



GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

Medieval Music: Chant as Cure and Miracle Transcript

Date: Thursday, 12 November 2015 - 1:00PM

Location: St. Sepulchre Without Newgate

12 November 2015

Chant as Cure and Miracle

Professor Christopher Page

I begin with the life of a saint, a form of medieval writing that few read today outside the academy but which can nonetheless shed a great deal of light on many aspects of medieval life, thought and imagination. The one that concerns me here is a life of St. Bona of Pisa, written over seven hundred years ago. At one point, the author relates how some gifted singers, who are travelling together, enter a church and sing a chant for the purposes of offering their devotions but also no doubt for the pleasure of hearing their voices in a resonant space. According to the author I am following, they were so struck by the sound of their own voices fading into nothing in the vast spaces of the church – by the 'passing away' or transitus of their music – that they pondered the fading of all earthly things and decided to enter a monastery together. Perhaps they were thinking of the biblical text Wisdom 4,18: 'our time is as the flitting, the transitus, of a shadow'. There may indeed be something in the claim of the fifteenth-century composer and theorist, Adam of Fulda, that music is 'a philosophy, a true philosophy, a continuous meditation upon death'. It hath a dying fall.

I imagine that most singers of the medieval Church, when they thought seriously about their task, accepted that theirs was the music of Mankind on the long march to Domesday: a trek that surely could not go on much longer as they looked back over their shoulders to the journey Humanity had made, since the time of our first parents, in the Garden of Eden. That is a grand view to take, and today I am going to explore some of the ways in which the plainsong of the medieval church was more than a matter of daily routine – of hard work rehearsing and learning music in the choir school – but something else entirely: something that was often an uncanny part of the landscape in which one lived, that could induce miraculous healing, visions and (you might be surprised to hear) the deepest horror.

I start with what seemed obvious to medieval singers but now seems fabulous in the proper sense of the word: I mean that monks, nuns, friars and clergy, singers, as they stood in the choirstalls to perform their plainsongs, did not believe that to count the singers gathered there was to number every active musician who was present. The thin curtain that hung between this world and the next, between the natural and the supernatural, was constantly stirring in the breath of ecclesiastical singers, for the angels were present in the building, keeping company note by note with their human counterparts. Now and then it was even possible to catch their sound, as in a dark and empty church we may sense a sudden movement out of the corner of our eye, by a pillar, perhaps, or by the edge of a stair. Consider, for example, this passage from the life of Pietro di Murrone, who later became Pope Celestine V in 1294. He built an oratory on a mountainside, one of a great many attempts in the Middle Ages to baptize waste or empty land by establishing a chapel there for prayers and plainsong. According to Pietro's biographer:

A great sound of office chanting was often heard in that place, sometimes in the oratory and sometimes in the cell of a certain brother, and the things being sung were readily intelligible. A certain brother often heard the sweetest voices mixed with the voices of the monks while he sang the Office, so that when the monks ceased those voices could be heard more clearly.

Voices are heard in a lonely chapel in a wild place: they are not unsettling, because they are angelic. For men and women in the Middle Ages it seems, as for Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, even barren land could be full of noises that hurt not.

Sometimes, such experiences of angelic singing – with their anticipations of heaven – had a visionary intensity. Here is a passage from a Life of a saint who was for a long time a monk at the Cistercian abbey of L'Aumône, North West of Paris:

...he saw an infinite number of angels. They were divided into two choirs on either side of the Cross with faces turned to one another, all without exception offering it the most wondrous devotion...Both angelic choirs sang now Kyrieleison and now Christeleison. The aforesaid soul [Christian] approached that company of angels and listened to their singing with careful attention. He so delighted in their wondrous music that, were it to be unceasing, he would think himself in the eternal felicity of heaven. Once the sweet music of this angelic throng did indeed cease to be audible, by divine command he returned to the body that he had formerly left. The abundance of sweetness that he had recently perceived in the angelic singing so overflowed in him that from then until Matins he could think of nothing else, nor even pray.

Notice how the angels have arranged themselves like earthly singers, in two facing choirs, to perform the Kyrie which is the first Ordinary chant of the Mass. Heavenly beings were quite happy to sing the same things, in the same way, as their human counterparts.

