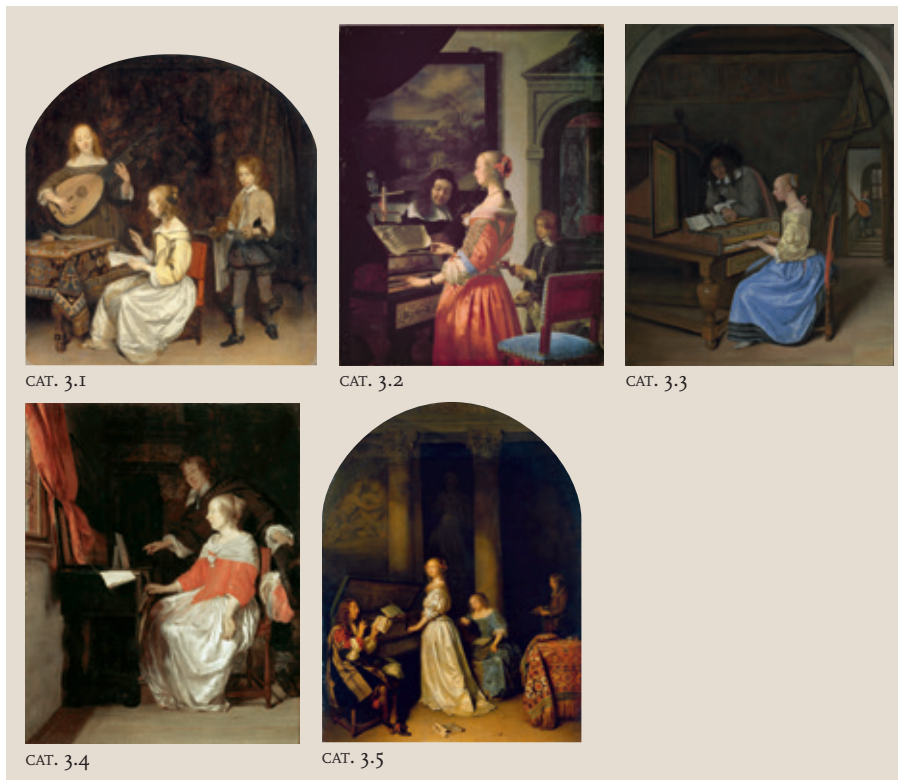


3.

MUSICAL DUOS

ERIC JAN SLUIJTER



In *Two Women Making Music, with a Page* (CAT. 3.1) Gerard ter Borch brilliantly transformed the motif of a man playing the lute and a woman singing (or vice versa), which had been rendered in numerous prints and paintings in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, into a novel and highly influential type of painting.¹ He isolated the two musicians, turned them into two women and enlarged their scale. He also situated them in a luxurious interior, the wealth of which is indicated by a heavy Turkish carpet on the table, a chair upholstered in velvet

and a tapestry covering the entire background wall. Ter Borch positioned the elegant women in a strong light against a dark background in order to clearly delineate them in their surroundings. He also provided them with graceful, civilised poses – avoiding any strong movement – and made the shiny white satin of the singer’s skirt, painted with miraculous virtuosity, the most eye-catching element of the composition. To enhance the atmosphere of affluence, Ter Borch added a pageboy, who courteously enters with a tray and drinks, a motif borrowed from earlier paintings of merry companies. Granting the boy such a prominent place was, however, new.

About a year later, Frans van Mieris adopted this page in his fabulous *Duet* (CAT. 3.2) of 1658. While the young Leiden painter referred self-consciously to Ter Borch’s composition, he inserted in the centre of his painting the elegant standing lady from Ter Borch’s *Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid* (CAT. 6.1), but changed her into a musician. Van Mieris must have known both paintings by Ter Borch well. By doing something different and new with Ter Borch’s innovations, he emphasised the artistic competition with the older master.² Van Mieris returned to the more common male–female interaction and changed the subject into an image of amorous courting. He exaggerated the stylised posture of the standing lady even more and elongated her proportions to underline her refined gracefulness. To emphasise the sinuous outline of the woman’s body, he placed her against the geometrical pattern of the horizontal and vertical lines of the black frame in the brightly lit background.³ Van Mieris also adopted the motif of the velvet-upholstered chair in the foreground, introduced by Ter Borch and repeated by many others, to clarify the foreground space and to invite the viewer to participate in the scene. It must have been Van Mieris’s intention to challenge connoisseurs to compare his manner of creating illusion with that of Ter Borch, and to evoke

amazement about the suggestion of light playing with great liveliness across all surfaces, painted in a breathtaking technique without visible brushstrokes.

The motif of a woman playing a keyboard instrument had been popular in prints and paintings of the late sixteenth and first decades of the seventeenth centuries (FIG. 25).⁴ By making it the magnificent focus of his painting, Van Mieris added a new theme to the repertoire of the painters of high-life genre. His colleagues, many of whom must have been familiar with this small panel, at once recognised the possibilities of this amorous duo in wealthy surroundings.

