

## Music and music manuscripts from medieval convents

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### I Introduction

The books that have been produced in the European Middle Ages are called "manuscripts".<sup>[1]</sup> This term is derived from Latin "*manu scriptum*", that is: written by hand. And indeed: these books are written by hand and not printed like modern books. It is not earlier than the 15<sup>th</sup> century that books have been printed in Europe. For around 1200 years before, in Europe books have only been written by hand.

Most medieval books have been written by monks for monastery libraries, sometimes big libraries, where a huge amount of books has been copied and preserved.<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, information about many famous philosophers and other authors of Western Antiquity is only available today because their works have been copied by medieval monks. Only from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a bigger amount of books has been written by lay people, too.

Most books written in the Middle Ages were liturgical books. And until today, most medieval manuscripts that have survived the Middle Ages and the centuries thereafter are liturgical manuscripts as well. These books preserve all texts and all music sung during Mass and Office in Christian churches, monasteries and nunneries.

In this paper, I first introduce some general aspects of manuscript production and music manuscripts. After this I focus on prayer books with music notation, a special kind of manuscripts from a late medieval nunnery in North Germany. Finally I present some reasons why this investigation method should be an important part of musicological research.

### II Manuscripts

Medieval manuscripts are all unique. There are never two identical books, even given the case that one has been copied from the other. Identical books can only be produced by printing, hand writing always results in exemplars with major or minor variations, and therefore each handwritten book is unique.

From books written for the general public to [private] notebooks, all kinds of books have been written in the middle ages. Due to their specific function, we can distinguish several types. Books with a representative function for instance are bibles, containing the gospel and other texts that are important for churches and cloisters, for private reading and celebrations of the divine office. Bibles and some late medieval prayer books are very precious books that have been decorated with expensive materials such as gold, silver, ivory and gems.

Some books have been written with silver- and gold ink on purple parchment. Such valuable books were intended to demonstrate the honor of God and the wealth of the owner.

Books for private use normally are much smaller and less expensive, because they have little decoration. Notebooks are even less representative, they are written on poor material, often remainders of paper or parchments. They are written very quickly in a personal handwriting and therefore are more difficult to read.

Among the liturgical books there are also different types, books for mass and books for the office, books with music notations and books lacking these. Liturgical books have been written very accurately because they had a function during the liturgy. It was important that texts and chants could be read and sung without mistakes, so all characters have been written clearly.

### **Manuscript production**

Until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, manuscripts were written mainly on parchment.<sup>[3]</sup> For this material, animal skins were shaved, tanned, spanned on a frame and dried in a long procedure. Afterwards it got cut into pages and treated with chalk so that the surface became soft and even.

It was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> century that paper and paper production became known in the West. The technique of making paper has been invented in China in the second century and this knowledge has been transmitted from China via the Arabic world to Spain, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century still under Arabic authority. From that time on, paper mills were built throughout Europe, and the knowledge of producing paper from old cloths and water spread over the whole continent. At the end of the Middle Ages parchment manuscripts were only used for very exclusive manuscripts and prints. Most books were written on paper which was much cheaper than parchment.

Producing parchment manuscripts was very expensive. For a book such as a bible for instance, the skins of a whole flock of around 150 animals – sheep, goats or calves – were needed. Therefore, manuscripts were used for as long as possible, some of them even for centuries. When books could no longer be used, many of them were cut and reused again.<sup>[4]</sup> Single pages and page fragments served as book-covers or fly-leaves to protect new manuscripts. Today we possess many medieval book fragments still preserved in old books or dissociated from them. They are important testimonies of a lot of medieval texts which would otherwise be unknown.

When the parchment was completely prepared, it was cut into big squares. These squares were folded up several times and cut. The result was a collection of several double pages called a 'gathering' or 'quire'. Medieval books don't count pages but the front side and the backside of a 'folio': for instance *4 recto* (4r, front side) and *4 verso* (4v, back side). Each page was lined out according to a layout scheme which left more or less broad margins unwritten. Text and music notation were written on the lines, and illustrations could be painted in the margins.

Finally, all gatherings were stacked and bound into a hard or soft cover. For cheap manuscripts one normally used soft covers made of old parchment. In the case of expensive manuscripts, wooden planks which were covered with leather had to protect the gatherings. These hard covers sometimes are made of richly ornamented silver or ivory blades, covers for books that belonged to kings.

### **The writing process**

After having drawn the lines, the text was written. The type of script influenced the distance of the lines: formal scripts as the late medieval *gothic textura* (from the 12 century onwards) often needed more space than informal ones like the *gothic cursiva* of the same time, used in manuscripts for private or for educational purpose. The type of script has been chosen in relation to the function and the level of the manuscript.

