detail: to ornamentation, to discrete passages, and to their sequencing and linkage by appropriate interludes. As in the Buxtehude cantata referred to above (figure 6), in Schröder’s altarpiece there is much to attend to. One might decide to focus on one or two distinct voices, or on the repeat of particular details, or on the elegant bridging of discrete passages, or on how the textual narrative is both dramatized and enriched by its setting. But, also as in the Buxtehude cantata, this does not mean losing sight of the greater whole even as one attends to abundant detail. In the altarpiece, this sense of a well-integrated whole even if constituted by many parts comes from its oaken solidity as well as from the clearly articulated tripartite vertical framework and its horizontal subdivisions, which structure both narrative and ornamental flow. In short, by means of its ornamentation, the Skt Morten altarpiece encourages one to link up creatively various parts of the salvific narrative, and, in the process, to reflect on one’s own place within it.

67 John 15:1.
68 On Schroder’s sparse but interesting use of signatures, see von Haven, Bogen om Abel Schröder, pp. 35-37.
Nevertheless, tension remains. This is largely because, both in polyphony and in art, ornamentation refuses to be contained semantically. It cannot be reduced to any fixed or straightforward verbal or textual meaning; it is overwhelmingly polyvalent. Thus the decorative detailing on Schröder’s altarpiece both complements and destabilises the Passion narrative. Much like the experience of listening to polyphony, the ornamentation and broader framework invite interrogation rather than mere recognition, and this means that the sculpture is not straightforwardly didactic or slavishly subordinate to its function as an altarpiece. Instead it both solicits and rewards enthusiastic aesthetic engagement which may, or may not, trigger deep reflection. That is the final point. Music is about experience as much as it is about thought or meaning. Accordingly, my analysis has been about structures, shapes and resonances as much as about figures and narratives. It has been about how Master Schröder the sculptor-cum-organist might have thought about his own work and, by extension, about some of the feelings, questions and anxieties that his fellow early modern communicants in Skt Morten – nobles, burgomasters, merchants, goldsmiths, bakers – might have brought to bear on their richly ornamental altarpiece.

As a whole, then, the Skt Morten altarpiece is not reducible to its function, indeed it could not be. It is simultaneously a piece of liturgical furniture and a musically structured sculpture that is nevertheless profoundly about sculpting, a virtuoso performance. Yet it remains eminently fit for its larger purpose. For it is a maxim of Lutheran theology that none of the senses and none of the faculties of mind can fully grasp God’s presence in the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{69} Luther’s lyrical passage on polyphony is phrased accordingly: ‘It is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his

wondrous work of music.\textsuperscript{70} This is the kind of sensory role that Schröder’s altarpiece proclaims for itself.

\textsuperscript{70} Leaver, \textit{Luther’s Liturgical Music}, p. 47.
Illustrations.

Figure 1. Abel Schröder junior, ‘Altarpiece’, 1667, Skt Morten, Næstved. Copyright: the author.
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Figure 3. Detail of figure 1: grotesque beneath left niche of ‘Christ Washing the Apostles’ Feet’. Copyright: the author.
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Figure 5. Hans Brüggemann, ‘Altarpiece’, 1541-1521. St.-Petri-Dom, Schleswig
(originally carved for the Augustinian church at Bordesholm). Photograph: Frank Vincentz.
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