

# Continuity and Change

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## A Reformed *Cantus Sororum* in Maria Refugie around 1800

ON 14 SEPTEMBER 1713, four Birgittine sisters arrived in the Dutch town of Uden. They came from the Birgittine abbey Mariënwater, about 20 kilometres away, which they had been forced to leave due to conflicts relating to the Thirty Years' War and the Reformation. These Birgittines were now able to reestablish their contemplative monastic life in an abbey they called Maria Refugie – the Refuge of the Virgin Mary. The community that moved to Uden consisted of only four sisters, including the abbess. A few sisters had remained at Mariënwater, where they had been allowed to stay but not receive any novices. The brothers had already left Mariënwater in 1652, due to the dissolution of the double monasteries in the Low Countries, and relocated to Hoboken, near Antwerp.<sup>1</sup> Maria Refugie was built up again under partly new conditions, of which the absence of the brothers was one major change in an order originally intended as a double monastery.

In this article, I will concentrate on the melodical reform that took place somewhere during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. It will prove to be an interesting case of how Gregorian chant could be adapted to changing tastes after the Middle Ages, a rarely treated subject in chant scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

In Mariënwater, liturgical manuscripts had been continuously produced with regular intervals of about 80–100 years, at least from the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In my previous research I have investigated the large corpus of antiphonals and graduals for the sisters in particular, and I have found that these handwritten manuscripts can be divided into four periods. These sources will

1 Further described in Sander Olsen et al. 2013 and Liebergen 2013.

2 The most important studies until now are Karp 2005a and b.

3 All extant manuscripts are catalogued in Sander Olsen 2002.

from now on be called the *Uden sources*. The division into periods is based on inscriptions in the manuscripts stating when they were completed, as well as on palaeographical comparisons and historical circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

**Period I:** *c.* 1480–*c.* 1510 (6 antiphonals of which 2 also contains a gradual section)

**Period II:** *c.* 1639–*c.* 1653 (11 antiphonals and 13 graduals)

**Period III:** *c.* 1728–*c.* 1760 (9 antiphonals and 13 graduals)

**Period IV:** *c.* 1843–*c.* 1851 (4 antiphonals and 1 gradual)

When investigating these 57 graduals and antiphonals in total, I have noticed that the majority of the office chants in the *Cantus Sororum* had been reworked in the Period III-manuscripts, whereas the chants in the graduals had never been altered. A close examination of the antiphonals revealed that the alterations were palimpsests, in other words written on erased parts on the music staves. The text of the chants had never been altered, although the spelling in the Period II- and IV-manuscripts had been altered in order to follow principles of classical Latin. This was in accordance with the humanistic ideals that influenced spelling from the sixteenth century onwards.<sup>5</sup>

An even closer examination showed that the notes in these palimpsests had only *partly* been erased. A number of original notes had been left untouched, while others had been erased to provide room for new notes. The erasures had been done so elegantly that it is sometimes necessary to see the original manuscripts (all on paper) in order to notice them. This also means that the reform took place *after* the manuscripts had been completed. This reform was completed in 1846 at the latest, which is the year of the only dated Uden antiphonal. This antiphonal, as well as the other Period IV-antiphonals, have the reformed repertoire, written by the original scribe and with no palimpsests. Before going into detail in order to demonstrate one example of the reworking, I will give a brief summary of the reform:

1. The majority of the melodies in the *Cantus Sororum* (a total of almost 200 chants) have been reformed. It is very difficult to make any exact calculations, since it has proved hard and ineffective to draw a firm line between

4 Described at length in Strinnholm Lagergren (forthcoming). Sander Olsen 2002 lists all manuscripts with dating.

5 Karp 2005a, p. 184.

- what is a new melody or reworked one.<sup>6</sup> An estimation shows that about 30 melodies have no or only minor alterations; these are so small that they cannot be considered as a part of the melodical reform. However, this approximation must not be taken verbatim.
2. A general principle in reworked melodies is to keep the beginning intact with no or few alterations. After that, the new melody develops in directions that can be close to, or diverge widely, from the original melody.
  3. Melismas – two or more notes to one syllable – *can* be shortened, but this is not an overarching principle. This is frequently done in post-medieval repertoire in cases outside the Birgittines, in order not to obstruct the text.<sup>7</sup>
  4. The most important issue in the reworking is the placement of melismas on accentuated syllables. Melismas result in the lengthening of the syllables and thus lead to accentuation of the syllable in question. According to the general view of Gregorian chant from the late sixteenth century onwards, too long melismas on unaccentuated syllables were regarded as a cause of confusion regarding the textual understanding.<sup>8</sup> In the Uden sources, the move of melismas from unaccented to accented syllables is the most important principle of the reworking. To some extent this can be observed already in the books for the sisters in Mariënwater, which were copied in the seventeenth century – during Period II – but the systematic work was done in the eighteenth century.
  5. In eleven cases the chants have been provided with new modal designations, by which the Period III-sources have extended the medieval 8-mode system up to 14 modes. The new attributions have been made, not only to reworked melodies, but also to ones that had not been reworked. Who made these changes and why is still an unsolved question.
  6. The question if there was any system according to which melodies in the *Cantus Sororum* were reworked, for example with regard to modes, genre, office etc., has proved to be impossible to answer. It seems as if there was no