For music manuscripts the same type of hand drawn lines has been used as for text manuscripts. Only from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards rakes have been used for text lines and music staves to draw 4 or 5 lines at once. Until the 15<sup>th</sup> century the text was written first, then the music notation was added and finally the decoration was painted. If music notation was intended, the text scribe left some space for music notation. That space was filled in by the music scribe, often the same person who wrote the texts. From the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in prestigious manuscripts music was written first and text filled in later which resulted in a more balanced view.

### **Medieval music notations**

The earliest known Western music notations following up the antique Greek notation, the *neumes*, have been written down from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards – the century of the emperor Charlemagne and the liturgical reforms of his empire. To establish a uniform liturgy in the whole empire, many books had to be copied. To achieve this ambitious goal, convents established schools and huge scriptoria in order to educate young monks in the skills of writing and reading. Around the same time and in the same region, a way to write music down was discovered as well. And although we don't know precisely where and how the first neumes were written down, the importance of the

cloisters for the invention of the neumes is apparent such as is the correlation with the liturgical reforms of the Carolingians.

The first notations were limited geographically. 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.<sup>[5]</sup> Often the name of a certain notation is connected to an important monastery, where the notation was first used, for instance the Benedictine abbey St. Gall in Northern Switzerland. This famous monastery still preserves a huge amount of medieval music manuscripts from the Carolingian era in its library, some of which are online accessible.<sup>[6]</sup>

Early medieval music notations have in common that they were not written on staves but first in the margins alongside the texts, later above the texts in the “open space” (Latin: *in campo aperto*) between two lines.

Around the year 1000, in Italy the first manuscripts with music notation on staves were written. As we are told by medieval music theorists, the staff system was invented by a monk of the Benedictine monastery of Arezzo, a famous medieval music theorist – Guido of Arezzo. Whether this story is historically true, we don't know. In any case, the staff system was a big success: during the next centuries it spread over the entire continent, from south to north, from west to east. Around 1300, the staff notation had been introduced in whole Europe. Characteristic for this early staff notation is a red f-line and a green or yellow c-line to mark the semitones e-f and b-c.

As infrastructure got better and traveling got more and more easy, medieval music notation got more and more uniform. At the end of the Middle Ages, around 1600, the number of types has diminished to two major systems of music notation: rhythmic notation and notation without rhythmic indication.

Notation without indication of rhythm was used notably for liturgical manuscripts with monophonic plainchant. Here 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. For polyphonic music in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century another kind of music notation was developed in France. We find this notation for the first time in manuscripts written for services in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. This kind of notation provided the possibility to organize the combination of voices in a rhythmically differentiated context of polyphony. This kind of music notation has been the starting-point for the development of mensural notation from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards and finally our modern music notation from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The way in which polyphonic vocal music has been represented visually in manuscripts during the Middle Ages is very interesting. The earliest known manuscripts with polyphonic music – the rhythm has not yet been indicated – were written in Southern France during the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, many of them in the area of influence of the famous Benedictine monastery St. Martial de Limoges. In these books the voices were notated one above the other in score notation – the same method we know from modern music editions.<sup>[7]</sup> But that didn't last very long: in late 13<sup>th</sup> century French motets the voices were notated separately: the two upper voices, cantus and discant, one besides the other, and the third voice, the tenor, under the cantus. This was a very economical way to write polyphonic music, because the *discantus*, the upper voice, had more notes than the cantus and the tenor. At this time, music manuscripts were still written on parchment, a very expensive material. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the different voices were written even in different booklets. In consequence much music from this time has been lost, because if only one part book is missing, the whole music remains incomplete. But this is a problem of later times, not of medieval music as notating in part books is not a medieval manner of writing music. Let's turn now to monophonic music writing.

Monophonic music notation has always been quite flexible throughout the centuries. Many manuscripts with monophonic songs show a quite creative way of writing music notation.<sup>[8]</sup> In polyphonic music two or more voices had to be combined, which required a precise system that could be interpreted without difficulties and with as few misunderstandings as possible. Monophonic music however offered the possibility to write more individually and to show creative solutions the writer needed for his aims – although we often are not able today to interpret them clearly.

The different notation requirements for monophonic and polyphonic music can be seen in the manuscripts. Manuscripts with polyphonic music are often separated from manuscripts with monophonic music. If they are mixed together, for polyphonic music often a different kind of notation is used than for monophonic music. And for liturgical music a different kind of notation is used than for songs. This is obvious in ms. Berlin190, a miscellaneous manuscript from the Netherlands from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.[\[9\]](#) In this manuscript three different kinds of notation have been used: one without rhythmic characters for plainchant (gothic notation), one with slight rhythmic indications for sacred and secular monophonic songs (gothic notation with some mensural elements), and mensural notation for polyphonic pieces. The mensural notation was written by another hand while the other kinds of notation and the texts were written by the same hand. Apparently writing mensural notation was a specialist's business.