Since the angels could be heard singing, if one listened very hard, joining their angelic voices to those in the choir, it was possible for those heavenly beings to teach new chants to earthly singers. Here is an example, from the Life of bishop Hariolf of Langres, who died in 722:

The following should be inserted, which is reported as having been seen on the vigil of Christmas Day. [Hariulf] saw a heavenly light filling the peoples' church, and having stood there for a long while with his eyes cast downwards to the ground, he stood up, and saw the most beautiful form of St. Mary sitting upon the altar, contemplating the little saviour of all that she had in her lap. And there he first learned, through angelic melody, the antiphon Quem vidistis pastores, dicite etc, which he afterwards sang very often.

Here there is a physical manifestation of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child, actually sitting upon the altar, while the angels sing a chant that Hariulf learns.

Other stories recount how a most unlikely or unexpected person was able to compose a chant, the implication that it was done with divine aid. One of the most elaborate stories in this vein concerns the responsory *Gaude Maria Virgo*. In some versions of the legend the event is associated with the dedication of the Pantheon in Rome to Christian worship, by Pope Boniface IV, in 609. The story relates how a blind man, angered by Jewish denials of the divinity of Christ and the virginity of his mother, once challenged a Jew of the city to meet him on the feast of the Purification (the second of February) promising that he would witness a miraculous cure. The day comes, the church is full of people and clergy, and the blind man asks to be guided to the altar. He sings a responsory that he has composed, *Gaude Maria Virgo*, and is miraculously cured:

Gaude Maria Virgo

Chants could also serve as a conjuration: they could summon the dead to appear. In one account, St. Augustine is conjured to appear by the last responsory at Matins on his feast day:

On one occasion, on the Feast day of St. Augustine, while the twelfth responsory was being sung, that same glorious bishop appeared...He showed himself above the choir in the most splendid raiment, with a lively face and eyes shining like two stars.

Such conjurations could go badly wrong, for the apparitions were not always holy or benign. The devil and his minions resented the singing of monks or clergy and did all they could to disrupt it as the singers set about the work of God, the *opus dei*. There were times, in other words, when the chant and its liturgy provided no protection from Satan's wiles, quite the reverse. When monks described the monastery as a mirror of Paradise, they did not forget that extraordinary moment in Genesis where the description of Eden is suddenly interrupted with a 'but'. Never has the word carried more weight: But the serpent was more artful than all the creatures of the earth. To describe the monastery as a paradise was to admit that the serpent was no longer pacing outside but was within the walls: he was there in the choirstalls, in the dormitory, in the single room with a fire where the monks warmed themselves on cold days, the calefactorium. There is a remarkable text called the *Book of Revelations*, written by a Cistercian named Richalm, which allows us to overhear monks talking about their dread of supernatural evil which seems to infect everything. They fear that demons are talking to one another in the voices of birds, or that that they communicate when the thunder peals. (*Audivi voces ex tonitru*, says one: 'I have heard voices out of the thunder'). The devils inhabited the monastery like a shadow community, with duties of disruption assigned to them by their satanic superiors, and the choral liturgy was the heart of their diabolic work as it was for any monk or cleric. One passage of Richalm's book even shows a senior devil rebuking some other demons in a ghastly parody of an abbot disciplining young monks: 'Why are you idling, running around like fools, occupying yourself worthlessly here? Why are you not at Mass?'

The devils within the monastery had many ways to disrupt the plainsong. They could make a monk's voice hoarse so that he could not sing. They could give him a rumbling stomach so that he thought himself possessed – his body actually inhabited by a creature other than himself – and might begin to panic. A story of the twelfth century tells how one brother began the Invitatory chant for the Office only to find that a demon had made his voice croak like a raven; a fellow monk swiftly made the sign of the cross over him and his voice recovered. This was mild enough, but as the monks, nuns, clergy and friars stood in the choir to chant they might be assailed by manifestations of a truly horrid kind. In many of the stories that have come down to us the animal world breaks into the choirstalls on these terrifying occasions: as the demons assume whatever shape they please, a nightmarish world of fur, horns, bristles and claws irrupts into the church, evoking the wilder country beyond the monastery and the filth of the cow byres or pigsties within it. A bear materializes in the chancel area, crying out in a human voice as it staggers to and fro, looking at the brothers in the choir who stand gaping; monkeys and cats are seen sitting on the shoulders of the brothers. Satan himself slithers out of the choir in the form of a serpent, 'and in the full light of a lamp...lest his departure might be concealed from any onlooker'.