6 Treitler discusses the lack of methodology in chant scholarship for determining at what point a variant becomes a new melody, Treitler 2003, p. 148.

7 This can be studied in the many transcriptions in Karp 2005b.

8 See note 5.

such system but rather the personal choice of the individual or the group who made the reworking.

By this reform, three important results were achieved:

- Correct accentuation: accentuation by means of melismas on the correct syllable.
- Classicised spelling.
- Modal clarity: the reworking shows a greater concentration towards the finalis and tenor, in order to enhance the modality of the chant in question. This also follows the renewed interest in the treatment of chant from the sixteenth century onwards.

As mentioned earlier, the classical spelling is a sign of the time within the humanistic movement. Also, regarding the music, the process described above is not unique. The emphasis on textual clarification follows a long trend back to the sixteenth century, not only following the demands of the Council of Trent, but also due to the primary interest in the text with the music as a servant of the text. This was taken to its most extreme point in the Italian monody during the first half of the seventeenth century. The Birgittines simply responded to general trends, though around two hundred years later.

#### THE METHOD

The method used in the reworking of the melodies can be examined by studying a melody in which the reworking was left incomplete. This is the Invitatory Antiphon for Monday in Uden HS K:An 16 from 1735 (henceforth Uden An 16). We will follow the method by studying this antiphon in three sources, all from Uden.

On the image on the next page (fig. 1) we can observe the partial erasures that later would become the scaffolding for the reworked melody. The C-clef was erased as well and has been reconstructed in music example 1 by examining the manuscript. This is an erasure that will be an important clue in the understanding of how the reform process was carried out.



FIG. 1: Invitatory antiphon *Regem angelorum* with partial erasures in Uden HS K:An 16 from 1735 (no pagination). Photo: The author.

A transcription of this melodic skeleton, with a reconstructed C-clef below:



Régem angelórum de éjus mátre exultántium. Veníte ado- ré mus.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 1: Transcription of Invitatory Antiphon *Regem angelorum*, from Uden HS K:An 16.

The complete melody can be reconstructed by comparing erasures in Uden An 16 with manuscripts from Uden from previous periods. Since the melodic transmission is consistent up to Period III, any manuscript can be used. Here I chose an antiphonal from *c.* 1500 (fig. 2 overleaf). The notes marked in red are the notes that were kept in the erased version in Uden An 16. As can be seen, compared to the music example in fig. 1, the red notes are on the distance of a third, something that will be discussed later together with the C-clef issue.



FIG. 2: *Regem angelorum*, in Uden HS K:An 1, 26r (c. 1500). Photo: The author.



Ré - gem an - ge - ló - rum de éj - us mátre ex - ul - tán - ti - um.



Ve - ní - te a - do - ré - mus.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 2: Transcription of Invitatory Antiphon *Regem angelorum* in Uden HS K:An 1.

In the next music example, we see the completely reworked version that was the result of the reform. The source here used is Uden HS K:An 18 (henceforth Uden An 18) from 1736 (fig. 3). The red notes are the same as in music example 1 (again on a distance of a third) around which the new melody was built.



FIG. 3: *Regem angelorum*, in Uden HS K:An 18, p. 47 (1736). Photo: The author.



Régem an-ge-ló - rum de éjus mátre exul-tán - ti-um.



Vení - te a-do-ré - mus.

MUSIC EXAMPLE 3: Transcription of Invitatory Antiphon *Regem angelorum*, in Uden HS K:An 18.



Having demonstrated how the melody went from the original to a reworked version via partial erasures, I will now discuss the erased C-clef. In order to be able to use the notes in Uden An 16 as scaffolding for the reworked melody, the clef was erased so that the notes could be re-used in the reworked melody. In this process, it would have been necessary to insert another C-clef before the seven last notes in order to use them. In music example 4, below, I have reconstructed the version in Uden An 16 with respect to these clefs, so that the notes could be used in the reworked version:



Ré-gem angelórum de éjus mátre exultántium. Veníte a- doré - mus.

