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## Musical Company

Gerard ter Borch the Younger  
(Zwolle 1617 – 1681 Deventer)

ca. 1642–44

oil on panel

33 x 41.2 cm

signed in dark paint, lower right corner, along  
stool: "GTBorch" ("T" and "G" in monogram)

GB-105

Currently on view at: The National Museum of  
China, Beijing

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## How To Cite

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Situated within a middle-class domestic interior, a trio of musicians is engaged in an intimate recital. The ensemble features a young woman playing the virginals, an early keyboard instrument known for its sweet, pure tone.<sup>[1]</sup> She is flanked by two male instrumentalists: an elegantly dressed young gentleman sits across from her and plays a viola da gamba, while behind the virginals is a slightly older man who looks toward the others as he actively bows his viola da braccia. The features of the room—including the fireplace and canopy bed in the background, the woolen bedcovers tossed casually over the bench, and the scraps of paper and broken pipe on the floor—indicate that this is a common setting for a wide range of domestic pastimes and amusements.

In *Musical Company*, an important transitional work within Gerard ter Borch the Younger's oeuvre, the artist evokes the immediacy of a moment taken from life. Drawing inspiration from his own family in Zwolle, Ter Borch modeled the seated figure at the virginals after his younger half-sister Gesina (1631–90), who was a frequent model in his paintings. Gesina's distinctive profile and unconventional beauty appear in as many as twenty paintings throughout Ter Borch's career.<sup>[2]</sup> Here he has portrayed her at the tender age of about twelve or thirteen. Although *Woman at Her Dressing Table*, from ca. 1648–49 and formerly in a private collection in Paris (**fig 1**),<sup>[3]</sup> is sometimes regarded as Ter Borch's earliest depiction of Gesina in a genre painting, the present work predates it by several years and represents the fair-haired half-sister's pictorial debut.

The hypothesis that Ter Borch painted this scene directly from life is supported by the existence of a black-chalk underdrawing (**fig 2**). The character of the simple, free-flowing lines and abbreviated figures, which correspond so closely with the final painting, suggests it was made quickly on the spot as an initial sketch.<sup>[4]</sup> Ter Borch diverged only slightly from the original drawing in the final position of Gesina's profile and of the violinist's hat, and in the leaning angle of the kitchen maid's pose. The fireplace and canopy bed in the background are also faithfully executed, while an extra hat, omitted in the final work, can be spotted on the bench next to the bed.

Visible on the inside of the virginals' lid is the inscription "Musica...", the first word of *Musica Donum Dei* ("Music is the Gift of God"), an inscription often found on such instruments. On the panel next to the woman's lap are the letters "So...", which almost certainly allude to another frequently found

## Comparative Figures



**Fig 1.** Gerard ter Borch, *Woman at Her Dressing Table*, ca. 1648–49, oil on circular panel, 20 cm diameter, formerly private collection, France



**Fig 2.** Infrared reflectogram of *A Musical Company* (GB-105)



**Fig 3.** Gerard ter Borch, *The Suitor's Visit*, c. 1658, oil on canvas, 80 x 75 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

inscription, *Soli Deo Gloria* ("Glory to God Alone"). The easy rapport of the musicians suggests that they play together on a regular basis and are familiar with the music. As was common in such ensembles at that time, they have no written musical notations before them and play from memory, following each other through visual and audible cues such as the speed of a bow or the intake of breath. Ter Borch explicitly conveys the auditory qualities of music by portraying the viola da gamba player pulling his bow on an intoned string while the woman rolls out a full chord on the virginal, parting her lips as if to allude to the sound of a vocal melody.

The players are fully absorbed in their music and oblivious to the entrance of the kitchen maid, who pauses to rest her heavy basket of wood. Ter Borch contrasts the higher engagement of their musical harmonies with the implicit clatter of her menial household task. To this end, he uses dramatic *tenebroso* lighting, which selectively illuminates the ensemble while leaving the maid obscured in shadow.

