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Iubilus and *canticum*: The role of Music in the Meditation of the Devotio moderna

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A central aspect of late medieval spiritual life in the Low Countries is the extensive meditation in communities of the Modern Devotion, a new religious movement which arose in the Netherlands at the end of the 14th century. This meditational practice has frequently been the object of research, but until now particularly from the perspective of church history and literary history. However, late-medieval religious literature contains numerous indications for the important role which music, too, played in this activity: it was intended especially to give rise to the proper and desired affect, or emotion, in the person meditating. In addition, the music manuscripts of the Modern Devotion reveal connections with the practice of daily meditation in various manners, both in their content and in codicological features. Combining research methods from the fields of literary history, the history of music, and codicology, I aim to gain more insight into the role of music in meditation in the context of medieval spiritual life in the Low Countries.

But first, let me give a short historical characterization of the movement known as the Modern Devotion, or *Devotio moderna*. It was founded in the late 14th century in Deventer, in the valley of the IJssel, by Geert Grote and his followers. Over the succeeding two hundred years, it spread throughout the northern and southern Netherlands, western Germany, northern Switzerland and the north-east of France – speaking in terms of modern geography. Adherents of the Modern Devotion founded houses for the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life, in which lay people lived together in convents, but without taking monastic vows. In addition, many convents of Augustinian Canons Regular, both male and female, were founded by the movement or adopted its ideas. The majority of these formed part of the Congregation of Windesheim. The Modern Devotion grew rapidly until the beginning of the Reformation in the 16th century, when it was virtually wiped out by the success of the new reform. Only a few communities survived this development.

For adherents of the *Devotio moderna*, personal spiritual development was the most important aim of their lives. This development of one's own soul, described in detail by several authors, was essential if one was to become a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem after death and be united with Jesus. An important method of spiritual development was meditation on certain themes, such as hell, heaven, death or the Passion of Christ. Within these meditations, not only texts, but also music had a central function. The link between music and meditation lay in *affectio*: the desired emotion that, based on the *lectio*, should result from the

meditatio in order to flow into effective prayer to God (*oratio*). The effects of music on the emotions were already known in Antiquity. This knowledge also entered into the treatises and the ideas of the Modern Devotion, mainly mediated through the writings of St Augustine. Besides specific treatises by several authors of the Modern Devotion, many more general sources report about music being involved in meditation. This function influenced ideas about music in the sphere of the Modern Devotion as well as the structure of the music itself.

My paper is divided in three sections. First I will talk about music and meditation in one of the most important medieval treatises on meditation, the *Rosetum* of Johannes Mauburnus. In the second section, I will point to some indications for meditation in what one might loosely term 'music manuscripts' of the Devotio moderna, especially the Medingen prayer books (although these are not really music manuscripts!). The last section will examine a specific term, the *iubilus*, and its particular function in song and meditation.

I. Music and Meditation in the *Rosetum* of Johannes Mauburnus

The *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditacionum* (Rosary of spiritual exercises and religious meditations) of Johannes Mauburnus (1460-1501) was of great importance for the meditation in the late Modern Devotion. Mauburnus was born in Brussels, and later became an Augustinian canon at the monastery of St.-Agnietenberg, near the Dutch town of Zwolle, which was part of the Congregation of Windesheim. At the end of his life, Mauburnus became an abbot at the monastery of Livry in northern France; he reformed several monasteries in the area in the spirit of the Modern Devotion. The *Rosetum*, his most important work, is an extensive introduction, in Latin, to the practice of meditation. In fact, it amounts to a full overview of the medieval tradition of spiritual exercises. At the request of his fellow brethren, he used his personal *rapiarium* as the basis to devise a collection of systematically arranged meditation schemes. Preceded by a first abbreviated version published in 1491, this extensive work was printed five times between 1494 and 1620.

