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## *Benedicamus Domino* as an expression of joy in Christmas songs of the *Devotio moderna*

*In memoriam Dr Ulrike Hascher-Burger*

CHRISTMAS, as the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, has always been a joyful feast of Christian worship. In medieval and early modern Europe, this translated into many special musical arrangements for Christmas celebrations, of which sacred Christmas songs were a significant part.<sup>1</sup> Song collections from the *Devotio moderna*—a spiritual movement that spread in the Low Countries and Germany during the 15th and 16th centuries—are an important witness to this Christmas tradition.<sup>2</sup> However, the wide dissemination of these songs has presented an historiographical challenge. In this context, the *Benedicamus Domino* offers a new and productive perspective to analyse well-known songs adopted within the *Devotio moderna*. Indeed, many Christmas songs are in fact *Benedicamus Domino* tropes. In addition, the *Benedicamus Domino* was singled out in the *Devotio moderna* for special permission to be sung in polyphony at Christmas:

Cantum ecclesiasticum per certas mensuras voluit decantan nullum discantum preter lectiones in nocte natalis Christi et ‘Benedicamus’ per ipsa festa propter festi illius leticiam in ecclesia facilliter admittens.

One wishes that no *discantus* in precise measures be sung as ecclesiastical song, an exception being made for the lections for the night Office of Christmas and the ‘Benedicamus’ for this same feast, because [*discantus*] brings the joy of Christmas into the church.<sup>3</sup>

Now commonly understood as a note-against-note polyphonic style, scholarly discussions of the term ‘discantus’ have obscured the frame in which it is used

here: as an efficient device to stir up the appropriate emotion (joy) for a specific feast-day (Christmas) at specific liturgical moments (the night Office and the *Benedicamus Domino*).<sup>4</sup> In this article, I trace the uses and functional implications of the *Benedicamus Domino* within a single and very widely transmitted song, *Puer nobis nascitur*. Based on analysis of its polyphonic versions in Latin and of its vernacular contrafacta, I argue that the *Benedicamus Domino* was one element deliberately used in Christmas songs to guide spiritual exercises and meditation, inspiring and expressing joy during the Christmas season.

### Context and sources

The *Devotio moderna* was a religious movement that emerged towards the end of the 14th century and became extremely influential during the 15th century in modern-day Belgium, the Netherlands and northern Germany. Its followers aimed at a more personal relationship with God via private devotion, rather than through the intervention of a priest. Imitation of, and meditation on, the life of Christ were key aspects of this new devotion, as they helped to practise the virtues and, therefore, to reform the interior life of the individuals. As Mathilde van Dijk summarizes, ‘the Devout aimed to rise above their natural feelings and to meticulously guide them into the proper shape and appropriate performance.’<sup>5</sup> Within this general spiritual frame, various types of religious communities emerged which followed their own set of rules for temporal and spiritual daily life. The three most prominent were the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life—semi-religious communities who

lived enclosed without taking monastic vows—female (and some male) monasteries following the Third Rule of St Francis and the Augustinian Congregation of Windesheim, which numbered a hundred monasteries at the end of the 15th century.<sup>6</sup> The ideas of the *Devotio moderna* also had an influence beyond these three groups either in other monastic congregations (for example, the Chapters of Sion and of Venlo, or in Cistercian houses) or in semi-religious communities (for example, the beguines) and infused the spiritual climate of the long 15th century in this geographical area.<sup>7</sup>

The writing and compilation of books was an important meditational exercise of Modern Devouts, which included the copying of music collections by both male and female communities.<sup>8</sup> These songbooks are usually organized around thematic clusters of which Christmas is the most represented textual theme and with the highest number of songs.<sup>9</sup> Songs are also found in miscellaneous manuscripts that contain other liturgical or spiritual texts. Several Christmas songs from the *Devotio moderna* are in fact well-known *Benedicamus Domino* tropes, including *Ad festum leticie* and *Puer natus in Bethleem*.<sup>10</sup> Among them are also Latin versions and vernacular contrafacta of *Puer nobis nascitur*. This song is not only interesting because of its wide transmission (including outside of the areas influenced by the *Devotio moderna*) but also because its Christmas contrafacta in the vernacular often contain textual references to *Puer nobis nascitur* and, more specifically, to the *Benedicamus Domino*. As such, the *Benedicamus Domino* comes through more clearly with this song and its transmission than in other *Benedicamus Domino* tropes.

*Puer nobis nascitur* and its contrafacta have been identified, in different forms, in at least twelve different sources from the *Devotio moderna* (their estimated date and provenance are summarized in Table 1). The Latin versions are always transmitted with musical notation while vernacular contrafacta are usually presented as texts accompanied by a rubric, either in Latin—‘sub nota Puer nobis nascitur’ (under the notes [of] *Puer nobis nascitur*)—or in the vernacular—‘Die wise Puer nobis nascitur’ (in the manner of *Puer nobis nascitur*). Here, I subscribe to Ulrike Hascher-Burger’s hypothesis that while vernacular contrafacta are mainly found in

sources from female communities, this ‘should not be interpreted as a primarily female culture, as the origins of many songbooks from northern Germany have not yet been definitively identified.’<sup>11</sup>

