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Monastic reform and liturgical practice. Interaction between plainchant and organ in northern Germany in the 15th century - a challenge for modern performance practice?

Introduction

The subject of this symposium is: *Monodien. Paradigmen instrumental begleiteten Sologesangs in Mittelalter und Barock*. Where medieval music is concerned, this theme poses several problems, because the terms “Monodie”, “Sologesang” and “instrumentale Begleitung” refer to music of the baroque era, and are not at all applicable to medieval music.

For this reason, I have chosen a broader approach for my lecture. I shall analyze the conditions of medieval music by focusing on medieval plainchant and the various ways it interacted with organs in the 15th century. This is a rather tricky undertaking in some aspects: quite a lot of such interactions are known, notably for the late Middle Ages, but it is difficult to interpret their concrete realisation.

I begin with a short introduction to modern performance practices of medieval plainchant and medieval organ music. Then I turn to 15th century sources from northern Germany to explore some forms of interaction between organ and plainchant which could be fruitful for modern performance practice.

I. Aspects of modern performance practice

Turning to modern performance practice, it is striking that performances of plainchant and organ music from the time before the Protestant Reformation are viewed as two completely different areas, which have barely any contact with each other.

On the one hand, liturgical organ music from the Middle Ages is now mainly performed as autonomous instrumental music, without any direct interaction with chant. On the other hand, liturgical plainchant tends to be performed a capella, with no interaction with the organ.

Solesmes

The fact that medieval plainchant today is almost exclusively performed a cappella is perhaps to some extent due to the influence of the restoration of Benedictine chant at the Abbey of Solesmes at the end of the 19th century. It seems to me symptomatic that Katherine Bergeron’s monograph *Decadent Enchantments - The Revival of Gregorian Chant at Solesmes* never even mentions the word “organ”. As the Solesmes père Dom Clair stated in an interview placed on YouTube, the idea of a “chant pauvre et universel”, a “poor and universal plainchant”, doesn’t include any form of interaction with organ.

The liturgical reform of the Roman Catholic Church and the birth of secular scholarly research into medieval liturgical manuscripts went hand by hand. From 1889, the monks of Solesmes published the famous series *Paléographie musicale* that provided scholars for the first time with facsimiles of the oldest liturgical manuscripts of the Middle Ages. Moreover, in 1903 the Abbey was granted the official privilege of publishing the liturgical books for the Roman Catholic Church, a privilege it still holds today. This alliance between scholarly research into medieval plainchant and chant restoration at the beginning of the 20th century resulted in a rather timeless manner of performing plainchant of all periods. This performance practice, without the participation of music instruments, is not at all in line with the liturgical situation described in late medieval sources from the Low Countries.

In this paper I focus on the interaction between chant and organ in late medieval liturgy in Lower Saxony, a region that was already rich in church organs long before the 15th century. I would like to illustrate some possibilities to revise chant performance practice to some extent.

II. Some aspects of the historical situation

Little information is available about organ music in the Middle Ages before the 15th century. Our main source is archeological remains of old instruments; references to their part in the liturgy are unfortunately scarce.

This unclear situation changed in the 15th century, when large numbers of organs were built in the Low Countries. At this time, organs were part of the standard equipment of churches that could afford them. Monastic convents and even beguinages made every effort to buy organs for their churches.

However, due to the influence of monastic reforms in the same period, conflicts arose between normative guidelines forbidding organs and daily performance of organ music in convents, especially in Lower Saxony.

a. Organ and Devotio moderna

In Lower Saxony, the Windesheim monastic reform in the spirit of the *Devotio moderna* in the 15th century was extremely influential on the way of life in the convents before the Protestant Reformation. In the 15th and early 16th centuries, the *Devotio moderna*, a reform movement which had arisen in the Netherlands, extended not only throughout that country, but also through Belgium, the western part of Germany, and the northern part of France, right up to the Alps. The Windesheim Chapter provided strict normative guidelines with regard to playing the organ during the liturgy and, already in the earliest edition of its *liber ordinarius*, even imposed a general ban on liturgical organ music.

Organs were in no way to be admitted to the liturgy. The reason for this rigid prohibition was the *fractio vocis* that could lead to *curiositas* and *levitas*: a merely superficial participation in the liturgy due to distraction by the music (*curiositas*) and a flippant cheerfulness (*levitas*). This levity was at odds with the targets of spiritual development to which adherents of the *Devotio moderna* aspired.

