

Medieval Music Manuscripts

TREASURES OF SIGHT AND SOUND

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St. Agnes
Choral Service Book. Italy (Rome), 1440-99 (folio 1r)
University of Houston, Special Collections
Gift of Frell Albright

The modern musical notation system developed over many centuries, but its roots lie in the medieval world.

Medieval music began as a part of the Catholic Church and flourished as the power of the Church grew. Eventually, music spread into the secular world as a burgeoning art form. Like other forms of medieval manuscripts, those containing music provided an opportunity for artists (other than the composer, author, or poet) to express themselves through the decoration of the manuscript. The medieval musical manuscripts that remain hold insights not only into the music of the past, but also into the artistic practices of the past.

Written music did not appear in the Middle Ages until the reign of Charlemagne (768-814) and the "Carolingian renaissance." Charlemagne encouraged and fostered learning and the arts during his reign, hoping to re-establish the traditions and achievements of Classical Rome, including a system to write music that derived from a lost Greek system. The system of notation that developed during Charlemagne's reign aided the oral tradition of music that existed prior to the Carolingians.

Music played a central role in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. The Church developed many different types of liturgical manuscripts to complement the extensive liturgy and quickly became one of the largest manufacturers of musical manuscripts. Worship for the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages fell into two main sections: the Mass and the Divine Office. The Mass is a

symbolic re-enactment of the Last Supper of Christ. The central events are the consecration of and consumption of the bread (Eucharist) and wine. The form of the Mass became fairly standardized by the tenth century, although some regional variations did prevail. Some parts of the Mass remain constant from day to day and are called "common." Other parts changed from week to week or even service to service, depending on the feast day or season being celebrated, and are called "proper".¹

The Divine Office was a series of services that took place at certain times of the day, and its main function was to allow for the recitation of the Psalms. These services are called the canonical hours: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline. During the Middle Ages, each of these services was performed daily by monks and the clergy. Matins, the longest of the canonical hours, was the first performed each day, usually beginning around two or three o'clock in the morning, with the other services following every three hours, ending with Compline. When private devotional books of hours became popular in Europe around the thirteenth century, lay people began observing parts of the Divine Office.²

The musical manuscripts used by the medieval Catholic Church (also called liturgical manuscripts) were divided by use for either the Mass or Divine Office. For each service, there was a book that contained only the texts used usually by the priest or person conducting the service, and a book containing the text and the music for those performing the musical parts of the service.³ A gradual is the main musical book used in the performance of the Mass, taking its name from one musical element in the Mass. Antiphonaries or antiphonals contain text and music for the Divine Office and are named for the antiphon, a melody that frames the singing of a Psalm verse that was integral to the performance of the Divine Office.⁵ Liturgical manuscripts are several volumes long because of the length of the liturgy.

Most of the liturgical books, especially

the graduals and antiphonaries, are arranged according to the liturgical year, divided into sections for the Temporale, Sanctorale, and the Common of Saints. The Temporale or temporal encompasses the "proper" Christological feasts, such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, that are celebrated universally across the Catholic Church.⁶ The Sanctorale is the celebration of the saints' feasts, with the exception of the feasts that fall between December 24 and January 13, which are included in the Temporale. The Common of Saints includes the feasts for the saints who do not have a separate feast. These were feasts for general groupings of saints like bishop confessors and virgin martyrs.⁷ The contents of the Sanctorale are variable depending on the monastic order and region of the manuscript.

The University of Houston Italian Choral Service Book in this exhibit contains the Sanctorale for St. Agnes; St. Lawrence and the Finding of the Holy Cross; the Temporale for the entire year, beginning with the Vespers before Pentecost; the Office of the Virgin; the Office of the Dead; and the Common of Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, and Virgins. Also included is a portion of the service for the dedication of a church. Material for the Mass on Holy Saturday and part of the services for Easter Sunday were added later, a common practice as the liturgy changed. Because books were so expensive, when changes were made to parts of the liturgy, material was either added to the end of a manuscript or inserted within the existing manuscript.

The actual size of liturgical manuscripts varied depending on their function. Usually missals and breviaries are smaller in size, because they were generally used by only the one person officiating at the service. Graduals, antiphonaries, and choir books were often much larger, depending on the size of the group using them.⁸ Unlike modern choirs in which each performer often has his or her own copy of the music, medieval choirs often read from the same book, propped up in front of the group. If the choir was very large, the choir

book would need to be extremely large, so that everyone could see it. The University of Houston's fifteenth-century breviary page in this exhibit (which measures 5.75 inches by 8.25 inches) was made for use by one person, while Rice University's musical manuscript leaf, probably from a gradual (which measures 14.5 inches by 20.5 inches), was probably used by a large medieval choir.

As with most manuscripts, the amount of decoration depended largely on the wealth of the patron and the book's intended function. Musical manuscripts made for daily use in a monastery or smaller church would have very little superfluous decoration in the margins. A manuscript for display in a cathedral might have a very elaborate decoration scheme with rich borders and miniatures. Because choir books and other musical manuscripts became sources of pride for communities, they became more elaborate⁹. The time period in which a manuscript was produced could also influence the level of decoration; the later Gothic and Renaissance styles were much more ornate than earlier decoration styles.

One decorative element common to almost all musical liturgical manuscripts is the initial or large letter. The initial could be decorated simply with a variety of motifs or it could be historiated or inhabited¹⁰. Initials were also used as visual place markers, to indicate a new verse, service, or day. There is a definite hierarchy of size and decoration according to the function of that initial. The first pages for the most important feasts have the largest and most elaborately decorated initials within the manuscript (in a gradual, it is usually the introit for the first Sunday in Advent; in an antiphony it is usually the first responsory of Matins).