The *Rosetum* had a significant influence on the history of spirituality of the late Middle Ages far beyond the circles of the Modern Devotion. It was published in important centres of printing throughout Europe, such as Basle, Paris, Milan and Douai. It also was known in the 16th century among the adherents of the Reformation, with Martin Luther referring to it in several of his publications. From the 17th century onwards, however, the importance of the *Rosetum* declined, as a new meditational method, the *Exercitia spiritualia* of Ignatius Loyola, became more popular.

Music occurs in the *Rosetum* in various forms:

1. The best known is the *Chiropsalterium*, the hand psalter, which was already described in detail by the church historian Ernst Benz in 1976. The *Chiropsalterium* is an instruction on meditation with the aid of biblical musical instruments, shaped like a hand (see illustration 1). This hand served as mnemotic reminder during meditation with the aid of biblical musical instruments.
2. Seven religious songs are also integrated into the *Rosetum* as contrafacts. Their rubrics refer to the melodies of well-known Christmas and liturgical hymns, which the songs could be sung to. The edition of 1510 even shows a song containing monophonic musical notation, *In primum principium*, a contrafact of the Christmas-song *Dies est leticie in ortu regali*. As far as I know, these songs have not yet been examined systematically. The texts are edited by Guido Maria Dreves in *Analecta hymnica* 48, on basis of the edition of the *Rosetum* published in Paris in 1510. The music has not been investigated yet.

Mauburnus composed meditations on different themes, divided into scales (scale), steps (gradus) and limbs (membra). In combination with the texts, he used a total of seven

religious songs. Four of them are written as entire songs at the end of meditations, completing them by providing a summary of what has gone before.

In two cases, the verses of a song are interpolated throughout the meditation. One or two verses were to be sung at the end of each grade.

Seven contrafacts is not many in such a voluminous book as the *Rosetum*, which numbers over 700 pages in print. Songs are only included occasionally. Nevertheless, as Mauburnus himself points out, this does not mean that other meditations should be devoid of music.

The songs had a specific role in the meditation. In connection with a Rosary prayer, Mauburnus gives some general information about the role and the function of music:

> "Here follow some metrical songs needed to stir up devotion at the beginning of, or between, some rosaries"

Music did not have a specific place in the meditation. Apparently, it could be interpolated into the meditation whenever desired. But besides stirring up devotion, music had another, related, function. It helped the meditator to overcome spiritual laziness. Mauburnus writes:

> "Since a person may not always be able to meditate, we have added some rhythmic verses to the different steps of our stair, which should be sung to the melodies of *Pange lingua* or *Crux fidelis*. So these little verses can be sung sweetly in the heart or in the mouth when you are feeling too sluggish to meditate."

Mauburnus provides information about some important aspects of music in meditation.
1. About the time and place for music: the use of music seems to be rather free. It does not have a specific place in meditation. Nevertheless it is important for the success of meditation.
2. Music can be sung 'in the mouth', i.e., aloud, or 'in the heart', i.e. silently, in someone's head. Mauburnus does not give any indications which is better or worse, or when one or the other might be preferable.
3. Music has two functions: to stir up emotion and to overcome inactivity if meditation is proving too difficult.

I now come to the second section of my paper, in which I shall examine some references to meditation in music manuscripts of the Devotio moderna. Here I will focus particularly on the Medingen prayer books, although, as I said above, these are not really music manuscripts.

II. Meditation in music manuscripts of the Devotio moderna

The connection between music and meditation in the Modern Devotion was first studied in detail in 2002, in my own doctoral thesis on a music manuscript produced within this movement. Some quires in the manuscript *Utrecht 16 H 34* are made up of a collection of ten little booklets originating from various convents in the eastern Netherlands; these little booklets are reminiscent of *rapiaria*, the personal devotional books compiled by the members of the Devotio moderna for use in meditation. Song-texts which are glossed and obviously intended for meditation indicate that they had a function within the extensive meditational exercises of the Modern Devotion.