### *Puer nobis nascitur*

#### Texts

*Puer nobis nascitur* is originally a sacred song sung on Christmas day. The text, perhaps of 14th-century origin, draws on and alludes to biblical descriptions of the birth of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the opening echoes the text of the introitus of the third Mass on Christmas day, itself based on Isaiah ix.6 (‘Parvulus enim natus est nobis’, ‘For to us a child is born’).<sup>13</sup> This is a first hint of the strong ties of *Puer nobis nascitur* with the liturgy. The text of *Puer nobis nascitur* is given here based on Soeterbeeck 475.<sup>14</sup>

Puer nobis nascitur rector angelorum In hoc mundo pascitur dominus dominorum	Unto us a child is born, Lord of the angels, In this world he is nourished, the Lord of Lords.
In presepe ponitur sub feno asinorum. cognouerunt domini christum regem celorum	He was laid in a manger, Amidst the hay for the asses They recognized the Lord, Christ the King of the Heavens.
Hinc herodes timuit magno cum liuore Infantes et pueros occidit cum dolore	Herod was then afraid And filled with jealousy, He had every infant and child Heartrendingly put to death.
Qui natus est ex maria die hodierna Perducat nos cum gracia ad gaudia superna	He who is born of Mary On this very day Shall lead us with glory To the most supreme joy.
Angeli letati sunt eciam de deo Cantauerunt gloria sit in excelsis throno	The angels rejoice Also of God They sing ‘Glory To the one who is on the highest throne’
Nos de tali gaudio cantemus in choro In cordis et organo benedicamus domino.	Let us sing in choir Of such great joy Upon the strings and organ Let us bless the Lord.

Table 1 List of *Devotio moderna* sources of *Puer nobis nascitur* (in chronological order)

Abbreviation	Preservation and folios containing the songs	Provenance	Dating
Utrecht 16 H 34	Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ms. 16 H 34, fols.54v and 55r	Brotherhouse Deventer, IJsselal; other parts from Brotherhouse in Zwolle and monastery of Agnietenberg in Zwolle; first gathering perhaps from a female monastery	c.1450–1500
Paris 39	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fonds néerlandais 39 (songbook of Liisbet Ghoeyuaers), fols.74v–76r	Franciscan female monastery (Poor Clares in Brussels or Tertiaries)	1470–1510
Brussels IV 421	Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Ms. IV 421, fols.133r, 139r and 221r–221v	Male monastery of Tongeren, Chapter of Windesheim	c.1480
Berlin 190	Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. oct. 190, fol.6	Dialect from north or west Netherlands; possibly from Chapter of Windesheim or of Sion, perhaps female monastery	c.1480 (end of the 15th century)
Soeterbeeck IV 84	Nijmegen, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ms. IV 84 (475), fol.73	East Netherlands	c.1497–9
Berlin 185	Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. oct. 185 (Deventer Manuscript), pp.192–4	House of Sisters of the Common Life, Deventer (Meester-Geertshuis? House of Lamme van Diese?)	End of the 15th century
Vienna 12875	Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. ser. n. 12875, fols.20v–21r	Canonesses regular in Brabant (Brussels?); perhaps Chapter of Sion	End of the 15th century
Berlin 280	Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. oct. 280 (songbook of Anna von Köln), fols.18v–19r and 19r–20r	Sisterhouse from Lower Rhine (Emmerich? Cologne?)	c.1500 (with additions after 1524)
Gent 901	Gent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, 901, fols.36v and 37r	Copied by Anthonius Ghiselters; calendar suggests origin in Brabant; male community	1518
Brussels II 2631	Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Ms. II 2631, fols.77v–78r	Tertiaries convent, female (?)	c.1525
DEPB	<i>Een devoot ende profityck boecxken</i> (Antwerp: Cock, 1539), fols.118v–119r and 120r	Printed in Antwerp; many songs are also found in <i>Devotio moderna</i> sources; could be used by both men and women	1539
Leiden 2777	Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BPL 2777, fols.29v–31v	Copied by Adriaen Adriaenson (who had close ties with the Chapter of Sion), for the parish church of Oegstgeest (current Netherlands); could be used by both men and women	1562

Table 1 Continued

Abbreviation	Preservation and folios containing the songs	Provenance	Dating
Catherina Tirs	Lost songbook. Copy made by Ludwig Erk in 1871 (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. mus. 40411). Modern edition in A. Classen, 'Mein Seel fang an zu singen': <i>Religiöse Frauenlieder der 15.-16. Jahrhunderts. Kritische Studien und Textedition</i> (Leuven, 2002), pp.154–257.	Copied by Catherina Tirs (d.1604) and other hands. Female Augustinian monastery of Marienthal in Münster (influenced by the Chapter of Windesheim)	Embossing on leather cover: 1588

In the sources of this song associated with the *Devotio moderna*, the fifth strophe is sometimes omitted (Berlin 190, Brussels II 2631, Utrecht 16 H 34), while other strophes are occasionally added, describing, for instance, the shepherds hearing the angels (Berlin 190) or praising the Lord (Brussels IV 421). In a few sources, there is an additional final strophe which deals with the jubilation of the heart or with Jesus being born to help mankind (respectively, DEBP, Gent 901 and Berlin 190, Brussels II 2631). This additional final strophe concludes 'Deo dicamus gracias' (let us say thanks be to God), that is, a paraphrase of the liturgical response to *Benedicamus Domino*. Finally, the first line of the last strophe given above is sometimes replaced by a series of vowels (for example 'O et E et I et O'), whose function is discussed below.