This hierarchy of initials is apparent on the Rice University manuscript leaf. This page contains the introit, gradual, and gradual verse for the first Sunday in Advent. The first initial for this feast, the "A" in the introit, is very large and much more elaborately decorated than the rest of the initials on the page. There is no doubt that this marks the beginning of a new and important feast within

this manuscript. On the same page there are other initials that stand out. The large blue "U" at the bottom of the page marks the beginning of the gradual for the feast, and the red and black "V"s mark the beginning of the verses for the gradual. These other initials are larger than the other letters around them, but are much smaller than the "A" that marks the introit. Nevertheless, when a performer was following along as a member of a large group, these initials would provide a quick reference to help him keep his place.

The Rice manuscript page dates from the fifteenth century, and its decoration offers clues to the function of the entire book as well as to the community that originally owned that book. Analysis is limited because there is only one leaf and not the entire manuscript. The large size of the leaf indicates that it came from an equally large manuscript. This suggests that the book might have been made for a sizeable religious community or church with a substantial choir. The decorative scheme leads us to consider two further possibilities concerning its use. The flower pattern inside the "A" marking the beginning of the introit is very elaborate and certainly eye-catching. While the decoration is lovely, the lack of gold leaf and the simple hierarchy of the design are neither the richest nor the most ornate produced in the fifteenth century. Thus, it is equally possible that the manuscript was made for use by a choir on a daily basis or was instead intended to be displayed in a middle class or poorer community of some size.

The University of Houston's choral service book, on the other hand, contains more elaborate decoration on its first page. The size of this manuscript indicates that it was used by a small to medium-sized community. The first service in this manuscript is the Sancto for the feast of St. Agnes, and it is the martyred Agnes who appears in the initial. The illustrations are drawn and painted in detail. Gold leaf is employed both within the illustrations and as part of the ornamental border. Later in the manuscript there is another highly

decorated page, with St. Helen holding the True Cross, although it is not as elaborately ornamented as the first page. For a small or medium-sized community, this choral service book could have been a treasured display copy. Indeed, there is some speculation that this manuscript originally belonged to a small seminary in Rome. The manuscript is also in excellent condition, which speaks to the care with which it was treated. Thus we may conclude that the University of Houston choral service book was either a luxury book for display or was very infrequently or carefully used, allowing it to remain in such excellent condition today.

Although most medieval musical manuscripts contained the Catholic liturgy, not all manuscripts from this time period dealt with the celebration of the sacred. The Middle Ages sustained several vernacular traditions. There were numerous poets and musicians who wrote and composed during the Middle Ages, often in their own tongues (as opposed to the Latin of the Catholic Church). Musical entertainment was very popular in medieval courts, and from the eleventh to the thirteenth century a new musical tradition developed in southern France, that of the *troubadours*. The *troubadours* were professional poets and sometimes nobles who wrote poems with accompanying melodies that dealt with topics of courtly love, service to a noble lord, travel, treason, and loyalty. The *troubadours* were often commissioned by a nobleman or prince to write works for entertainment at banquets or elsewhere, but they usually did not perform their own works. *Jongleurs* (or minstrels) were professional singers and musicians who performed these works and were usually of a lower class than the *troubadour* composers. Although the melodies have not all survived, there is strong contemporary evidence that indicates that these poems were performed to music¹¹. This tradition moved into northern France and eventually to Germany, with each region developing and adding its own elements to the tradition.

In Germany this tradition became known as *Minnesang* (love song), and began in the late twelfth century. These works were written in Middle High German and took many forms. In addition to the traditional courtly love songs, there were songs written from the perspective of both men and women, dancing songs and songs about the Crusades¹². In this exhibit, the facsimile of the Manesse Codex represents the *Minnesinger* tradition and depicts Otto IV playing chess. This collection of songs was written between 1300 and 1340 in Zurich and contains 137 portraits of *Minnesingers* and their poems¹³. It is one of the largest collections of vernacular poems surviving, although the music is not included in this work. Most of the miniatures in this work depict the composers of the poems in everyday scenes or in scenes from their works.

There was a vast musical tradition in the Middle Ages that developed from the simple and beautiful plainchant, most containing the Catholic liturgy. Others contained vernacular songs composed for the entertainment of princes at court and banquets. These manuscripts provide not only a link to the music and art of the past, but also insights into the worship and entertainment of the Middle Ages.

1 Jeremy Yudkin, *Music in the Early Medieval World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 87-88.

2 Yudkin, 146-199.

3 Consuelo W. Dutschke, "Liturgical Manuscripts," in *Leaves of Gold: Manuscript Illumination from Philadelphia Collections*, ed. James R. Tanis and Jennifer A. Thompson (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), 130.

4 Michelle P. Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum in association with The British Library, 1994), 62.

5 Yudkin, 146-147.

6 Brown, 120.

7 Brown, 113.

8 Dutschke, 130-131.

9 Dutschke, 131.

10 Robert G. Calkins, "Choir-book," in *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed 10 November 2003), <http://www.groveart.com>.

11 Yudkin, 252-255.

12 Yudkin, 314.

13 "Documentation for the Miniature 'German Minnesang'" (Accessed 17 July 2005), http://home.arcor.de/mustangace/sca_arts_illudacu2.htm