**MUSIC EXAMPLE 4:** *Regem angelorum* in Uden HS K:An 16, partly transposed.

A comparison between the original and the reworked version by analysis of the red notes shows how the skeleton in music example 4 has become the scaffolding for the new version in Uden An 18. This in turn shows a high degree of awareness and a careful planning of the reworked melody: these reworkings were not haphazard, but carefully planned before the erasing process took place.

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE REFORM OF *Regem angelorum*

The result of the reworking of this specific antiphon has resulted in the guidelines outlined earlier. Here I will point to two important features. In the transcriptions I have marked the word accents by accents (for example *angelórum*). A comparison between the transcriptions in music examples 2 and 3 (on pp. 330–331) shows how the melismas in the reworking were concentrated to the accentuated syllables. A few examples are the words *angelórum*, *exultántium* and *veníte*, which have one or few notes on the unaccented syllables and many on the accented ones in Uden An 18.

The second feature concerns the way in which the reworked version enhances the modal clarity. Notable is that the mode has changed from E-mode to D-mode, more specifically from the fourth to the second mode. This can be established by the changed finalis; the reworked version ends on D instead of E as in the original version, but the tenor tone is also changed from A (for E-mode) to F (for D-mode). Changes in modality in the reworked melodies do sometimes

occur, so this is not unique to this chant. The tenor tone A is less emphasised in the melody in Uden An 1, while we can observe a concentration of the melody to the tenor in Uden An 18. The concentration has been done by limiting the range of the melody and by centering it around F.

The reasons for reworking certain melodies into new modes are difficult to determine, but in this particular case I would argue that it has to do with the transition from a modal into a tonal understanding of music. D-mode is closer to our understanding of minor/major than E-mode, since D-mode resembles D-minor, whereas E-mode has a very different character and cannot be fitted into the tonal system. In the eighteenth century, the step into major/minor tonality was finally taken, and it is possible that this chant in its original form felt old-fashioned.

As for the dating of Uden An 16 and Uden An 18, they were written with just one year in between, and this is why we might ask why one was completed and not the other, especially since Uden An 16 also contains melodies that have not been revised, while Uden An 18 has the complete reformed corpus. I think there is a simple reason: the format of the books. The difference between Uden An 16 and other manuscripts produced during Period III is the size. While the format of Uden An 16 is quarto, the others are in the format of octave, and this is a clue to how and by whom they were used. I believe that Uden An 16 was used by the group of singers in charge of solo tasks: the *horista*, the *cantrix* and *versicularie*. These tasks were circulated on a weekly basis, probably among the most skilled singers in the community, who must also have known all melodies more or less by heart.<sup>9</sup> A manuscript in quarto format is ideal for placing on a music stand between the two choir groups where at least the *horista* was placed. We know that such music stands were used.<sup>10</sup> It was therefore more important to carry out the changes in the manuscripts used by sisters who did not know the new melodies so well, which here means the manuscripts in the octave format used in the choir stalls.

#### HYPOTHESES ON WHERE THE REWORKED REPERTOIRE CAME FROM

From whom or from where the melodic reform came is difficult, not to say impossible, to answer, due to the lack of contemporary sources for comparison from other Birgittine abbeys and other documentation from Maria Refugie. I

<sup>9</sup> This praxis is further described in Servatius 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Refugie still holds a music stand on the nuns' platform.

have demonstrated the difficulty of establishing an exact period when the reform was carried out. We cannot say more than after 1760 and before 1846. There are four probable hypotheses that I will now present and discuss.

1. *Did the reform come from outside the Birgittine Order?* Can we find the answer to the reform in other editions of these chants in other monastic traditions or in diocesan traditions? This is unlikely, since a great part of the chants in the *Cantus Sororum* are unique and not found in sources outside the Birgittines.
2. *Did the reworked melodies originate from the daughter foundation Mariënblum?* A few years before the move from Mariënwater to Uden, the community were joined by sisters from their daughter foundation Mariënblum in Kalkar, Germany. One of them was Theodor Alexia de Haen, who in 1705 became prioress of Mariënwater (and later in Maria Refugie), an office she held until her death in 1730.<sup>11</sup> In this function, she had the opportunity to influence the liturgy, for example by a repertoire she had brought with her from Mariënblum. Unfortunately, no liturgical books from Mariënblum have survived, so no comparison can be made. A fact that speaks against this hypothesis is that the reform was carried out during the second half of the eighteenth century at the earliest, which is a long time after the sisters from Mariënblum came to Mariënwater.
3. *Did these reworkings come from another Birgittine abbey and not from Mariënblum?* In order to draw firm conclusions on this, we would need material from other Birgittine abbeys from the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, the only abbey from which any such material is preserved is Maria Altomünster in Bavaria. This material still awaits investigation. The probability that we would find the reformed melodies in the Altomünster manuscripts is not great, since the contacts between Altomünster and Maria Refugie seem to have been sparse. It is important to point out that no printed musical edition of the *Cantus Sororum* that could function as an 'Urtext' for the Birgittine chant existed before 1861.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Sander Olsen et al., 2013, p. 220.