Most polyphonic music however has been written outside the monasteries at courts and cathedrals. In many medieval monasteries even during the late Middle ages, when the most differentiated mensural notation for polyphonic music was developed, only one kind of notation was used: the traditional one for liturgical plainchant, without rhythmic indications, used even for simple two voice settings.[\[10\]](#)

### ***Instrumental music***

My last point of this chapter will be devoted to the notation of instrumental music. Pure instrumental music has been notated quite late. There is a small number of music pieces written without texts that is discussed as being intended for music instruments.[\[11\]](#)

But this is quite unsure, and they are dating only from the end of the Middle Ages, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first music notation which was meant clearly for music instruments is music for the keyboard and for the lute.[\[12\]](#) Here again we see a specific kind of music notation, the tablature notation, which was probably developed from the view on the instrument itself. This can clearly be recognized with lute tablatures, a notation consisting of numbers on a staff of six lines representing the neck of the lute and its strings. However, with the instrumental tablature notation we already leave the Middle Ages, for only in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century this notation can be found, in separate manuscripts.

Most of medieval music written down in manuscripts is vocal music. If there are traces of instrumental music, they are scarcely known and their interpretation calls up many questions. But this doesn't mean that medieval people didn't play on music instruments. In the contrary: throughout the Middle Ages manuscripts show many illustrations of medieval music instruments played by angels and humans, and many medieval texts refer to an extensive and widespread use of music instruments in this time. This is a big problem for performers of medieval music: on one hand, only vocal music has been written down, on the other hand many beautiful illustrations demonstrate a lively picture of multiple use of music instruments. Bridging this gap of transmission is an important task for medieval performance practice today. Most music ensembles performing medieval music are using music instruments as well as voices – even if they don't have any original music from medieval manuscripts for the instrumental parts.

### **III Music manuscripts in late medieval nunneries**

Although the mainstream of music transmission in the European Middle Ages happened via male institutions like monasteries, cathedrals and courts, recent findings show that nunneries, convents for women, also participated in music transmission. Music in medieval nunneries however is much less investigated than music in monasteries. Only in the last decades more details became known about musical life in medieval nunneries on a broader scale. The last part of my paper therefore is dedicated to the nuns' music.

The conditions for musical life in nunneries were different due to the conditions of their religious life. Nuns normally did not have public functions, only abbesses could sometimes have some influence outside the walls of a nunnery. Nevertheless, until the 15<sup>th</sup> century nuns normally had many contacts to the world outside the nunnery. They were allowed to visit family members and to receive their

visits without difficulty. This privilege disappeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during monastic reforms in north and south Europe. As a result, nuns lived closed up behind the walls of their cloister, their contacts with the outside world being strictly limited. This was one of the reasons for an increasing focus on inner life: singing the divine office, meditation and prayer became more and more important activities for these women whose lives have been restricted to their own convent. This can be recognized in the different types of late medieval manuscripts conserved from nunneries. Liturgical manuscripts were written in Latin and contain plainchant. These manuscripts are not very different from those preserved in monasteries. Both monks and nuns copied the chant necessary for the liturgy. But there is one difference: in monasteries, all books were written by men. In nunneries, many books were written by men, too, and as far as we know, only a few manuscripts were written by the nuns themselves. The reason for this difference is that monks had a better access to education and even wrote books to earn money. Nuns were educated, too, but only for reading skills and for consciously singing the Latin liturgy. Writing books was not the focus of their education, and so until recently it was presumed that only few nuns were able to write whole books.[\[13\]](#) Although in many cases this is correct, there are important exceptions. Recent investigations have shown that Northern German nunneries were characterized by a high level of manuscript production,[\[14\]](#) as we know the names of the nuns who were scribes. A well known example is the cistercian nunnery of Medingen in the Lüneburg Heath nearby the city of Lüneburg.

Preserved manuscripts from Medingen are notably books for daily private contemplation,[\[15\]](#) showing a special mixture of prayers, meditations, plainchant and sacred songs. Prayer books were very common in nunneries, but the prayer books of Medingen have become famous due to their extraordinary beauty. At this very moment we know 50 books originating from Medingen – and the number is still increasing.[\[16\]](#) They are rather small but thick books that could easily be carried around.

Most of these manuscripts are written on parchment and decorated very beautifully: texts are written in black, red and blue ink and rich illustrations use sometimes even gold and silver colors. These are precious books, written by the nuns themselves for their own use, or for the use of female family members outside the nunnery. The owners came from rich families in Lüneburg, the city nearby, who had enough money to pay for such precious personal books. In the margins, many tiny pictures have been painted, depicting birds, flowers, saints, nuns, angels and scenes from the bible, but also many medieval music instruments.