### Melodies

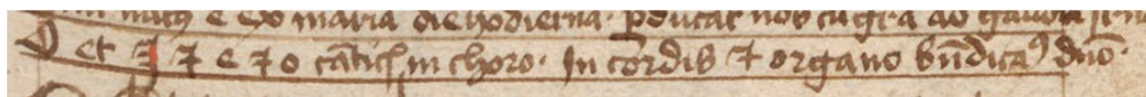
Two parameters are worth considering with regard to the melodic construction of *Puer nobis nascitur*: its liturgical origin and the flexibility (or *mouvance*) of its polyphonic renditions.<sup>15</sup> J. Smits van Waesberghe has identified similarities between the melody of *Puer nobis nascitur* and a *Benedicamus Domino* plainchant melody derived from the melisma on 'clementiam' from the responsory *Qui cum audissent* for the feast of St Nicholas (ex.1).<sup>16</sup> This is one of the most widespread *Benedicamus Domino* melodies of the Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup> According to Barbara M. Barclay, it 'may have been used for both untroped and troped *Benedicamus* settings from the 11th century on'.<sup>18</sup> Example 1 attests to

reworkings of the *Benedicamus Domino* plainchant melody through melodic adjustments (also present in the various transmissions of the original melody) and with the shifting of the final segment of the *Benedicamus Domino* plainchant to the beginning of the *Puer nobis nascitur* melody. The original *Benedicamus* melody, based on the melisma 'clementiam', was used specifically for second Vespers on the highest feasts since at least the 13th century, which is certainly significant given the liturgical function of *Puer nobis nascitur* at second Vespers of Christmas.<sup>19</sup> This is another indication of the melodic and liturgical origins of *Puer nobis nascitur*.

The various transmissions of *Puer nobis nascitur* feature different, yet related, types of vocalizations. Van Waesberghe's study of *Puer nobis nascitur* was based principally on a manuscript from the Imperial Abbey of Thorn (currently in the southern Netherlands). There, the first poetic line of the last strophe is sung on the vowels 'O et O et I et O', reminiscent of the sequence of vowels in the final part of the original melody on 'DOMINO' (see ex.1). A similar poetic line is transmitted in Utrecht 16 H 34 (fol.55r), where the first line of the final strophe is composed of 'O et J et e et o' (see illus.1). Such vocalizations in *Puer nobis nascitur* will play a role in the vernacular contrafacta, as discussed below.

Polyphonic renderings of *Puer nobis nascitur* in *Devotio moderna* sources are always two-voice note-against-note songs. Their melodies can be divided into four segments, as example 2 shows.<sup>20</sup> These segments are distributed in various combinations

### Ex.1 Links between *Puer nobis nascitur* and the *Benedicamus Domino* plainchant melody *Clementiam*



1 Final strophe of *Puer nobis nascitur* in Utrecht Universiteitsbibliotheek, Hs 16 H 34 (fol. 55r, detail; reproduced with permission)

in the sources, in polyphony as well as in monophony. The combinations are summarized in [Table 2](#), which also includes notated vernacular contrafacta and two additional sources outside of *Devotio moderna* circles by way of comparison (the *Officia propria* from the Imperial Abbey of Thorn and the Moosburger *Graduale*, copied c.1360 and used at the church of St Kastulus in current-day Bavaria). The melodies in these sources are rarely exactly the same, since they usually contain melodic variants and ornaments, and they may be notated several tones higher or lower (as indicated in [Table 2](#)). Nonetheless, the melodic segments show enough similarities to be considered variants of the same two melodies.

[Table 2](#) shows that:

- ABCD is either monophonic or a lower voice;
- AbcD is either monophonic or a lower voice;

- aBCd is either monophonic or an upper voice;
- abcd is only an upper voice.

In addition, when a source transmits several notated versions, it can either present a single, stable type of combination (Utrecht 16 H 34) or multiple different combinations (Brussels IV 421).<sup>21</sup> This demonstrates that the use of melodic segments neither depended on the communities (male/female), nor on the language (Latin/Middle Dutch).

[Table 2](#) also illustrates how the possibility of two different but nonetheless similar, and partially interchangeable, melodic lines increased the flexibility of the musical material and, therefore, the potential to reshape the melody in various ways. The two voices work together in contrary motion, with each of the segments beginning and ending on octaves or unisons.<sup>22</sup> Depending on which segment appears in which voice, the range and voice-crossing change.

### Ex.2 Melodic segments in polyphonic renderings of *Puer nobis nascitur* based on Berlin 190

For instance, in Berlin 190 (abcd in the upper voice and ABCD in the lower voice), the two voices move within the same range of an octave and frequently cross. On the contrary, in Utrecht 16 H 34, the aBCD melody (upper voice) and the AbcD melody (lower voice) both stay within range of a 5th and never cross. When performed and received aurally, of

course, these variants—visible in the written form—merged to create a unified sound, in which distinct melodic lines may have become indistinguishable in polyphony.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Table 2 shows that the melodies which contain part of the original plainchant melody (i.e. ABCD, AbcD and aBCd) could stand alone as monophonic songs independently of

