

Stalls - An Angelic Orchestra

According to the *Dictionary of Art Terminology*, stalls are “wooden or stone benches intended for the clergy; they were placed along the walls of the presbytery and appeared mainly in collegiate, monastic, and cathedral churches. Stalls had high backs (often with a canopy), armrests, front-enclosed kneelers, and were usually richly decorated with sculpture or painting.”

In the monastic church in Lubiąż, stalls for the monks existed already in the Middle Ages, but unfortunately no information about them has survived. They were replaced by early Baroque stalls funded by Abbot Matthäus Rudolph von Hennersdorf (in office 1607–1636), which were sadly destroyed or plundered during the Thirty Years’ War. After the conflict ended and extensive modernization work in the monastery began, new stalls were commissioned from the sculptor Matthias Steinl.

The oak structure of the stalls consisted of sixteen seats on each side, arranged facing each other, and two additional seats placed at a right angle, closing the stalls on the western side. On the choir side, the entire arrangement was completed with two lower abbatial loges facing the main altar. Additionally, the presbytery was separated from the nave by an intricately forged screen, flanked on the western side by two side altars dedicated to holy nuns – St Ludgardis and St Scholastica.

Upon this architectural framework, a rich sculptural decoration was applied, dominated by lush, stylized branches of soft acanthus (*acanthus mollis*) forming canopy-like structures over the seats. From this dense acanthus foliage emerged music-making putti – playing instruments, singing, and holding various attributes. They were accompanied by inscriptions in the form of scrolls with quotations from the Bible (Psalms 96 and 150, the Book of Samuel) and fragments of the monastic rule referring to music. On the crowning cornice stood larger, graceful angels playing instruments – string instruments on the north side and wind instruments on the south. This impressive ensemble was complemented by a wide range of ornaments, including low-relief decorations on the backs and kneelers composed of acanthus motifs, shells, and angel heads, as well as powerful sculptures of lions guarding entrance gates leading to the seats.

The theme of this work was an angelic orchestra expressing worship of God through music and accompanying the monks in prayer. Yet it had nothing to do with earthly reality – such a selection of instruments could not have produced harmonious music in practice, and many were archaic, long unused in Baroque musical culture. This was an intentional artistic choice: the creators of the ideological program of the stalls (Steinl must have collaborated closely with the patrons) sought to express the music of the divine, the perfect harmony of the heavenly spheres, permeating the world yet inaudible and inaccessible to us. We humans possess only a memory of it, toward which we strive in creating earthly music.

The angel stalls of Lubiąż represent the earliest use in Silesia of the motif of the angelic orchestra (*musica sacra*), remarkable for its scale (unique even by European standards), consisting of as many as 56 putti and angels. They became a model for later elements of similar ecclesiastical furnishings created in the region, such as in the Cistercian monasteries in Krzeszów and Henryków.