These paintings of music instruments cannot be interpreted clearly. In fact, there are many open questions we cannot answer at this moment. The persons playing music instruments in most cases are not humans, but saints or angels. Only in one situation humans are painted: nuns playing the organ.

We know that the Medingen nunnery had two organs in the 15<sup>th</sup> century: a big one in the church and a smaller one in the nuns' gallery. The choir organ was played by nuns during Office. These nuns had received special education as organists. Further use of music instruments in Medingen is unknown. Nevertheless, the illustrations of the Medingen manuscripts, which are quite precise with regard to the appearance of the music instruments, might give us some hints about music instruments used in the nunneries.

But illustrations with music instruments are not the only trace of music in the Medingen prayer books. Most of them also show music notation: sometimes on staves, then the music can be transcribed. Most notation however is staff less notation, very late examples for this type of notation, because already around 1300 music notation normally was written on staves. Staff less notation in these manuscripts was probably not sung, but served primarily as an aid for meditation on chants sung during the services. Staff notation in Medingen prayer books was probably used for singing. This notation is part of little songbooks bound in the prayer books. But staff notation was also used for new plainchant and songs yet unknown or only little known.

For research on the music culture of late medieval nunneries these little prayer books of Medingen nunnery are very important testimonies. But they have to be analyzed very cautiously with the aid of

codicological, paleographical and musicological methods to reveal their rich information. That brings us to our last question: why do we need manuscript studies in musicology?

#### IV Why medieval music manuscript studies?

Why should we need all this specific information? Why not keeping analyzing and playing music already edited, the much easier and more common way in musicology? In my opinion, there are several reasons why the codicological and paleographical research of music manuscripts is a quite important subject especially for medieval music research, but for all handwritten music from later times as well. Furthermore, manuscript studies are indispensable for discovering medieval music and to bringing it on the market. To explore music documents still undiscovered in archives and libraries you need to be able to read the texts, to transcribe the notations and to analyze the books in order to prepare the material for music publication or performance.

At last, a fundamental reason for manuscripts studies is to get more insight in medieval culture and music as a vital part of it. In Europe, music has been written down for more than thousand years. However, there are still many difficulties concerning the interpretation of these old manuscripts and the huge amount of different music notations to be faced. Solid knowledge about the construction and content of medieval manuscripts can open for us the door to the past, to make it fertile for the future.

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[1] With many thanks to Xuefei Liang who kindly has translated my paper into Chinese.

[2] Famous medieval convent libraries have been St. Gall and Einsiedeln, both Zwisserland. From both libraries important old music manuscripts have been preserved.

[3] For manuscript production see Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin palaeography : antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Cambridge 2004.

[4] For Book Fragments see Jan Brunius (Ed.), *Medieval Book Fragments in Sweden. An International seminar in Stockholm 13-16 November 2003*. Stockholm 2005. Kerstin Abukhanfusa, *Mutilated Books. Wondrous leaves from Swedish bibliographical history*. Stockholm 2004.

[5] Richard Rastall, *The notation of Western music : an introduction*, London 1983.

[6] See <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/csg/Shelfmark/20/0>

[7] Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fonds latin 3549; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fonds latin 3719; London, British Museum, ms. add. 36881.

[8] For instance the Gruuthuse-manuscript from the Southern Netherlands, now conserved in the Royal Library, Den Haag: <http://www.kb.nl/bladerboek/gruuthuse/index.html>.

[9] Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, ms. germ. oct. 190. An edition of the complete manuscript is expected to be published in 2012.

[10] Lüne, Klosterarchiv, Hs. 11.

[11] Robertsbridge codex: London, British Museum, Ms. add. 28550. For more information see <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/MMDB/Mss/LOR.htm> (10 october 2011)

[12] See for the 'Codex Faenza', Pedro Memelsdorff, *The filiation and transmission of instrumental polyphony in late medieval Italy: the Codex Faenza 117*, Dissertation Utrecht University, 2010.

[13] For the high Middle Ages, Alison I. Beach investigated female scribes in convents. Alison I. Beach, *Women as Scribes. Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria*. Cambridge 2004.

[14] Please put here the Chinese publication of your Researchmaster thesis. And if its works in China, the URL of your English thesis as well.

[15] The library of this convent burnt down in 1781 together with most parts of the nunnery, so only manuscripts preserved outside the nunnery are known today.

[16] Prof. Henrike Lähnemann from Newcastle University, Great Britain, is busy with a big project about the Medingen manuscripts and is still discovering manuscripts from Medingen in libraries all

over Europe. She is travelling from library to library, from archive to archive to discover more of those specific manuscripts. At this very moment, I am preparing an edition together with her of one of the manuscripts Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. lat. lit e 18, a miscellaneous book that contains amongst others many chants for processions with music notation on staves.