**Table 2** Distribution of melodic segments in *Puer nobis nascitur* and its vernacular contrafacta

Source	Provenance	Language	Melodic segments
Brussels II 2631, fols.77v–78r <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Female	Latin	AbcD
DEPB, fols.118v–119r <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Could be used by both men and women	Latin	AbcD (down a 2nd)
Gent 901, fol.36v <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Male	Latin	aBCd (down a 3rd)
Gent 901, fol.37r <i>Met rechte singhen wij</i>	Male	Middle Dutch	aBCd (down a 3rd)
Vienna 12875, fols.20v–21r <i>Ons is een kyndekyn geboren</i>	Female	Middle Dutch	aBCd
Berlin 190, fol.6r <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Female (?)	Latin	abcd ABCD
Brussels IV 421, fol.139r <i>Ihesus ad templum</i>	Male	Latin	abcd ABCD
Brussels IV 421, fols.221r–221v <i>Wildi horen</i>	Male	Middle Dutch	abcd ABCD (up a 2nd)
Soeterbeeck 475, fol.73 <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Unknown	Latin	abcd ABCD
Brussels IV 421, fol.133r <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Male	Latin	aBCd AbcD
Leiden 2777, fols.29v–31v <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Could be used by both men and women	Latin	aBCd AbcD
Utrecht 16 H 34, fol.54v <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Male	Latin	aBCd AbcD
Utrecht 16 H 34, fol.55r <i>Puer nobis nascitur</i>	Male	Latin	aBCd AbcD
Moosburger <i>graduale</i> , fol.247r	Could be used by both men and women	Latin	ABCD (down a 5th)
<i>Officia propria</i> , fol.325	Female	Latin	ABCD

polyphony. By contrast, the additional polyphonic upper voice (i.e. abcd) is never found independently of its lower-voice material in a monophonic version, which indicates a close and continued connection between the *Puer nobis nascitur* text and its original melodic plainchant source.

#### *Liturgical use and symbolic function*

The liturgical use of *Puer nobis nascitur* in *Devotio moderna* circles is difficult to attest with certainty, because of a lack of contextual information. Nevertheless, it is known that in contemporary religious communities of the Low Countries *Puer nobis nascitur* was sung instead of the *Benedicamus Domino* at specific moments of the liturgical year, in particular during Christmas time. A *Liber ordinarius* from the collegiate church of Our Lady in Tongeren (the same city as the monastery that produced Brussels IV 421) copied around 1435–6 prescribes the singing of *Puer nobis nascitur* in place of the *Benedicamus Domino* at Lauds of Christmas day ('Ad laudes ... loco *Benedicamus*, canitur *Puer nobis nascitur*').<sup>24</sup> The same applies at the end of the second Vespers of the same feast-day ('Ad secundas vespervas ... loco *Benedicamus* cantatur *Puer nobis nascitur*').<sup>25</sup> *Puer nobis nascitur* is similarly used as a replacement for the *Benedicamus Domino* every day between Christmas and Epiphany at Lauds as well as at Vespers on certain feast-days. In a different context, the Imperial Abbey of Thorn, *Puer nobis nascitur* was also used during Christmas time, including to replace the *Benedicamus Domino*. Its first occurrence in the liturgical calendar is on the Vigil two nights before Christmas day, where it was performed in alternation between the organ and the choir ('luditur in organis sequens hymnus [i.e. *Puer nobis nascitur*] et chorus respondet usque ad finem').<sup>26</sup> Then, it was sung at Lauds on Christmas night instead of the *Benedicamus Domino* ('Sacerdos intonate Laudes ... et loco *Benedicamus* canitur *Puer nobis nascitur*') and on second Vespers on Christmas day. In addition, *Puer nobis nascitur* replaced the *Benedicamus Domino* at first and second Vespers on each of the feast-days from Christmas until Candlemas on 2 February ('Secundas Vespervas finit sacerdos in choro domi-cellarum et loco *Benedicamus* dicitur infra octavas

et profestis et festis diebus ad Purificationis festum usque *Puer nobis nascitur*').<sup>27</sup>

Such uses of *Puer nobis nascitur* had a wider historical precedent, as confirmed, for instance, by the Moosburger *Graduale*. Here, *Puer nobis nascitur* is designated as a *Benedicamus Domino* substitute for Christmas day ('De Nativitate domini benedicamus').<sup>28</sup> Almost two centuries later, in 1544, Johann Spangenberg printed *Puer nobis nascitur* with the following rubric: 'Ein Lobgesang / An stadt / Benedicamus Domino' (a song of praise in place of *Benedicamus Domino*).<sup>29</sup> The fact that *Puer nobis nascitur* had such a stable and enduring role is a testament to its popularity as well as to its evident suitability in liturgical contexts, in particular Lauds and Vespers. These Offices are certainly significant, since throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, it was customary to embellish the *Benedicamus Domino* melody on feast-days at the end of the three major hours: Matins, Lauds and Vespers.<sup>30</sup>