I think you will agree that we need an exorcism here, so here is one. In the year 1322, the northern magnate Thomas of Lancaster was executed for his part in the baronial opposition to Edward II. A cult grew up around his tomb at Pontefract, and an unofficial liturgy was devised, for 'saint' Thomas of Lancaster was never officially canonized. Since there were many miraculous cures at his tomb the creator of this liturgy adapted a chant for St. Nicholas, a great healer. 'The shedding of Thomas's blood gives health to the sick', runs the Latin text: 'O how the cures of diseases reveal the sanctity of that holy leader':

Sospitati dat egrotos

If you feel that the chant you just heard restores a little peace, or indeed a measure of sanity, medieval singers would generally have agreed with you. But they looked to the power of their chant for a great deal more than a

restfulness and calm. The central Middle-Ages have left many accounts of miraculous cures effected during the performance of a chant. We have already encountered one of the most vivid, but there are many more. Here is a passage from a Franciscan chronicle concerning the miracles of one of the most renowned of medieval saints, Anthony of Padua. The eyes and tongue of a necromancer at Padua, torn out by demons during one of his conjurations, are restored during ordinary chants of the Mass:

Since he was greatly troubled in his heart for his sin and fault, and was unable to confess it, he decided to entrust himself entirely to the help of St. Anthony. When he had remained for many days and nights in the friars' convent in prayer, and the friars were singing Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini, 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord', during the Mass, the priest raising the host at the elevation, his eyes were restored anew in his head...While the choir sang Agnus Dei, 'Lamb of God', finishing with dona nobis pacem, 'give us peace', God in that place restored his tongue to him and his power of speech, with which he extolled the great deeds of St. Anthony.

Here is yet another grain of sand from this vast beach of medieval story; this time the events are said to have taken place in Venice in the early twelfth century. A woman from Corbie, in Picardy, crippled since birth, had taken the cross with her son and made her way south. She had spent seven days of prayer in a crypt before an image in the abbey of St. Nicholas of the Lido:

This miracle was not accomplished without the witness of monks or laymen. I was present there for the octave of the Feast of Epiphany, singing Vespers; I can confirm that, when the convent of monks had completed Vespers for the aforesaid feast in the choir, they approached the relics of the saint in procession singing the antiphon O Christi pietas, from the liturgy of St. Nicholas, according to custom, with clear voices, and see! The woman...touched with the hand of divine mercy, was stretched out and lay as if dead for half an hour, and did not breathe. Those of us standing by were astonished to hear her bones crack, as if they were would shatter, and her sinews stretch, as if they would break...Afterwards she felt nothing and woke as if from a sweet sleep...

There is so much of this material it is difficult to know how much is enough. Here is a lame man in southern France cured during the singing of an antiphon:

While the choir of monks was singing the vespers psalmody for the Feast of St. Vivian, and the antiphon Homo iste fecit mirabilia in vita sua ('This man performed wonders in his life') after the Magnificat...this cripple, who was seated before the choir, immediately began to stretch his contorted limbs and, crying out loudly, he began to extend them straight. And so it was that he who came on four legs returned to his lodging on two.

How were such wonders achieved? I would like you to hear once more that chant for Thomas of Lancaster, *Sospitati dat egrotos*. It is what medieval musicians called a *prosa*, which is the title it bears in the manuscript from which I have taken it. Notice the restraint and balance: the setting works almost entirely by giving each syllable one note, and since all the lines have fifteen syllables, and all end, save the last, with an -io rhyme, the piece is a very tightly organized and harmonious design in sound:

Sospitati dat egrotos

That chant, I would suggest, 'sweetens our state of mind through the sense of hearing'. I have taken that phrase from one of the most developed and systematic discussions, by a medieval theologian, of how music produces cures and exorcism: the latter being a very important issue at a time when many diseases were attributed to malign power. Our author here is the English Franciscan Richard of Middleton. Like every good scholastic, he begins by laying out his question in clear terms:

QUESTION. Whether herbs or musical accords can hinder a devil from troubling Mankind.

Notice the reference to herbs, that is to the apotropaic (or devil-countering) powers of certain grasses and plants; the world of magic, for want of a better word, is not far way here.