The emotional rapport between the gentleman playing the viola da gamba and the young woman at the virginals connects the theme of music to that of love. Ter Borch guides our attention to their elusive psychological exchange by means of a vibrant red tablecloth and light reflections that sweep across the folds of the girl's satin dress and over the smooth surface of the viola da gamba. The girl's shaded eyes and steady gaze, directed at the male figure so fully engrossed in his playing, alludes to deeper affections of the heart. Although the theme of music making was a well-established metaphor for love and harmony, Ter Borch imparts an amorous overtone through suggestive nuances rather than through explicit narrative detail.<sup>[6]</sup> The decidedly private and introspective mood of the present work thus differs radically from the jovial musical companies popular in Haarlem and Amsterdam that Ter Borch would have encountered in the work of his older contemporaries, such as Dirck Hals (1591–1656), Jan Miense Molenaer (c. 1610–68), Pieter Codde (1599–1678), and Anthonie Palamedesz (1601–73). *Musical Company* offers a new direction in this genre and contains the seeds of an idiomatic approach that Ter Borch would develop subsequently in his fully mature work.<sup>[7]</sup>

*Musical Company* likely dates to about 1642–44, relatively early in Ter Borch's career. He probably painted it after returning from his voyages



**Fig 4.** Gerard ter Borch, *The Music Party*, ca. 1675, oil on oak panel, 58.1 x 47.3 cm, Cincinnati Art Museum, Bequest of Mary M. Emery, inv. no. 1927.421



abroad and before settling in Amsterdam, with trips to Zwolle to visit his family.<sup>[8]</sup> The work bears considerable stylistic resemblance to his *Card Playing Soldiers before an Ancient Ruin* in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, which Gudlaugsson dates to ca. 1643.<sup>[9]</sup> The painting is close in conception to the artist's earliest signed and dated work from 1635, also in Berlin, *The Consultation*, particularly in the dramatic use of light and carefully executed reflections.<sup>[10]</sup>

The painting introduces a number of features that would become hallmarks of Ter Borch's mature style of the 1650s and 1660s, including his extraordinary ability to portray the alluring visual effects of fabric—here foreshadowed in the play of light across the crinkled black satin of the young girl's dress—and his masterful depictions of genteel encounters between the sexes. The theme of love and attraction under the guise of music would become an enduring favorite. As demonstrated in works such as *The Suitor's Visit* in Washington (**fig 3**), from ca. 1658, and *The Music Party* in Cincinnati, from ca. 1668/70 (**fig 4**), Ter Borch would continue to explore the social rituals and power dynamics of courtship while treating the engagement of music with nuanced psychological inflection.

-Dominique Surh

## Endnotes

1. Edward Kottlick, *A History of the Harpsichord* (Bloomington, 2003), 127ff. On the theme of music and love, see *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Music and Painting in the Golden Age* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Kunsthandel Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder; Antwerp, Hessenhuis) (Zwolle, 1994), 43ff, 125.
2. Allison McNeil Kettering, "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin," *Art History* 16 (1993): 95–124, also published in W. Franits, *Looking at Seventeenth Century Dutch Art, Realism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, 1997), 98–115, 222–28; Allison McNeil Kettering, *Drawings from the Ter Borch Studio Estate*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1988).
3. Illustrated in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Gerard ter Borch* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit Institute of Arts) (New Haven and London, 2004), 84, under no. 17, fig. 1; see also Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007), 1:63, 64, n. 7.
4. A similar underdrawing, visible especially in the head of the female figure, was found through infrared reflectography in another of the artist's music-making scenes from ca. 1668: *A Woman Playing the Theorbo-Lute and a Cavalier*, in New York. See Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007), 1:70–74.
5. See E. Kottlick, *A History of the Harpsichord* (Bloomington, 2003), 127ff; P. Fischer, *Music in Painting of the Low Countries in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Amsterdam, 1972), 61ff.
6. On the theme of music and love, see Madga Kyrova, "Music in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," in *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Music and Painting in the Golden Age* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Kunsthandel Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder; Antwerp, Hessenhuis) (Zwolle, 1994), 41ff; A. P. Mirimonde, "Les sujets musicaux chez Vermeer de Delft," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 57 (1961): 29–52.
7. See, for example, works such as Anthonie Palamedesz, *Party Scene with Music*, mid-1630s, oil on panel, 63 x 89 cm, Wallraf Richartz Museum, Cologne, no. 1058; or Pieter Codde, *Cavaliers and Ladies*, 1633, oil on panel, 54 x 68 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-4844; and, also by Codde, *Dancing Party*, 163[9?], oil on panel, 50 x 89 cm, private collection. On the latter, see Edwin Buijsen, "Dancing Party," in *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Music and Painting in the Golden Age* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Kunsthandel Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder; Antwerp, Hessenhuis) (Zwolle, 1994), 174–77, no. 12.
8. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:257, no. C85, catalogued the painting as a lost work known only through documents, until it came to light in 1987 at public auction. Allison McNeil Kettering dates the painting to ca. 1642–44, while Otto Naumann suggests a slightly earlier date (see correspondence, on file).
9. Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, *Geraert ter Borch*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1959–60), 2:257, no. 25.



10. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Gerard ter Borch* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit Institute of Arts) (New Haven and London, 2004), 47–49, no. 2.

## Provenance

- C. E. E. Baron Collot d'Escury (his sale, Leeuwarden, 17 October 1831, no. 4).
- Christopher Rice Mansel Talbot (1803–90), Margam Castle, Port Talbot, Wales; and by descent (Sotheby's, London, 10 December 1986, no. 65).
- Saul Steinberg (1939–2012), New York [Richard L. Feigen, New York, by 2002 until 2006].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

## Exhibition History

- Bartlesville, Oklahoma, The Price Tower Arts Center, "Music's Power: Great European Paintings on Musical Themes," 28 May–10 July 2002, no. 2 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, "Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer," 25 June–16 October 2011; Miyagi Museum of Art, 27 October–12 December 2011; Tokyo, Bunkamura Museum of Art, 23 December 2011–14 March 2012, no. 6 [lent by the present owner].
- Dallas Museum of Art, "Vermeer Suite: Music in 17th-Century Dutch Paintings," 15 January–21 August 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, "Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

## References

- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. 8 vols. London, 1907–27. Translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28, 5:55–56, no. 151.
- Gudlaugsson, Sturla J. *Katalog der Gemälde Gerard ter Borchs*. 2 vols. The Hague,

1959–60, 2:257, no. C 85.

- Surh, Dominique N. “A Musical Company.” In *Human Communication in the Age of Vermeer*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Danielle H. A. C. Lokin. Exh. cat. Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art; Tokyo, Bunkamura Museum of Art. London, 2011, 48–50, no. 6.

## Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of horizontally grained, rectangular, wedge-shaped Baltic oak derived from a tree felled after 1630, has an earliest use date of 1638.<sup>[1]</sup> The unthinned and uncradled panel has bevels along all four sides. There are machine tool marks, two labels, and two chalk inscriptions but no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker’s marks along the panel reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The image was constructed extremely thinly and smoothly, the thinnest areas are through the central figure’s black skirt, sleeve and face.

The X-radiograph image is extremely thin. Only a few areas of the composition are faintly radio-opaque: the cellist’s proper right wrist cuff and proper right lower leg, the highlight along the cello’s proper right edge, and the central figure’s white, triangular shawl. Neither the faces nor the white shirt collars of the remaining figures are visible.

Infrared images captured at 780–1700 nanometers reveal a detailed, sketchy line underdrawing throughout the composition.<sup>[2]</sup> The images also reveal a compositional change to the maid along the right, who originally stood more vertically, and an underdrawn hat on the bench to her left, which was not executed in the paint stage.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the lower right corner along the stool but is not dated. It is inscribed in dark paint along the lid and front panel of the virginals.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2005 and is in a good state of preservation.

## Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Peter Klein’s 2008 dendrochronology report.
2. Longer wavelength infrared images captured with an InGaAs camera by Shawn Digney-Peer, paintings conservator, Metropolitan Museum of Art.