Another example can be seen in a music manuscript originating from the house of Brethren of the Common Life at Zwolle. The manuscript is bound in one volume with an incunabula containing the treatise *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, one of the earliest and most important theologians of the Devotio moderna (he died in 1386). I will get back to this treatise later. In terms of the music used, its further contents

and its codicological composition, the manuscript demonstrates close connections with a hitherto unknown meditation schema that has survived in the form of notes written in the margins of the incunabula. The marginal notes are written by the same scribe as the rubrics of the song manuscript and represent a Passion meditation and a penitential meditation. The content and composition of the song manuscript are similar to the penitential meditation as represented in the incunabula, which was practised on weekdays in the community of the Brethren of Common Life at Zwolle.

The most striking examples, however, can be found in another type of manuscript, in which music and meditation are completely mixed up: the prayer books from the nunnery of **Medingen**, on the Lüneburger Heide, in northern Germany.

Medingen is one of six nunneries in Northern Germany which were founded in the Middle Ages and still exist as Lutheran convents today. Like the other five, Medingen was reformed in the second half of the fifteenth century under the influence of the Modern Devotion. The reform was instituted by Johannes Busch, an Augustinian canon from the monastery of Windesheim in the Netherlands, one of the most important male convents of the movement. About forty prayer books have survived from this period, containing not only prayers, but also indications for meditation and musical notation. This musical notation gives rise to a good many problems, for example in its use of a rare and very old-fashioned manner of writing music without staffs. But now is not the time to go into that – today I shall restrict myself to a few aspects of the interaction between meditation and music in these little books.

The Medingen prayer books contain Latin and German meditations and prayers for different occasions. They are connected to the liturgy for the various feast days, often for a specific saint, but particularly for Easter and Christmas. Easter and Christmas day, and also the days before and after, were filled with liturgy in the services of the mass and the liturgical hours. Since these were important feasts, the liturgy had to be memorized and prepared by meditation 'in the heart or in the mouth', as Johannes Mauburnus puts it. Music in the Devotio moderna can be related to several occasions for meditation, which are described repeatedly: personal meditation in the morning and evening, daily work and preparing for the daily Office. In the Medingen manuscripts, meditation is linked to liturgy. The two are linked together by rubrics which provide the clue to understanding Mauburnus' instructions. The rubrics contain concrete indications for the context and time of meditation as well as clues for the emotion to be felt while singing and meditating. For instance:

> "Canta in via dulciter": "sing sweetly on your way":
>
> or: "Cum hilaritate et devotione cordis ad nobilissimam solempnitatem predelecti apostoli tui et canta in via" (Ser. 2): "With joy and devotion in your heart on the most noble feast of your most beloved apostle, sing on your way"
>
> or: "singe dem koninge der ere dessen vroliken Osterdage up der harpen diner sele unde sprick"…:" "Sing for the King of Glory on this joyful Easter day on the harp of your soul and say… (ser. 31)
>
> but also more practically: "Post horam matutinalem dum exis de coro canta in cordis iubilo": "After the morning service, while leaving the choir, sing in the joy of your heart" (ser 52)

Unlike in Mauburnus's *Rosarium*, these examples often give quite precise indications regarding the place in which the meditation took place and where the song was to be sung: *canta in via, dum exis de coro* etc. So we know that meditation took place around the liturgy as an aid to preparation or 'digestion'.

In addition, meditation also had a place during services. This phenomenon has already come to light in connection with nunneries in the Southern Netherlands in the late Middle Ages, as examined by Youri Desplenter in his doctoral thesis. Unlike in the Medingen meditations, however, the manuscripts from these nunneries do not contain any music, only song texts. Musical notation does occur in the Medingen manuscripts, though not for the meditations, but for the parts of the mass such as the Kyrie or the Gloria. As I said before, the problems regarding the notation are too complex to discuss here.

My final example from the Medingen manuscripts is one of the most elaborate rubrics. Even without music notation, music is the central subject in this text, which concerns a meditation during the feast of St Maurice, the patron saint of Medingen:

> "For the glorification of his feast, the voice should burst forth in the most heartfelt devotion. The sound should rise up to the ethers; vehement glorification should be opened up with canticles; the harmony of innocence should sound in an affecting way; silent desire should sing aloud and the voices should sound sweetly and pray with spiritual *iubilus*: *let us all rejoice in the Lord*."