In 1464, a further ban on organ playing was published in the acts of the annual meeting of the Windesheim Chapter: “Just as we do not allow organs in the divine office, neither do we allow them in the dormitories because of the excitation they cause.” The ban on the organ was extended to the dormitory, where organs were apparently also used. The reason for this ban was the *excitatio* caused by organ playing, an inner excitement as dangerous as *curiositas* that might distract the singers from concentrating on meditation. The dormitory was

often the place where spiritual exercises were carried out, which is probably why organs had been placed there as well.

b. Monastic reform in northern Germany

In the context of monastic reform, the Windesheim ban on organ music was to be introduced in northern Germany as well. However, the German convents largely ignored the ban. In fact, in most of them a certain tension can be noted between normative guideline and concrete practice. It was not only the Windesheim reform that tried to forbid organs, incidentally; the Bursfelde reform, a contemporary sister movement in northern Germany, also formulated a prohibition of organs at their General Chapter in 1496. In Bursfelde circles, abstaining from organs was regarded as a sign of intact ascetism.

However, we know of only a few convents where the prohibition on organ playing actually was kept. The chronicle of the Benedictine nunnery of Ebstorf, for instance, refers to several consequences of the reform in the field of liturgy: besides adaptation of the liturgy and the separation of the convent from the church and the lay people (nuns could attend services only in the nuns' choir), notably the loss of the organ was a cause of much bewilderment and grief.

The Augustinian nunnery of Heiningen, which was reformed in 1451 by the Windesheim Augustinian Johannes Busch, is a good example of the tension between normative order and daily practice. A *liber ordinarius* based on the Windesheim Ordinarius has come down to us from this convent, and of course it includes the prohibition of organs. In the same period, however, we have two reports of organ playing during the probation of novices.

Many records are positive about the use of organs, even in reformed convents. Take the *Liber de reformatione monasteriorum*, for example, written by the same Johannes Busch. This work, one of the most important sources of the monastic reform in Lower Saxony, contains eyewitness accounts of the reform of 31 female convents and 29 male convents. For most of them, Busch had conducted the reform himself, or had strongly encouraged it. In this book, he refers nine times to occasions on which organs were played, without ever mentioning the official prohibition of the organ.

In practice, the more powerful convents with good political relationships to bishops and local lords were apparently more successful in evading the normative guidelines than those with less political power. This is clear from two Cistercian nunneries, Wienhausen and Medingen, both in the first instance convents for the daughters of the aristocratic and bourgeois elite of Lower Saxony. In the case of Wienhausen, close connections to the Dukes of Saxony (whose daughters were often nuns there) played an important role throughout the abbey's history. In 1469 it was reformed by Johannes Busch, and was therefore confronted with the prohibition of organ playing. The chronicle of Wienhausen reports on this problem in connection with visits of patres and preachers from outside the convent, who ordered that "no organ or other instrumental music should be heard any longer during matins and vespers." However, apparently this order was not followed by the nuns. A charter from 1483 allowed the organ to be played on high feasts, notably during Mass and Vespers. But since the organ stood in the church, outside the monastic enclosure, the nuns were not allowed to play it themselves any longer and had to leave this task to secular clerics. Between 1489 and 1495, a new organ was built in Wienhausen with the financial support of the Duke of Saxony.

Near the city of Lüneburg, a very wealthy city in the Middle Ages thanks to the salt trade, the Cistercian nunnery of Medingen was for centuries the 'home convent' for the daughters of the rich Lüneburg bourgeoisie. In 1479, through the influence of the Bishop of Lüneburg, the convent was reformed by nuns of Wienhausen Abbey, in the spirit of the Windesheim reform.

Medingen had a notable organ tradition already before the reform, and it continued afterwards. In the first half of the 15th century the church had been extended and –besides a big organ in the church – an organ had been installed in the nuns' choir. The nuns used to play this choir organ during services of the Divine Office.

Organ playing was restricted in Medingen after the reform. But thanks to their close connections to the Bishop of Lüneburg, the nuns were able to find ways to avoid a general interdiction on using this instrument. In an episcopal dispensation, they achieved not only the promise that they would be allowed to eat meat during Lent in a separate refectory, but also the concession that they could continue to play the organ as they were accustomed during feasts of the apostles and other high feasts. During the Hours, the organ (presumably the one in the choir) was to be played by a nun who had been specially trained for this task.

Indeed, numerous indications given in manuscripts from Medingen point to a lively practice of organ playing during Mass and Office, even after the monastic reform.

c. The organ in Medingen

To familiarize ourselves more closely with this instrumental practice in Medingen, four medieval illustrations of nuns playing organ, still fairly unknown, are particularly interesting.