The first to respond to Van Mieris’s invention was his friend Jan Steen. It appears that in addition to Van

Mieris’s *Duet*, the two Ter Borch paintings known to Van Mieris must also have been accessible to Steen.⁵ His first painting with this subject, dated 1659, is one of his most finely executed works (CAT. 3.3).⁶ Steen was well aware, however, that in order to compete with Van Mieris he had to summon his greatest strength: liveliness of expression and humorous wit. His delightfully timid girl makes Van Mieris’s lady look overly sophisticated and artificial. Her concentrated and entirely natural pose immediately recall Ter Borch’s singing woman. She too is placed against a large tapestry covering the wall, which, for these painters and their audience, signalled an aristocratic interior.⁷ The young man casually leans on the

CAT. 3.1 Gerard ter Borch, *Two Women Making Music, with a Page*, c. 1657, oil on panel (arched top), 47 × 44 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des peintures, Paris.



CAT. 3.1

harpsichord, while a page approaches carrying an enormous theorbo-lute, to be used by the suitor to prove that he can harmonise with her. The lid of the instrument is inscribed with large capitals: *Acta Virum Probant* (actions prove the man).⁸

In Amsterdam, Gabriel Metsu addressed the theme of the woman at a keyboard instrument in a number of paintings.⁹ He must have been well acquainted with several works by Ter Borch, Steen and Van Mieris.¹⁰ His earliest painting of this subject, *Man and a Woman at the*

Virginal (CAT. 3.4) of about 1659–62, is a good example. Metsu used elements of Van Mieris's *Oyster Meal* – the woman's attitude and her position in relation to the monumental chimney – and combined them with the theme of a music-making couple.¹¹ He referred to Ter Borch's singing

woman from the latter's *Two Women Making Music, with a Page* (CAT. 3.1) more directly than Van Mieris by placing her in a strong light against a dark background, which makes her immaculate skin and spectacular satin dress stand out forcefully. At the same time, Metsu gave the space an



CAT. 3.2 Frans van Mieris,
The Duet, 1658, oil on panel,
31.6 × 24.9 cm, Staatliches
Museen Schwerin/
Ludwigslust/Güstrow.

CAT. 3.2



CAT. 3.3 Jan Steen,
*Young Woman Playing a
Harpsichord to a Young
Man*, 1659, oil on panel,
42.3 × 33 cm, The National
Gallery, London.

CAT. 3.3

entirely different character by revealing the light source: a window in the left foreground. It ‘explains’ the shadow in which the man is positioned. However, it seems that Metsu primarily aimed to emulate Steen’s *Young Woman Playing a Harpsichord to a Young Man*. He activated both the young woman and the hopeful lover trying to prove himself – the

latter singing his part, keeping time and swinging broadly his hat with flashy feathers that repeat the colours of the woman’s dress. Metsu demonstrated that nobody could match him in the combination of a highly sophisticated yet loose and flowing painting technique and, especially, in the animated but subtle expression of moods and passions.



CAT. 3.4 Gabriel Metsu, *Man and a Woman at the Virginal*, c. 1659–62, oil on panel, 31.4 × 25 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des peintures, Paris.

CAT. 3.4

Knowledgeable connoisseurs would have recognised Caspar Netscher’s *Song with Harpsichord Accompaniment* (CAT. 3.5) of 1666 as an updating of Van Mieris’s *Duet*. Netscher even included a page bringing in drinks on a tray. At the same time, he presented himself as Ter Borch’s star pupil and heir. He transformed Van Mieris’s graceful

young woman into an elongated version of a figure from Ter Borch’s *Gallant Conversation* of about 1654 (FIG. 67).¹² In contrast to Ter Borch’s ladies, however, his musician addresses the viewer.¹³ Netscher used the composition of the *Gallant Conversation* as his template: he changed the seated woman into a lavishly dressed male singer and relo-



CAT. 3.5 Caspar Netscher, *Song with Harpsichord Accompaniment*, 1666, oil on panel (arched top), 59.5 × 46 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

CAT. 3.5

FIG. 67 Gerard ter Borch, *Gallant Conversation*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 79.5 × 70 cm, Musée du Petit Palais (Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris), Paris.

FIG. 68 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman at the Virginal with a Gentleman* ('*The Music Lesson*'), c. 1662–4, oil on canvas, 74.1 × 64.6 cm, Royal Collection Trust, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



cated the man with the tilted head to the right of the standing woman, turning him into a young lady. Though the lighting of the figures against the dark background makes the construction of space Ter Borch-like, he depicted monumental Corinthian columns, between which a sculpture and reliefs can be seen, thus elevating the interior into a palatial gallery.¹⁴ Netscher's main contribution in this work was an enhanced refinement and lavishness of the dresses and, especially, of the ambiance.¹⁵

Johannes Vermeer's first response to Van Mieris's *Duet*, *Woman at the Virginal with a Gentleman* ('*The Music Lesson*') of about 1662–3 (FIG. 68), is highly idiosyncratic; the Delft artist emphasised all aspects that made his art different. The first impression is one of clarity created by light and severe geometrical shapes. The keyboard instrument, which in the previously discussed paintings was positioned perpendicularly to the picture plane to accentuate perspective lines running diagonally into space, has now been placed parallel to the picture plane in order to become part of the rectangular shapes defining the background. With this light-filled interior, Vermeer pushed to its limits Van Mieris's use of geometrical forms as a foil to