Gaudeamus omnes in domino – let us all rejoice in the Lord – is a well known responsory in honour of Saint Agatha, which was apparently sung here in honour of St Maurice.. The importance of music for this feast can even be seen in the manuscript illumination: in the margins, angels with a cithara, a lute and bells nestle among the flowers and birds. However, there is another interesting aspect in this rubric: the use of the term '*iubilus*'. This brings me to the third part of my paper, about *iubilatio* in the meditation.

III. Mystic or ascetic? The *iubilatio* in the meditation

So far, we have seen that music had an important function for the emotions during meditation. The background of this, however, reaches much further than the mere act of meditation itself. It also has an impact on the way the believer should seek contact with God: whether this should be an ascetic approach or a mystical approach. And this, in turn, relates to the question of whether the Modern Devotion should be seen as a mystical or predominantly as an ascetic movement, a question that has been exercising scholars in various fields for the past few years. An ascetic approach, in this case, means striving for contact with God through human endeavours, such as corporal and spiritual exercises. Mysticism, on the other hand, represents the possibility of entering into contact with God in an immediate way. There are various possible ways to define mysticism: by the strictest definition, only *raptus* is viewed as a mystical event. If one takes a slightly broader definition, however, the path towards this *raptus* is also mystical. Through its connection with the emotions, music may offer deeper insight into the question of whether the way of life of the Devotio moderna should be viewed more as ascetic or as mystical.

In the medieval doctrine about the three forces of the soul (*vis sensitiva, vis intellectiva* and *vis affectiva*), emotion is assigned to the latter, the *vis affectiva*, the force of affect. In his *Rosetum*, Johannes Mauburnus concludes that the *vis affectiva* is expressed by music:

> "There are three ways in which the soul can be bound to the manger of Christ with a threefold rope, and can turn forcefully to the Christ Child.
> With the *vis sensitiva*, you have to go to the manger, really or in your imagination; with the *vis intellectiva* you focus on some devotional meditation from the rosary, and with the *vis affectiva* you set yourself aflame by means of a jubilant chant (*iubilosum canticum*)."

Here the term *iubilosum canticum* is important, in which much more resonates than the translation 'jubilant chant' can convey. The terms *iubilus*, *iubilum* or *iubilatio* are repeatedly used in the psalms. In his commentary on psalm 33, Augustine defines *iubilus* as the wordless jubilation of a believer who is overwhelmed by the knowledge of God.

> "Look what kind of singing God has given you: you must not search for words – as if you could explain yourself and thus please God. Sing with jubilation, because that, singing in jubilation, means singing for God in a good way. What is the meaning of 'singing in jubilation'? Not being able to comprehend with intellect what can be sung in the heart. A *jubilum* is an indefinite sound that shows how the heart is able to generate something that cannot be told. And to whom is this iubilatio due, if not to the ineffable God?"

The human heart responds to the ineffable God with an inexpressible affect which is uttered in a wordless jubilation.

The *iubilus* acquired a firm position in the medieval liturgy of the mass as an addition without text to the Alleluia. Beyond the liturgy, and this is more important here, the *iubilatio* had a function notably in combination with mystical experience. But in this sense, as an expression of mystical rapture, the *iubilus* was heard less and less in the later Middle Ages. The heart had taken priority over the voice; the *iubilatio* had become purely an affair of the heart, and was carried out voicelessly in the heart. In the *Arbor Amoris* (*Minnebaum, Tree of Love*) a treatise written by a German Franciscan around 1300 and very popular in the circles of the Devotio moderna (to judge from the manuscript transmission), the *iubilus* is clearly connected with mystical rapture and *affectus*:

> "I call the *iubilus* unapproachable for love [as an activity of the human will]; it [the iubilus] is the alienation or transgression of the spirit and the blinding of all intellect, so that they - spirit and intellect - are guided by emotion as a blind man is guided by a guide-dog."