The symbolic meanings of Lauds, Vespers and the *Benedicamus Domino* help to explain the role of *Puer nobis nascitur* within a liturgical context. The *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* written by Guillelmus Durandus (1230–96) is especially enlightening in this regard.<sup>31</sup> Durandus associates Lauds, the morning Office sung at dawn, with light and with the time when Christ was reborn. Dawn is also the time of the day when God 'created the world and the angels who, immediately after their creation, sung in a canticle of jubilation the praise of their creator' and is therefore an Office of joy.<sup>32</sup> It seems that *Puer nobis nascitur* was considered appropriate to express the themes of Lauds by retelling the birth of Christ, evoking the joy ('ad gaudia superna'; 'nos de tali gaudio') and communal singing of the angels in jubilation ('angeli letati sunt'; 'cantemus in choro / in cordis et organo'). Furthermore, Vespers represents Christ's first Advent, i.e. his birth.<sup>33</sup> As mentioned above, the *Benedicamus Domino* melody used for *Puer nobis nascitur* was sung at second Vespers on solemn feasts.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it makes sense from a liturgical perspective that *Puer nobis nascitur* replaced the *Benedicamus Domino* at this Office. More generally, the symbolic meanings of both Lauds and Vespers are deeply connected with the celebration

of joyful biblical events, and both Offices share strong thematic traits with the feast of Christmas. The replacement of the *Benedicamus Domino* on major feasts of the liturgical calendar at these Office hours demonstrates that *Puer nobis nascitur* was considered an appropriate expression of joy.

Finally, one of the symbolic meanings of the *Benedicamus Domino* is to express an ‘ineffable jubilation’, as Durandus describes (*‘Benedicamus domino cum deo gratias est ... exultacio ineffabilis’*).<sup>35</sup> Durandus also associates the versicle’s answer, ‘*deo gratias*’, with the joy of the apostles (*‘et responderetur Deo gracias quod ad gaudium apostolorum’*).<sup>36</sup> As a *Benedicamus Domino* replacement, *Puer nobis nascitur* can be assumed to have had the same function: not only is it a spiritual song of praise, but it also serves as a song of joy. In addition to its liturgical function, the variants in the musical transmissions highlighted above demonstrate that *Puer nobis nascitur* was not simply a musical embellishment of a trope, but it was also an independent song with considerable musical flexibility. The transmission of its text, which is much more stable, highlights the meditative function of *Puer nobis nascitur*, a function that is also reflected in the vernacular contrafacta.

### Vernacular contrafacta of *Puer nobis nascitur*

Meditation was a central component of the daily life of *Devotio moderna* followers. In the late Middle Ages, and in particular in *Devotio moderna* circles, meditation was ‘impassioned, emotional, ardent, and loud’ and songs had ‘the function of stirring up this turbulent expression’.<sup>37</sup> Devotional vernacular songs were used ‘as a tool for meditation and spiritual exercise, to be sung in the heart or aloud during work and recreation’.<sup>38</sup> In the second part of this article, I demonstrate how the *Benedicamus Domino* was used directly or indirectly in vernacular contrafacta to guide meditation and stir up the joy of the Christmas season, just as *Puer nobis nascitur* did within the liturgy.

Vernacular contrafacta include the following four songs:

- *Met rechte singhen wij neuen sanck*; transmitted in DEPB, Gent 901, Brussels IV 421, all from male communities;

- *Ons is geboren eyn kyndelyn*; transmitted in Berlin 190, Berlin 280, Berlin 185 and the lost manuscript of Catherina Tirs, all from female communities;
- *Ihesus suesse lieff*; transmitted in Berlin 280, from a female community;
- *Van ihesus kerst marien sone*; transmitted in Paris 39, from a female community.

Hascher-Burger has demonstrated that topics for sung meditation, and in particular meditation on Christmas, are gender-based.<sup>39</sup> The comparative analysis of these vernacular contrafacta confirms this distinction in male and female emphases and perspectives. In male meditations, the texts focus on Jesus as governor of the world, the king who was born in miserable circumstances to save humankind. In female meditative songs, Mary is not simply mentioned in passing as the mother of Jesus: she is a central character, depicted with motherly qualities, full of care for the helpless baby Jesus. Very often, the songs change the perspective between the opening strophes, in which Mary is referred to as ‘she’, and the last strophes, in which she is replaced by ‘I’. In female meditative songs on Christmas, therefore, there is a clear emphasis on the identification of the singers themselves with Mary. This distinction in male and female emphases and perspectives is also present in the contrafacta of *Puer nobis nascitur*.

### *Jubilation and the angels*

The expression of joy takes the form of vocalizations on vowels and aims at reflecting the communal joy of the choir of angels, both within the frame of moderation typical of the *Devotio moderna*. As mentioned above, in the Latin version of *Puer nobis nascitur* transmitted in Utrecht 16 H 34, the opening line of the final strophe is composed of a succession of vowels (*‘O et J et e et o’*, fol.55r). A similar line is included in four vernacular contrafacta. It is either similar to Utrecht 16 H 34, with an alternation of vowels and ‘et’ (*‘O et o et gloria’*, Berlin 185, fol.185r; *‘O o o o et o’*, Paris 39, fol.76r) or a simple repeated vocalization on ‘O’ (*‘O O O O gloriam’* (Gent 901, fol.37r); *‘O o o gloria’* (DEPB, p.258)). The ‘O’ vocalizations are positioned at the same place in the vernacular songs as in the Latin text: always in the last strophe (and, in the case of Paris 39, in the



penultimate strophe as well). This suggests the existence of strong ties between the contrafacta and their model, whether conscious or not.