This is how Richard Middleton reasons it out:

In the first Book of Kings [I Samuel 16, 23] it says that Saul was relieved of a demon's attacks when David played the harp before him 'and the evil spirit departed from him'.

But one argument leads way from the notion that when David played the harp before Saul, it as the music that caused the spirit to depart, or that the effect arose through the natural power of the musical accords. It is true that the touching of the strings released the natural power of music to somewhat lessen Saul's affliction; to the extent that the music sweetened his state of mind through his sense of hearing, he was made less vulnerable to the demon's vexation...I rather contend that the evil spirit went away from Saul when David harped before him because of the power of the cross...David was able to repress the evil spirit with his harp, not because the instrument or the music had such power in itself, but because the strings and the wood together made a sign of the cross.

That is what makes the study of the medieval mind so fascinating: on one hand this is keenly rational. It was not the music of the harp that drove the demon from Saul, though it calmed him and sweetened his spirit. On the other hand, Richard of Middleton's argument rests upon ways of thinking that may now seem alien to even the

most devout amongst us: David was able to exorcise the demon from Saul because the gut strings and wood of the harp were like the sinews of Christ stretched upon the cross. The demon fled as surely as a vampire when the sun rises.

Richard of Middleton, of course, was talking about the harp. The powers of plainsong were another matter, and during the Middle-Ages people tried to make a sharply practical use of the powers of powers of chant by founding hospitals with chapels. These buildings were once very common; some of them still remain, and even when they have long since been demolished, their names linger like ghosts in our landscape: at Spitalfields here in London, at Spital on Merseyside, at Spital Hill in Yorkshire. In all of these, and many more, 'spital' of course means hospital. A great many of these institutions were founded, often with attendant chapels or small chantries, during the period 1000-1300. This development is especially telling in the east of Europe where it occurred at one advancing edge of Latin-Christian conquest. The favoured dedication for the new hospitals invoked the Holy Spirit; a suitably universal choice for houses regarded as outposts of the Universal Church, even though the foundations were located in new settlements and was therefore embedded in a sharply local and sometimes perhaps a transitory context. It says much about conceptions of the hospital, and its purpose, that dedications, when not the Holy Spirit, almost always alluded to 'international' saints such as Nicholas, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Bartholomew and Lazarus; medieval travellers and patients lodged under the sign of a saint whose name evoked the open road because it was known everywhere.

Many charters survive to illustrate the creation of hospitals and their chapels down the Oder River from what became the great port of Lübeck. The work was done by the bishops of the new episcopal sees founded there, or by incoming magnates who saw very clearly that the work of carving out a new lordship in formerly pagan territory was not enough to ensure their salvation; their charitable duties remained pressing. Brandenburg, not far from Berlin, had a hospital by 1220, but in a region (to quite a contemporary) 'that up to our own time has been possessed by pagans and infested with the cult of idols'. Riga, today in Latvia, had its Holy Spirit hospital while the town was still a stockade, the work of Bishop Albert whose other initiatives included the foundation of a chivalric order, the Sword-Brothers, as a standing army of occupation. These foundations were closely related to the legal but also to the social consolidation of these new settlements; they often attracted the attention of new confraternities who gathered for masses of the dead and other services, just as they were the object of internal pilgrimages on certain feast-days when indulgences were granted to all who came for prayer. At Colbergh, today in Poland, a confraternity of citizens 'seeking the bonds of brotherhood' agreed to gather each year, on a day of their own choosing, at the Holy Spirit hospital for Mass, prayers and almsgiving. The witness-lists of the many charters which reveal these initiatives gradually show indigenous names like Zulizlaus, Jarozlaus, Priznoborus and Mozkot ceding ground to James, John, Paul, Henry and Bartholomew: biblical and Frankish names that came with the Western colonisers. The making of Europe has left few more intimate traces.