The first illustration is part of a lost cycle of 15 medieval panel paintings that originally hung on the walls of the dormitory to illustrate the history of the nunnery. In the 17th century, the cycle was copied by Johan Ludolph Lyßmann, the Lutheran minister at Medingen. Plate 12 [slide] shows the relocation of the nuns from Alt-Medingen to Neu-Medingen in 1330:

The younger nuns, who had moved first, warmly receive the older nuns and children on their arrival from Altmedingen, welcoming them with bells and organ playing. In the church, a nun can be seen playing the organ. A young boy operates the bellows, and another rings the bells.

A similar scene of organ playing is painted in a Medingen prayer book from the time after the 15th century monastic reform. [slide] Here too a nun is playing the organ and a boy is ringing the bell and operating the bellows at the same time.

Two other illustrations from Medingen prayer books depict a scene of two nuns playing the organ [slide].

We all know that it is quite risky to interpret illustrations to obtain precise information about musical instruments. Normally they were not painted with a view to giving technical instructions about building instruments. Nevertheless I think we can derive some information from these examples.

The three 15th-century illustrations from the prayer books share some significant similarities. Each time the nuns are sitting in the same position along the side of the instrument. Their feet can be clearly seen, touching some sort of sticks that can probably be interpreted as pedals. Their hands touch a kind of stops with handles. As we are told by the chronicle of the nunnery, a new choir organ was built in the first half of the 15th century. So perhaps these illustrations refer to this actual organ, but there are some problems about this interpretation I would like to discuss with you.

1. It seems that the same type of organ is shown in all illustrations, a type that for the most part resembles the famous Theophilus organ from the late 12th century, as painted in the Rutland Psalter in the 13th century [slide]. In both scenes, a boy operates the bellows [slide] – but in fact in Medingen, after the monastic reform, a boy - probably a pupil of the provost's school -, would not have been allowed to have any contact with the nuns.

2. The organ in the miniatures shows big slides to play on. The way they are painted doesn't make it clear whether these are "Tonschleifen", the forerunners of the keyboard, which according to Theophilus had to be drawn horizontally and then switched back again. It is possible, too, that these are the more modern 'claves', broad keys to be pushed down, as reported in the case of the famous Halberstadt-organ [slide]. By Theophilus' account, organs with Tonschleifen often had to be played by two players together in order to move more quickly between the notes. This could be an indication that the instrument painted in the prayer books featured Tonschleifen.

But there are also some important differences between the Medingen organ and the Theophilus organ, which might provide some important information for us. For instance, the pedals the nuns are playing: Theophilus does not mention pedals. Already in the 14th century, pedals were used to play Bourdon pipes in the Netherlands, creating a drone sound.

Another important detail is that it is not David who is the musician here, but nuns. These organ illustrations are the only miniatures in the prayerbooks that show ordinary people playing instrumental music – all the others show angels or David in this role. It must have been an important detail for the painter that the nuns themselves played the organ.

The type of organ painted is not quite certain, as only one of the illustrations shows the range of pipes running from big to small, as is typical for choir organs. [slide] Two miniatures show two equal ranges of pipes like the organ from the panel painting. As far as the nuns playing the instrument are concerned, all three illustrations most probably show the organ in the nuns' choir that was installed by the provost Töpfer in the early 15th century. However, it must have been an instrument with pedals, and probably still with a Blockwerk if we take the Tonschleifen as a real fact. In the first half of the 15th century, bourdon pipes were combined with large blockwerk organs; later the bourdon pipes were combined with smaller organs as choir organs as well. As you can see, there are many questions left about the Medingen organ, which cannot be solved or even mentioned in this paper.

Another important aspect of the three miniatures is the combination with plainchant. All three miniatures bear the words "Ergo die ista", the incipit of the last double versicle from the Easter sequence *Laudes salvatori*, which was sung during daytime masses on Easter Sunday. This versicle appears [slide] in the Hildesheim manuscript on fol. 44r (A) in a banner without musical notation; on fol. 119r (B) it is written beneath the organ, and in the Copenhagen Manuscript (C) the text, with musical notation, is integrated into the organ. In A it is combined with the *Te Deum*, in C with the low German hymn *Also heylich is desse dach*.

In addition to the visual combination with the organ, moreover, some text rubrics refer to interaction between chant and this instrument. For instance, the rubric "post matutinas per organa" in the Hildesheim manuscript is followed by *Illuxit dies quam fecit dominus*, the incipit of versicle 9a of the *Laudes salvatori*, which must somehow have been sung in combination with the organ. According to the rubrics, the whole sequence was sung by the nuns after matins (post matutinas), together with the organ.