These poetic lines made up of extended or repeated vowel sounds and exclamations echo much earlier traditions of *Puer nobis nascitur*. For instance, in the 14th-century Moosburger *Graduale*, the strophes of *Puer nobis nascitur* are sung in alternation with extended vocalizations on ‘O’, to be sung to the full melody of *Puer nobis nascitur* as a response to each strophe. A similar procedure is used in the three-voice version of *Puer nobis nascitur* in the Vorau fragment, where the last of the five strophes is actually a long vocalization on the vowels ‘O o o [etc.]’ which ends with ‘benedicamus [domino]’.<sup>40</sup> This vocalization clearly has the function of *jubilatio*.<sup>41</sup> It is similar in effect to a melisma, a common musical expression of joy beyond words in the Middle Ages and early modern period. The vocalization goes a step further, because it is not a word or part of a word but rather simply a (vowel) sound, creating a sense of ineffability and joyfulness that exceeds semantic articulation. This emotional sense is particularly striking here, on the one hand because of the liturgical context of Christmas, and on the other because of the long relationship between melisma and the liturgical *Benedicamus Domino* itself. For instance, the Italian prelate Sicard of Cremona (1155–1215) wrote that ‘having sung forth the words [*Benedicamus Domino*], we often vocalize in melismas.’<sup>42</sup> The various vocalizations on vowels in *Devotio moderna* sources precisely evoke this melisma and the *Benedicamus Domino*. In all cases, the use of the vowel ‘o’ anticipates and underlines the concluding ‘o’ of ‘Domino’. Their brevity—they never extend beyond one poetic line—is most likely due to two factors: first, it enabled the poetic structure to be consistent; second, it reflects the emphasis on moderation (a short vocalization) and text expression (the poetic lines that follow this vocalization deal with emotions of joy) that is characteristic of the *Devotio moderna*.

In the vernacular contrafacta, this *jubilatio* often takes on the form of communal jubilation. The vernacular texts effect a change of narrator, moving from the first-person singular (the singer) to the third- or second-person plural (the group of singers). Mary is designated either with the third-person

singular or the first-person singular (the singer thus identifying herself with—and singing as—Mary). Within this frame, the act of singing is always plural and connected to joy, and it often relates to the choir of angels.

end songhen alle mit yolyt  
and [they] all sang with joy  
(Berlin 190, fol.176r)

nu willen wir syngen myt vrouden hoge  
now we want to sing with great joy  
(Berlin 280, fol.19r)

des wille wy syngen und wesen vro  
for this we want to sing and are happy  
(Catherina Tirs)

wir haven gehoirt der engelen sanck  
wir willen myt iubelieren.  
we have heard the angels singing  
we want to rejoice with them  
(Berlin 280, fol.20r)

Here, the Christmas *topos* of rejoicing with the angels through singing is a reference to *Puer nobis nascitur* (see strophe 5 above). It is also an integral part of *Devotio moderna* meditations: Johannes Busch, Windesheim’s reformer, translated an anonymous text from Middle Dutch to Latin to provide material for weekly meditation cycles. One of them deals with the opposition between the heavens and angels and the harsh conditions of earthly life in which Jesus is born. The text asks to raise one’s voice ‘only to praise and to sing with the angels: *Gloria in excelsis deo*’ (‘Exalta vocem tuam nunc cum laude et cum angelis decanta: *Gloria in excelsis deo*’).<sup>43</sup>

#### *Jubilatio of Mary*

The joy of the angels is expressed in texts from both male and female communities, but another kind of Christmas joy was especially important in female communities. Contrafacta from male houses, as noted above, focus on the child Jesus as a saviour of humankind, while those from female houses identify with Mary. In the latter, joy takes on a new level because it is not only the joy of humankind or a shared joy with the angels, but it is also the joy felt by

the mother of Christ herself. The *Devotio moderna* songs are part of a very vivid contemporary tradition in the Low Countries where Mary is specifically associated with the 'jubiliatio'.

A good example is that of a modern devout text written by Sister Bertken (1426/27–1514). Sister Bertken (or Berta Jacobs) had herself enclosed in the Buurkerk, Utrecht's largest parish church. While there, she wrote many texts about spirituality and meditation. Most notably, she wrote a *Kersttraktaat* (Christmas treatise) which describes Mary giving birth to Jesus, rejoicing to God and accompanied by angels singing her praise. In this text, Mary is constantly associated with joy and jubilation. For instance, the text describes how Mary was 'in [a] jubilant state' ('in deser jubilacien') and how the angels surrounding her were strengthening her 'with immense joy' ('met hogher bliscap').<sup>44</sup> A few lines later, the text refers to the 'moisture' that 'flowed from [her body] sweetly out of exceeding jubilation' ('overvolre jubilacien').<sup>45</sup> When God gave birth in her spirit, she was filled with such 'overabundant joy' ('overhoochlick vervruechde') that the 'usual jubilation' ('ghewoenliker jubilacien') in her was calmed and brought to rest.<sup>46</sup> In this text, the joy of the birth of Jesus is transposed into a personal experience of Mary's *jubilatio*. This had to be expressed in the songs of Modern Devouts. In the same anonymous meditation cycle mentioned above, Johannes Busch recommends the reader to 'sing with jubilation *Ave Maria*' ('cane cum jubilo *Ave Maria*') in one Christmas meditation.<sup>47</sup> In female communities, Mary's jubilation was to be expressed in, and experienced through, vernacular contrafacta. This was achieved through jubilant repeated 'o' vocalizations, descriptions of the communal singing with the angels, as well as references to *Benedicamus Domino* and *Puer nobis nascitur*.