Inventories of the goods contained in hospitals and leper houses suggest that few were so small or dilapidated that they might not possess a service book of some kind to enable at least the basic elements of a sung service to be held. While it is only to be expected that an important foundation like the hospital of Saint-Raymond at Toulouse should possess a missal, an epistolarium, a breviary and a psalter among its chapel goods, or that the chaplains of the Great Hospital at Norwich should receive a 'book of chant and a missal' as a bequest from one of the city's bishops, it is another matter to discover that a run-down leper house at Montgeron, near Corbeil, had a liturgical book. Even though the grange of this hospital was empty and roofless for the most part, with the chambers deserted and ruinous, the episcopal visitors found a small volume which they inventoried as 'a kind of missal'. When the leper houses and other hospitals in the diocese of Paris were inventoried, there were found to be encompassed 72 houses with 202 service books between them, 82 of which were found to have musical notation. The fourteenth century is relatively rich in such documents, many of them no doubt listing significantly older materials. In England, an inventory of God's House in Southampton, from records a psalter, an antiphoner and two graduals. The Ospedale di S. Maria di Colle had a missal, an antiphonarium nocturnum, a lectionary and a psalter. The auditors of a leprosarium in Estella (Navarre), on the pilgrim road to Santiago, found a missal and 'an office book, new and good'

The statutes of hospitals are sometimes explicit about their musical provision. The clerics serving the Hôtel-Dieu in Pontoise were to sing *Matins à notte and toutes les heures canoniales et la messe...à notte*. Foundation charters are usually more reticent, but there are occasional references to the provision that the founders or governors expected. At Cammin, in Pomerania, one hospital was staffed by a priest and a scholar who were required to sing mass but allowed to say the Hours and vigils *sine nota*. Many centuries later, Charles Dickens wrote of a nineteenth-century hospital in London that 'the dim light which burnt in the room increased rather than diminished the ghastly appearance of the hapless creatures in their beds, which were ranged in long rows on either side'. The scene was perhaps not so different in many a larger medieval hospital as the sound of chant arose from the altar, the principal therapy available once urine had been tested, poultices applied and simples given out.

The inmates of some hospitals, especially the leprosaria, formed semi-monastic communities living under a form of the Rule of St. Augustine and waiting for release into a new life of eternal *salus*, meaning of course, 'health'. When the thirteenth-century songwriter Baude Fastoul contracted leprosy and took leave of his friends in Arras, bound for the hospital of Grand Val, he spoke of himself as a pilgrim and even as a monastic solitary venturing *en un desert*. Such meanings may seem strange today because they imply a duty of penance and self-examination at a time of sickness rather than the absolute right to care and indulgence that is taken for granted

in the modern developed world; nonetheless, pilgrimage and monastic withdrawal provided medieval sufferers with two of their most potent metaphors for giving meaning to the grave changes in their lives that sickness might enforce.

Hospitals, indeed, were rich in metaphor and association. Once again *The Tempest* comes to mind; this time the moment where Ferdinand says 'the music crept by me upon the waters'. Not for reasons of hygiene alone were so many hospitals and the accompanying chapels built close to rivers; lepers are associated in a wide range of medieval narratives with cures produced by a miraculously cleansing bath in a river's course. The bridges over these waters, places that can so readily draw the mind to unexpected depths of contemplation, were often chosen as the site of hospitals and their chapels. Examples can be found throughout Latin Europe. Pamplona had a hospital of St. Julien de ponte superiori, while a hospital chapel of St. Nicholas stood super pontem at Salisbury. In Modena, the Templars maintained a hospital by the Bridge of St Ambrose, while the Great Hospital at Paris stood by one of the bridges across the Seine. The water flowing beyond the door could also be a reminder of baptism: the only bath that was truly cleansing (Hospital dedications to John the Baptist are very common and far outnumber others in medieval England, for which there are especially good figures). The water might also turn the mind to prayers or vows, not least because a medieval bridge was often a fragile structure liable to break or be carried away by flood. Saint Arnulf, a distinguished forebear of the Carolingians, is reported to have become so alarmed when he crossed a bridge over the Moselle in haste that he cast his ring into the current with a vow that he would think himself loosed from the bonds of sin the day he saw that ring again. (Needless to say, he did see it again). The tokens and rings that the heroes and heroines of medieval romance throw into rivers with vows and declarations find their counterpart in the medieval pilgrim-badges, recovered in substantial numbers from the rivers where they were seemingly thrown from bank or bridge as votive offerings. It is as if they stood upon the bridge, hearing the plainsong coming from the chapel, and said:

Where should this music be? i'the air or the earth?

It sounds no more: and sure, it waits upon

Some god...Gaude Maria virgo