In short, these miniatures point to a liturgical practice in Medingen that is also documented in other Medingen sources. A manual for the provost of Medingen from the time after the monastic reform prescribes the combination of *Ergo die ista* with the low German song *Also heylich is desse dag*: the song is to be sung by the lay congregation of the Easter mass, as a refrain to *Ergo die ista*. But according to the manual, this was not an interaction between the singing nuns and the organ, but between the clerics and the lay people: the congregation sang the Low German stanza as a refrain between the Latin versicles of the sequence sung by the clerics. Interaction between organ and chant is only reported for the Office – Matins – and must have taken place in the nuns' choir, the location for singing the Office.

III. Some clues to interaction between organ playing and singing in the 15th century

But how could interaction between organ and chant have worked?

a. Liturgical occasions for playing the organ

De facto, the organ was played even after the monastic reform, but the use of this instrument was bound by strict rules. It was a highlight limited to high feasts such as Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and feasts to honour important saints, such as the Virgin Mary and the apostles. During these feastdays, organs were mainly played during Mass and the most important daytime Offices: Matins and Vespers.

This is apparent from Johannes Busch's *Liber de reformatione monasteriorum*: he mentions organ playing nine times in all, and four of these instances refer to Vespers. In Wienhausen nunnery as well, the organ was only allowed to be played on high feastdays in Mass and Vesper services.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the organ was played in combination with some favourite musical genres, such as sequences and the *Te deum* at the end of Matins, as we have seen in the Medingen prayer books.

During Mass, the organ was used mainly in the context of Ordinary chants, as is shown by numerous adaptations, notably of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*. Some Proprium chants were also given emphasis by the organ, particularly if they had an important liturgical position. The responsory *Regnum mundi*, for instance, had a key function in the context of the probation of novices in many nunneries, a high feast for every convent. In the Augustinian convent of Heiningen this chant was to be combined with organ.

b. Kinds of interaction between organ and plainchant

I would now like to discuss some kinds of interaction between organ and singing, as revealed by some sources from the North German monastic reform.

Today, the best known is the alternatim practice, chant in some way alternating with organ music. Already in the late Middle Ages it is demonstrated in manuscripts such as Edinburgh 33 [slide], a 15th century gradual written in the diocese of Utrecht, with some Kyrie and Gloria additions with indications for organ and choir to perform. [slide] While the alternatim performance in this manuscript is highly standardized, some testimonies from Lower Saxony reveal a more flexible manner of interaction between organ and plainchant. [slide]

- Substitution of entire chants

The organ could play entire chants in substitution for choral singing. To judge from a contract for organists from the Oude Kerk in Delft from 1451, the organ played the antiphons in their entirety and chant was limited to the psalmody. Another document from the same church from 1450 ordered that the introit of Mass and the antiphons of all important feasts should be played on the organ. Sometimes substituted chants were to be repeated immediately by the choir. The 15th-century ordinal of the Mariakerk in Utrecht prescribes that during procession the *Alleluia Nonne cor nostrum* was first to be played by the organ and then to be repeated by the choir.

The documents of Lower Saxony are less clear about this interaction, but probably point in the same direction.

In the *liber ordinarius* of the Augustinian nuns in Heiningen, a similar procedure is envisaged for the transition from the probation of the novices to the Mass: "The introit of the Mass should be started by the organ immediately, and meanwhile the convent should climb up to the nuns' choir, then, after confession, the Prior should continue the Mass as usual."

Whether the whole introit was played on the instrument without any singing is not precisely noted. As we know from similar documents, the probation rite itself was sung by the novices, the nuns, the prioress, the bishop and the clerics, while the Mass following this ritual was sung only by the clerics. Thus the clerics may have sung at least a part of the introit while the nuns were climbing up to their gallery.

Similar questions arise from a report of Johannes Busch on a Mass following a procession: [slide] “The provost climbed up to the choir and prepared to celebrate the service solemnly and to sing Mass with the organ.” If we interpret this report literally, the provost would have fulfilled the role of the cantor and the organ that of the choir. But this would be an extremely rare case, considering all the people who usually participated in a service and in the preceding procession. More probably Busch simply aimed to emphasize the highly solemn character of the day, that included a procession and participation of the organ during Mass.

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- *Substitution of all chant by the organ*

Yet clearly extraordinary use of the organ is reported as well. A special situation regarding performing organ music resulted from a moral conflict. When the mighty Cistercian abbey of Marienrode declared an interdict on the whole town of Hildesheim because stones had been stolen from the abbey’s stone quarry, Johannes Busch was greatly troubled. This ecclesiastical penalty prohibited Mass services in all churches and monasteries of the town, including the monastery of Sulta, whose prior Busch was at the time. The bishop of Hildesheim did not agree with Marienrode and ordered that all religious institutions should simply ignore the interdict. Busch felt a moral conflict: on the one hand he didn’t want to have a run-in with the bishop for not following his orders, on the other hand, according to Canon Law, ignoring an interdict carried the risk of losing eternal life. Busch found a clever way out. He cancelled all services in compliance with the interdict, but cheated the bishop and the local lay people who attended services in Sulta during high feasts by pretending to celebrate. Instead of singing he ordered that the whole service be played on the organ.