Thus when Mauburnus talks of a *iubilosum canticum*, or the Medingen prayer books exhort the reader to pray in *spiritual jubilation*, we can assume that the mystical connotations of *iubilus* were known in both cases. A *iubilosum canticum*, therefore, might be a song that brings the voiceless *iubilus* of the heart to audible musical expression.

But there is another aspect to be considered. Songs consist of two elements: melody and text. *Iubilus* originally means a melody without text and therefore only refers to one element of a song, the music. The other element, text, is not part of the jubilation. On the contrary, song texts of the Devotio moderna often treat of an ascetic way of life, full of laborious striving, even where they use mystical terms such as dulcissime, intime, devotissime etc.. They focus on life on earth, and the spiritual development of the soul in this life. Union with God is an event which will take place only in the future, after death. The short antiphon 'Nullus labor durus' is a good example:

> "Nullus labor durus, nullum tempus longum videri debet quo eternitatis gloria acquiritur et damnatio eterna declinatur. Stemus ergo in accepto proposito certaminis nostri."
> "No work should seem hard, no time long, where the glory of eternity is being acquired and eternal damnation avoided. So let us accept the proposition of our struggle."

So in songs of the Devotio moderna one can identify opposing tendencies in the two elements that make up a religious song: text and melody. The music without text contains a mystical element, while the texts deal more with an ascetic view of life. On one hand, one has the exuberant and sweeping effect of a *iubilus*, and on the other hand the *canticum*, the devotional song text, which, above all, exhorts believers to continuous ascetic development. These two elements serve different purposes, which nevertheless complement one another. The text is intended to guide the emotions stirred up by the melody; the melody, in turn, is intended to inflame the *affectus*. And the text takes priority over the melody, as we can read in many sources associated with the Devotio moderna. This was supposed to ensure the steady improvement of the soul through ascetic exercises.

However, music – melody – played an important role in the Devotio moderna, too. And the question arises of whether singing a melody enabled the singer to get closer to mystical experience. It is a hypothesis I am still working on. The documents on music in the *Rosetum* of Mauburnus show elements of both mysticism and asceticism. On the one hand, the treatise contains a large number of pre-programmed and completely organized meditations, which seem to lack all spontaneity. On the other hand, the important role of music for the emotions is emphasized repeatedly, which concurs with the rubrics in the Medingen manuscripts. Apparently it was important not to take the laborious path of intellectual asceticism, but the emotional one of mysticism.

This combination of mystical and ascetic elements in religious songs of the Devotio moderna makes clear that the discussion about the two forms of spirituality must be more differentiated. They were not so separate as some scholars are inclined to believe. There were combinations and crossovers. Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, one of the earliest and most important theologians of the Devotio moderna (he died in 1386), wrote in his treatise *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* (The Spiritual Ascent) that the first steps of spiritual development are a matter of hard work and dedication. Mystical union with God, however, the *unio mystica*, is a spontaneous gift from God that cannot be achieved through practising. But this event is not essentially separated from the ascetic exercises. *Unio mystica* cannot be achieved by human effort – it is a gift – but, according to Zerbolt, spiritual exercises and meditations can prepare the long path to achieving *unio mystica*. Union with God can normally only be reached after death, and only very exceptionally in this life; but it is nevertheless possible to draw closer to this aim throughout one's whole life. One of the ways to draw near to God is through singing.

However, in the Modern Devotion music was not left to chance, as in the case of the *iubilus* of the enraptured mystic. In this spiritual movement, the *iubilus* becomes a *iubilosum canticum*, a specific song, a concrete text, written down with musical notation – in short: a directed *iubilus*, serving as a mystical component in ascetic exercises.

IV Conclusion

I come now to my brief conclusion. In the above, I have referred to several sources – song books, treatises and prayer books – to describe some aspects of the role of music in meditation within the Devotio moderna movement. As the vital precondition for meditation which involves the emotions, and a proven remedy for a sluggish spirit, music represents the mystical element of ascetic exercises. Pure asceticism could be tempered by singing, allowing the kingdom of God to draw closer to earth; even if, for most members of the movement, mystical union with God could only be attained after death.