

# Medieval music wasn't only supposed to be beautiful to listen to, suggests study

June 7 2023

---



"Nuns Convent of the Sacred Heart in Rome," painted by Karl Bryullov. Credit: Wikiart

Medieval religious music is often perceived as being simple, and not particularly flashy or lavish. It often had a function that goes beyond simply being pleasant to listen to, says a University of Oslo researcher.

"In the Middle Ages music wasn't necessarily supposed to be something

beautiful and complex. It had other practical purposes," says Manon Louvriot, a musicologist at the University of Oslo, Norway.

As part of the research project "BENEDICAMUS: Musical and Poetic Creativity for a Unique Moment in the Western Christian Liturgy c.1000-1500" she has investigated the vocal exclamation "Benedicamus Domino" and its importance to the creation of music in female religious environments. The academic article was recently published in the journal *Early Music*.

"Benedicamus Domino" means "Let us praise the Lord," and in the Middle Ages and still today it is an exhortation used to conclude sacred rituals.

Through examination of the way women and men in the religious movement of the "Devotio moderna" created music for the "Benedicamus Domino" in masses and rituals, Louvriot found that it had a very special function: to unite the singer with God.

"The aim of the music was to evoke the right emotions in the singers, so they would personally connect to the divine," says Louvriot.

## **Same melody to different texts**

It was when Louvriot was searching for the Christmas carol "Puer nobis nascitur" in 15th-century German, Belgian and Dutch music manuscripts that she found it used a well-known plainchant melody associated with the exclamation "Benedicamus Domino."

She thinks the "Benedicamus Domino" melody was reused for the carol "Puer nobis nascitur" because it was easier to set a new text to a melody that was simple and that many people already knew.

At the same time she discovered that the tune of the Christmas carol was not only sung with a text in Latin but also in other languages.

One of the versions included the instruction that it should be sung in Latin, while in another version it was to be sung in Dutch.

"Most texts were written in Latin at this time, but in this case we've found vocal texts in Dutch," she says.

## **Men and women sang in Latin and other languages**

The religious movements Louviot has investigated were divided into female and male communities. Most of the manuscripts Louviot found came from female communities, and thus there seemed to be a link between the texts translated from Latin and the women who sang them.

It was also more common for women to sing in languages other than Latin, because they had less access to education.

So it surprised her that women in the religious movement also sang the Christmas carol "Puer nobis nascitur."

She thinks that in some cases they chose not to sing in Latin.

"In any of the manuscripts where the vocal text is in Dutch it's fairly clear that they chose not to sing in Latin, but there are a few lines in Latin from the original text," she says.

Manuscripts from male communities with vocal texts in a language other than Latin have also been found.

"It gives us a more nuanced picture than women singing only in Dutch and men singing only in Latin. Men sang in other languages too, and

women also sang in Latin," she explains.

## **Women wrote new texts and poems**

The vocal texts were not simply translated from Latin into Dutch, but completely new texts and poems were also created.

"They created new texts with rhymes and an equal number of syllables for each line.

This challenges the notion that women were illiterate, because writing a new poem calls for a certain degree of literacy," she explains.

In the new texts there seemed to be a big emphasis on emotions and on how to bring about the appropriate feelings.

One of the emotions the melody was supposed to arouse was joy.

"Some of the texts contain a series of vowels, the aim being to express joy that is greater than can be expressed in words," she explains.

## **New texts should evoke the 'correct' feelings**

Louviot compared the Dutch texts in the male and female communities.

In one of the texts the women sang about the Virgin Mary during the birth of Jesus Christ, they described her as a mother and a devoted person.

They shifted their focus from her to a collective "we." In some cases, even to an "I."

"It's as if the Virgin Mary and the women singing about her become one person throughout the text, and the singers identify with her," says Louviot.

In the male environments the text didn't mention the Virgin Mary, but rather highlighted the poor conditions under which Jesus was born, on bare earth and in a lowly stable.

"The texts from the different communities emphasize different aspects of the same event and are intended to arouse different emotions. While one text leads to joy, the other leads to shame."

Manon has written the article "Benedicamus Domino as an expression of joy in Christmas songs of the Devotio moderna." It is part of a special issue of the journal *Early Music*, edited by Catherine A. Bradley, titled "Benedicamus Domino as Female Devotion."

In the article, Manon's investigation—of the particular ways in which "Benedicamus Domino" was sung in the low countries in the 1400s—is placed in a broader geographical and chronological context.

Other articles in the issue investigate the moment of the "Benedicamus Domino" in Czechia, Poland, Spain, Sweden within communities of religious women, showing how this sacred exclamation offered a space for female music-making and creativity.

**More information:** Manon Louviot, Benedicamus Domino as an expression of joy in Christmas songs of the Devotio moderna, *Early Music* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/em/caac050](https://doi.org/10.1093/em/caac050)

Provided by University of Oslo

Citation: Medieval music wasn't only supposed to be beautiful to listen to, suggests study (2023, June 7) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-medieval-music-wasnt-beautiful.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.