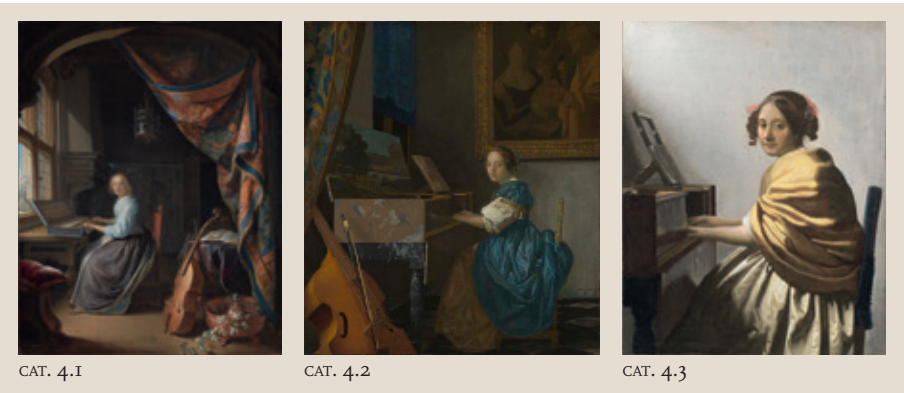
the human figures' sinuous elegance. The strongly accentuated orthogonals of the left wall and floor lead the viewer to the inevitable focus: the young woman before the virginal.

The connoisseur is invited to enjoy the conscious references to well-known masterpieces by Vermeer's peers – not only to Van Mieris's *Duet*, but also to Ter Borch's *Gallant Conversation* ('*The Paternal Admonition*') (CAT. 19.1). We are reminded of the woman tantalisingly seen from behind who does not acknowledge the suitor gazing fixedly at her face (see p. 214). The informed viewer might also recognise the soft reflection of the woman's face in the mirror; it offers a glimpse of the beauty that the painter withholds (CAT. 7.1). In great contrast to his contemporaries, however, Vermeer refused to grant a leading role to the descriptive imitation of textures of different materials. He only described with precision the folds and creases of the girl's yellow satin jacket, which envelopes her upper body and serves as the focal point of our gaze. The rest seems slightly out of focus. Paramount for Vermeer must have been the optical effect of taking in an entire room and becoming immersed in the total stillness of the scene.¹⁶

4.

INVITING DUETS

MARJORIE E. WIESEMAN



Dozens of paintings by Vermeer and his contemporaries feature women as solo musicians: in the company of others (CATS 3.1–3.2), alone and wrapped in musical reverie (CATS 5.1–5.3) or, as here, inviting an intimate duet. In composing paintings with a musical theme, the artist's major challenge was to get a mute and static image to suggest a live, audible performance. An outward glance, or an empty chair or musical instrument placed prominently in the foreground, could enhance the impression of almost-audible sound, luring the viewer with the promise of an intimate duet. This seductive trio presents a progressive refinement in the means by which the artist engaged the viewer, drawing him into the scene.

The invitation posed by the musician in Dou's *Woman at the Clavichord* (CAT. 4.1) is genteel but nonetheless clear. The curtain raised to reveal the scene also reminds us that we are entering an exclusive domestic space. In real life, etiquette and custom restricted visitors' access to certain spaces within the home, but paintings permitted a rare glimpse of areas normally closeted from view. The description left by the English traveller Joseph Taylor after calling

upon 'the prettiest woman in Rotterdam' gives a sense of the awe and anticipation he felt when invited to breach the sanctity of the more private areas of the Dutch home, and could easily have been written in response to paintings by Dou and Vermeer:

When I went to wait on her, I was carried up a noble marble staircase through a long dining-room paved with excellent marble and hung with Indian satin and adorned with curious china. And then through another room into a withdrawing room, where the lady was playing upon the harpsichord. It is impossible to tell you how I was delighted with her genteel reception, which was mixed with such an air of modesty and freedom that she appeared inexpressibly charming. After I heard her sing several Latin, Italian, French and English songs, and enjoyed the pleasure of a most engaging conversation, I retired home, melancholy at the thoughts of being so soon deprived of it.¹

Dou's musician gazes coolly at the viewer as her fingers dance across the keys of her clavichord. The quietest of all keyboard instruments, and requiring a technique that was difficult to master, the clavichord was ideal for practice, solo playing or to accompany small ensembles (FIG. 69). Uniquely among keyboard instruments, its particular action allowed a skilled player to control not only volume, but also variations in pitch and subtle effects of tone, including a type of vibrato. It was, therefore, a remarkably personal instrument. In opting for a clavichord, Dou counted on the viewer's knowledge of the instrument to awaken the impulse to draw closer to the painting in order to 'hear' it. A vacant chair on the left, and wine, a recorder, an open book of tablature and a bass viol on the right offer their own invitations. A bass viol (or viola da gamba) often appears propped in the foreground of musical scenes as a broad invitation for the viewer to join in the performance