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Music notation in Medingen manuscripts preserved in Oxford

Ulrike Hascher-Burger

The first music notations from the Middle Ages showed a high degree of geographical variation. Whereas nowadays we are using the same classical music notation all over the world, medieval notations varied from region to region, each using its own set of characters. What they have in common is that they had not been written on staves but initially in the margins alongside the texts, later above the texts in the “open space” between two lines.

Around the year 1000, the first manuscripts appeared in Italy with music notation written on stafflines. The staff system was a big success: during the next three centuries it spread across the entire continent, from south to north and from west to east. Around 1300, the staff notation had been introduced in the whole of Europe. As infrastructure got better and traveling became more and more easy, medieval music notation became increasingly uniform. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, around 1500, the number of notational types had been reduced to two major systems of music notation: rhythmic notation and notation without rhythmic indication. Plain Notation was used notably for liturgical manuscripts with monophonic chant. Here again two main types can be distinguished: Gothic notation in countries north of the Alps and in the east, and Square notation in countries south of the Alps and in the west. But whereas the staff system spread out over the whole of Europe, some Northern German convents continued to use staffless notation until the 16th century as well. One of these convents was the Cistercian nunnery of Medingen.

In Oxford libraries four manuscripts from Medingen have been preserved.¹ All of them use Gothic notation, typical for late medieval liturgical manuscripts in Northern Germany. But there are some particularities: in these manuscripts, as in others from Medingen, too, staffless notation is used next to staff notation. Which kind was written in which manuscript, and which specific codicological conditions were required, will be the questions I deal with today.

Let's begin with **O1**. In the main part of this prayer book staffless notation has been used, whereas in the additional part chant has been written on staves with clefs. On **fol.90r** we see the incipit of *Salve festa dies*, an well known procession hymn sung in the Easter vigil. It is evident that this page has not been written in accordance with musical conventions, but those of a prayer book. Each line is filled with text with no space left for staves. The music notation is squeezed into the small space between the text lines. The notation is in red colour, so it can be seen on first sight. In the additional part, from **fol. 284r** onwards, the layout is adapted to musical needs with enough space for staff notation with clefs. This layout conforms to a liturgical chant book, not a prayer book. However, a third manner of writing music notation can be found in **O1** on **fol. 36v/37r**: The Kyrietrope *Kyrie. Salve nox preclara* begins with staff-notation, but after two lines it continues staffless. Here the layout combines elements from both staff notation and staffless notation: Each second textline is

¹ O1: GB-Ob: MS. Latin lit. f. 4; O2: GB-Ob: MS. Latin lit. e. 18; O3: GB-Okc: Ms. 18; O4: GB-Ob: MS. Don. e. 248. For manuscripts from Medingen visit the website [Medingen Manuscripts](http://MedingenManuscripts.com).

left empty providing space for staffless but diastematic notation: the pitch is not shown as accurately as with staves, but the melody can be reconstructed quite easily.

In **O2**, music notation has been used in the first two parts. We see some incipits with music notation in the liturgy of the burial on **fol. 81v**, all with staves. As is usually the case in liturgical manuscripts, the letters of the chant texts are smaller than those of the prayers to gain space for stafflines leaving one text line empty. However, only one line is given with the incipit of the chant in question. In this part of the manuscript, the texts spoken by the provost were more important than the antiphons sung by the choir. In contrary, the first part, the *Liber Ordinarius*, is almost completely focused on liturgical music, most of it written on staff lines. But here, too, differences can be observed. On **fol. 49v** and following, [Laudes Salvatori](#), a well known Latin Easter sequence sung by the priests, has been interpolated with the German *Leise Crist is upstanden*, sung by the parish community. Whereas the Latin text is written completely down, only the incipit and the end of the German *Leise* have been recorded. Again this is due to the function of the book: the provost only needed the Latin chant, some indications of the German *Leise* were sufficient.

In **O3**, music notation has been added only once, to a further unknown hymn in honour of St. Maurice on **fol. 149r**.² Again this hymn is adapted to the layout of a prayer book with no extra space left for music notation. As is typical for hymns, only the first stanza has been notated, and the beginning of the second one until the end of the line, while the other stanza's on **fol. 149v** remained without music. They have been sung to the same melody, so they needed no music notation.

O4 finally mainly contains staffless notation. On **fol. 103r**, the incipit of the antiphon [Intende in me et exaudi me](#) is huddled between the lines, probably as a later addition. In the right corner above, the word "Quarti" indicates the psalm tone (*quarti toni*), the simple melody in which the psalm had to be sung, combined with the first three notes of this tone. In contrast, on **fol. 277v** the responsory for the Office of the dead, [Subvenite sancti dei](#), is written in the manner of liturgical books on stafflines with clefs.

Medingen manuscripts in Oxford and abroad show a wide range of layout concerning music notation. The choice was not made at random. First of all, the layout of the music notation depended on the function of the manuscript. In books for liturgical use as O2 it was necessary to write music as clear as possible to guarantee a faultless development of the liturgy. In a private Psalter as O4, music notation is exceptional, in liturgical Psalters only the antiphons and a few other chants accompanying the psalms show music notation. And in prayer books normally no music was written at all. In this respect Medingen prayer books such as O1 and O3 are unique. Music notation here probably has been used as an aid to memory, squeezed between the lines, due to the layout of this kind of manuscripts.

Prayer books had to be handy and compact, there was no superfluous space left for music notation. Thus using staffless notation didn't mean the nuns were not familiar with the notational conventions of their time, as demonstrate O2 and small quires with songs or chant notated fullout as in O1. The choice of staffless notation in prayer books is rather due to a creative handling of this manuscript type.

That brings me at last to the question: why should music notation be added to prayer books at all? Medingen prayer books combine three kinds of texts: prayers, meditations and liturgical chant grouped together in liturgical-thematic order. As we know, the late medieval reform movement of the Modern Devotion – the spiritual background of the monastic

² Foto on database [Musica Devota \(University of Rostock\)](#)

reform in Lower Saxony – regarded music as a catalyst for emotions. In their concept, meditation had to be combined with singing and prayer to achieve successful spiritual growth. The Medingen prayer books date from the time after the monastic reform, when the ideas of the modern devotion had already taken root at Medingen. They manifested themselves in this new kind of prayer books, combining prayers with meditations and liturgical chants to sing in private context, loudly “in the mouth” or quietly “in the heart”.

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Henrike Lähnemann, Website *Medingen Manuscripts*: <http://medingen.seh.ox.ac.uk/>