#### *Jubilation through Benedicamus Domino*

Finally, the association of the *Benedicamus Domino* and emotions of joy can also be seen in cases where references to the text of this versicle and/or its response are not explicitly included. For this, we need to turn to contrafacta from male communities. The song *Wildi horen newen sanc* in Brussels

IV 421 is an alternative version of *Met rechte singen wij*.<sup>48</sup> Five of the seven strophes of the two songs are exactly the same but, in addition to the different opening line, there are two significant variants between the two contrafacta. The first one lies in the following strophe:

Daer was bont noch grouwe  
Noch pellen noch simide  
Oreten was zyn wyeghe stroe  
Dats ons een grock iolijdt

There was neither bundle of fur, nor grey fur  
Neither pelts, nor velvet  
Fodder was his straw cradle  
This is our great joy  
Gent 901, fol.37r (*Met rechte singhen wij*)

Orte was syn bidde stroe  
Dat is ons grote scande  
Maria namt kijnt in horen scoet  
Ende cuscet voer syn wanghen

Fodder was his straw cradle  
This is our great shame  
Mary took the child on her lap  
And kissed him on his cheeks  
Brussels IV 421, fol.221v (*Wildi horen newen sanc*)

The perspective in these two songs is clearly different: in *Met rechte singhen wij* in Gent 901, the emphasis is on rejoicing at the birth of Jesus, while in *Wildi horen newen sanc* in Brussels IV 421, the emphasis is on the unworthiness of humans and on the miserable conditions of Jesus's birth. The same event (Jesus in a humble cradle) leads to two opposite emotions: joy or shame. Significantly, this discrepancy is also found in the other variant strophe. In Brussels IV 421's final strophe, the narrator addresses a plea to God to be able to see eternal life. There is no reference to *Benedicamus Domino*. By contrast, the last strophe of the song *Met rechte singhen wij* (Gent 901) includes a short 'O' vocalization which refers to its textual models (both *Benedicamus Domino* and *Puer nobis nascitur*). The vocalization concludes with 'gloriam' before praising Lord Jesus, son of Mary and praying to God to be worthy of Him. This indicates

that the invocation of *Benedicamus Domino* and *Puer nobis nascitur* was included here on purpose, for its joyful character, and conversely omitted when such feelings were not appropriate.

The function of *Benedicamus Domino* specifically to express joy in vernacular contrafacta is further strengthened by another example, the Christmas song *Het was een maegt wtercoren*, transmitted in the DEPB (fols.123v–124r, no.237). The poem describes how Jesus wanted to be born of the Virgin Mary, how the angel Gabriel announced the news to Mary in Nazareth and how Mary accepted God's will. The music has no relation to *Puer nobis nascitur*, and a detailed study therefore falls outside the scope of this article. Here, suffice it to say that its refrain, sung after each two-line strophe, reads 'Dies ben ick vro / O o o Benedicamus domino' (This I am glad of / O o o Benedicamus Domino). All the elements mentioned above are present: the vocalization (whose modest length fits the ideals of the *Devotio moderna*), the use of the Latin words 'Benedicamus Domino' in a Middle Dutch poem and the clear textual association of the *Benedicamus Domino* with emotions of joy ('vro'). These are characteristic of a more general and common practice that uses *Benedicamus Domino* and 'O' refrains, which in turn evokes the common liturgical practice of singing melismas to *Benedicamus Domino*.

### Joy in the heart

The principal aim of vernacular contrafacta was to induce an appropriate meditational state and reach a very personal experience of biblical events. This was achieved through bringing these events into the heart, whether inside or outside a liturgical context. For instance, the very vivid descriptions of Jesus in the manger and of Mary's behaviour in the vernacular songs aimed at being seen 'with the heart'. Seeing with the heart is attested in an event reported to have happened to the canoness Katheryna von Arkel (d.1421), from the Windesheim monastery of Diepenveen, and described in a manuscript copied at the end of the 15th century. While working at the wash house before Christmas, Katheryna was meditating on the birth of Jesus Christ. The stone basin became associated in her mind with the newborn Jesus in his cradle and 'she then saw with her

spiritual eyes the little child Jesus lying and crying in front of her' ('soe sach si mit oeren geesteliken ogen dat kyndeken Ihesus voer oer liggen schreyen in den stien').<sup>49</sup>

Since joy was an essential component of the Christmas season, it was equally crucial to feel this emotion in the heart during meditation as well. As Sister Bertken writes, when Mary looked at her newborn child, 'she [Mary] was so filled with new gladness and rejoiced so sweetly in her heart that the melody surpasses [*sic*] all understanding' ('soe weerdt si also vol nyeuwer vruechden ende jubyleerde in haerre herten also rechte suetelic, dat dye melodie boven gaet alle begriip der sinnen'; emphasis mine).<sup>50</sup> It is this state of mind that Christmas meditation was supposed to inspire, and this was achieved by music and text. The music of *Puer nobis nascitur* carries the liturgical and symbolic connotations of joy and feast-days described above. It was equally important that its texts also conveyed the appropriate emotion, not only because of the importance granted to texts over melody within the *Devotio moderna*, but also because these songs could have been sung silently, 'in the heart'.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the surviving sources suggest that the songs could either be sung aloud (alone or in a group) or silently (that is, in the heart).<sup>52</sup> When singing aloud, the appropriate devotion had to come from the heart, but the words pronounced aloud also stimulated the appropriate emotion within the heart. Therefore, when the texts describe their narrators 'sounding all with sweet song' ('luyden al mit sueter sanck', Berlin 190, fol.176r) or the angels whose 'melodies gave such sweet sounds' that the 'shepherds sang together beautifully [with the angels]' ('die melodien gaff so suessen clanck, die heirdekens songen myt schoen', Berlin 280, fol.19v), it is not only to call to the imagination these passages of biblical history. It is also to invite the singer—whether aloud or silently—to sing this sweet sound together.<sup>53</sup> When joy is expressed in vernacular contrafacta, it is often a paraphrase, if not a direct quotation, of the Latin *Puer nobis nascitur*. For instance, as mentioned above, some Latin transmissions of *Puer nobis nascitur* include a strophe dealing with the joy of the angels (DEPB, Brussels IV 421, Soeterbeeck 475, here Gent 901):