He used the same trick to cheat lay people who had been excommunicated during the interdict and who, by Canon Law, were no longer allowed to attend services – though they did so nevertheless. First the canons regular celebrated themselves behind closed doors, then the bells were rung and vespers were celebrated solemnly for all people – on the organ alone.

Obviously the organ could to a large extent take over the function of a choir. Services took place musically, but the liturgical formulas were not declaimed or sung. Therefore, according to Canon law, this kind of celebration was invalid and Busch was not violating the interdict. He was not caught disobeying the orders of the bishop either, because the lay people listening to the organ obviously didn’t realize that there was no singing of plainchant at all.

- *Simultaneous performance?*

Busch’s report brings us to the last aspect of such interaction: is there evidence for simultaneous performance of chant and organ?

The kind of interaction we generally refer to as “instrumental accompaniment”, i.e. the simultaneous performance of chant and instruments, is not documented for organ and chant until the *Caeremoniale episcoporum* of 1600, at a time when medieval Blockwerk organs had become obsolete. Thus one important obstacle for this kind of interaction, the imbalance in volume between organ and singers, had vanished thanks to new technical possibilities in organ construction. In the time of the Blockwerk organ, a balanced use of organ and voice simultaneously is scarcely imaginable. Michael Praetorius, in his *Syntagma musicum*, gives the following description of the big Blockwerk organ in the cathedral of Halberstadt :[slide] “The large Praestants and the low manual compass, which did not rise high enough for

lightness of sound, together caused a deep coarse rumbling, as of dreadful distant thunder, while the many-ranked mixture [i.e. undivided chorus] gave an exceeding shrillness, strong, loud and powerful.” Scholars have been right to doubt the idea of simultaneous practice in the Middle Ages. Voices – and more importantly, the text – could simply not be heard or understood properly in purely acoustic terms.

Yet the stories about Busch cheating lay people who attended services took advantage of this loud sound of medieval organs. The organ must have been very loud, too loud even to hear the choir combined with it in normal circumstances during services. And yet it must have happened that both were performed together, even if chant could then not be heard, otherwise lay people would not have been content with hearing only the organ. In a large church, the jube and a powerful organ separated lay people and choir not only visually, but also acoustically: it was not possible to listen to the choir far away when the organ – a Blockwerk organ – was played.

Busch equally referred to the powerful sound of the organ in a report about a sister who resisted the monastic reform. When the nun was threatened that she would be taken away in a carriage as punishment for her resistance, she argued that she was not able to hear Busch, because the strong blowing of the organ had hindered her – so nobody could blame her.

IV Some performance perspectives

Back to modern performance practice again.

The number of references to interaction between organ and chant in Lower Saxony in the 15th century is surprisingly high – and at the same time disappointingly low: a huge number of examples show that the organ was indispensable during the liturgy of high feasts, but the reports tend to be very general in nature and reveal few details about the precise practice. In most cases, “in organis” was enough to point to the liturgical participation of the organ.

And yet, even scarce information could bring some essential nuances to modern performance practice of medieval plainchant. I would like to finish my paper with some suggestions:

First of all, more attention should be paid to the geographical and historical background of the music performed. A distinction should be made between performance of St. Gall plainchant from the 10th century and North German plainchant from the 15th century, between music on a ferial day and a high feast, between a sequence and an offertory.

Secondly: interactions with organ should be applied, but in a differentiated way. *Te deum*, *Kyrie* and *Gloria* chants from 15th century North German manuscripts, for instance, could more regularly be performed with organ – alternatim, in repetition or even simultaneously with plainchant. This applies equally to all feastdays: notably sequences or hymns for Easter, Christmas or Marian feasts could be performed more often with the organ.

Thirdly: we should take advantage of information such as the use of bourdon pipes at Medingen nunnery. The realization of their somewhat drone-like sound could add an interesting tint to modern performances.

The result would be more variegated performances of medieval plainchant, reflecting the colourful liturgical culture of the late Middle Ages, not only in cathedrals and courts, but even in the convents of the Windesheim reform movement. But to apply this approach successfully, I think we first have to overcome some mental restrictions of the Solesmes liturgical reform dating from the end of the 19th century.

Thank you.