<sup>12</sup> This year, Pustet in Regensburg published a print for use by the Birgittines in Altomünster: *Antiphonarium Ordinis SS. Salvatoris seu S. Birgittae in Monasterio S. Altonis.*

4. *Did the initiative come from inside Maria Refugie itself?* No written documents exist that can support this assumption, but it seems the most likely alternative, since nothing else supports any of the other theories. This musical reform did not take place in a 'parallel universe', but was carried out by someone who was well informed about the currents that influenced Gregorian chant after the Council of Trent. It remains a mystery why it took such a long time to carry out this reform here, which in other contexts took place much earlier; from the late sixteenth century onwards. One explanation might be that after the dissolution and the relocation of the brothers in 1652, Maria Refugie had become a rather isolated abbey. By the relocation, the sisters lost their natural connection with the diocesan liturgy and other traditions. Taken together with the cloistered life without any opportunities to leave the abbey, this might have contributed to the rise of this distinct musical repertoire.

#### EPILOGUE: THE REFORMED MELODIES AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As earlier mentioned, the reform was completed in 1846 at the latest. What happened after that? Was this reform just a short transient trend, after which the sisters went back to the original melodies? The answer can be found by examining the first prints of the *Cantus Sororum* with musical notation published for the Dutch Birgittines in 1881 and 1883.<sup>13</sup> These prints were made by a daughter foundation of Marie Refugie, Maria Hart, which had been founded in 1843, and were probably intended for use by these two abbeys only. I have been able to establish that this not was a transient trend, since these prints transmit the reformed repertoire. Therefore we can conclude that the reform not was of an ephemeral character, and the printed versions were in use (possibly alongside handwritten books) until the 1950s, when the Roman Catholic priest and musicologist Nicolaas de Goede reformed the melodies according to one of the oldest sources, in order to restore the melodies to their presumed medieval splendour: Uden An 1.<sup>14</sup> This manuscript was used for the reconstruction in music example 2 (see p. 330). His work is entirely in line with the restoration of the Gregorian chant undertaken by the Benedictines at Solesmes some one hundred years earlier, and which has ever since influenced both our thinking about

<sup>13</sup> *Antiphonale juxta breviarium sanctimonialium ordinis SS. Salvatoris ...*, Weert 1881; *Vesperale juxta breviarium sanctimonialium ordinis SS. Salvatoris ...*, Weert 1883.

<sup>14</sup> Sander Olsen (s. d.).

Gregorian chant and how to perform it.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Goede's restoration of the Birgittine chant formed the basis for the reworking into the vernacular of the *Cantus Sororum* into both Swedish and Dutch, which he was to undertake in the 1970s.<sup>16</sup>

#### SUMMARY

After the Middle Ages Gregorian chant was subject to changes on a larger scale, in accordance with new trends and ideas on the relationship text/word and musical taste. The musical reform of the *Cantus Sororum* in Maria Refugie is one example of a consistent reworking of an Office repertoire. It took place after 1760, when almost all the melodies were subject to partial erasures, and it was completed by 1846 at the latest. New notes were written in, substituting the erased notes, and this resulted in reworked melodies. One such example has been discussed in this article by the examination of the Invitatory Antiphon for Monday, the antiphon *Regem angelorum*. These melodies were transmitted in the prints from 1881 and 1883 and sung until the 1950s, when the Office chants were revised again, this time in order to restore the chant melodies to their late medieval shape. It is important to point out that the reform only affected the office repertoire and never the Mass repertoire.

The revised repertoire of the Birgittines in Maria Refugie is not an isolated example of a unique process. It all corresponds to new musical ideas. As such, it must be seen as part of the currents in the world-wide Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent. Plainchant after the Middle Ages is only scantily researched, but the subject is gradually gaining interest among scholars. Even so, monastic repertoires are still very little investigated. Studying chant in contexts outside the medieval period can teach us more about the ability of this music to adapt to changing musical fashions and tastes, and about the ideologies that were the driving forces behind musical reforms.

I want to make three concluding points:

- Gregorian chant always communicates with its context.
- Gregorian chant is shaped by its users.
- Birgittine chant has a fascinating history in its own right, even after the Middle Ages, although there is still much research that needs to be done.

15 The restauration of Gregorian chant is discussed at length in several texts, see for example Bergeron 1998; Strinnholm Lagergren 2009 and Ellis 2013.

16 Strinnholm Lagergren 2009, pp. 158–180.

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