Angeli letati sunt  
eciam de deo  
Cantauerunt gloria  
sit in excelsis throno

The angels rejoice  
Also of God  
They sing 'Glory be  
To Him on the highest throne'

The first two lines of the fifth strophe of *Ihesus, susses lieff* (Berlin 280) express joy in a very similar manner:

Die engelen sungen eynen nuwen sanck  
Glorie sy goed in den throne

The angels sang a new song  
Glory to God on the throne

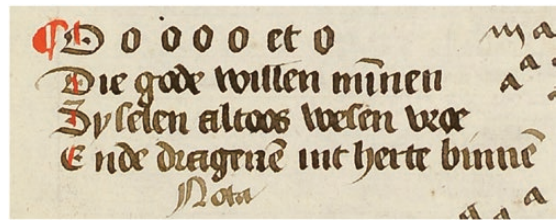
More strikingly, two versions of *Ons is geboren eyn kyndelyn* have partly translated the last strophe of *Puer nobis nascitur* and partly reused the Latin lines verbatim (Berlin 280 and the manuscript of Catherina Tirs):

Nu willen wir syngen myt vrouden hoge  
cum cantibus in choro,  
cum cantibus in organo,  
dat ons dat kyntgen blyve.

Now we want to sing with great joy  
With songs in [the] choir  
With songs at the organ  
That the little child stays with us.

A final example highlights the connections between the *Benedicamus Domino* trope *Puer nobis nascitur* and the expression of joy, the combination of which aimed at stirring up the appropriate emotions and guiding them in the heart. The final two strophes of *Van ihesus kerst marien sone* (Paris 39, from a Franciscan female monastery) read as follows (see also [illus.2](#)):

O o o o o et o  
Allen meghden vrede  
Benedicant domino  
Van allen sinen goede



2 Last two strophes of *Van ihesus kerst marien sone* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Néerlandais 39, fol.76r, detail; reproduced with permission)

O o o o o et o  
Die gode willen minnen  
Syselen altoos wesen vroe  
Ende dragenen int herte binnen

O o o o o and o  
All maidens happy  
Praising the lord  
For all his goodness

O o o o o and o  
Wanting to love God  
They will always be joyful  
And carry [that joy] in their hearts

Not only do we find a direct Latin quotation of *Benedicamus Domino* and the 'O' vocalizations whose joyful properties have been described above, but the outer emotion and expression of joy specifically has to be carried in the heart. In this song, the theological ideas of joy at Christmas are made explicit.

More generally, the poetic contents of the contrafacta of *Puer nobis nascitur* discussed here illustrate a theological progression. The texts open with descriptions of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus and Mary's behaviour, which provided the appropriate contextual frame for Christmas day. Then the texts usually move to a personal identification of the singer with Mary, as if to experience the events from the inside or through the voice and experience the joy of the Virgin herself. Finally, the texts conclude with a clear expression of communal joy that must be experienced and carried within the heart. References to the *Benedicamus Domino* trope *Puer nobis nascitur* were used especially in this final

strophe (and sometimes the penultimate strophe too) in order to inspire or to lead joy from and to the heart.

## Conclusion

The emotion of joy during Christmas time was very important for all Christians, and in this regard, the present analysis confirms previous observations that the Modern Devouts 'did not create an ideology of emotions that differed from other late medieval religious movements'.<sup>54</sup> Going a step further, my contribution demonstrates that music was an essential tool to induce the proper emotion in the

inner spiritual life—not just any kind of joy, but one that imitates the joy of the angels and, in female communities, of Mary. The comparison of Latin and vernacular transmissions of *Puer nobis nascitur* highlights its function as a signifier of joy, in the sense that the song produces (or actualizes) what it talks about. *Puer nobis nascitur* inspires and creates the emotion of joy, either musically with the use of a *Benedicamus Domino* plainchant melody originally used in the liturgy of major feast-days, or through explicitly joyful texts. In this regard, *Puer nobis nascitur* is at once a depiction of joy and an expression of joy itself.

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*This research was funded by a European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant under the European Union Horizon 2020 Programme for Research and Innovation (Grant no.864174), in the context of the project BENEDICAMUS: 'Musical and Poetic Creativity for a Unique Moment in the Western Christian Liturgy c.1000–1500'. I most sincerely thank project leader Catherine A. Bradley for her advice, editing and encouragement. My warm thanks to Nicholas David Yardley Ball, Johanna-Pauline Thöne, James Ralph Tomlinson and Sigbjørn Olsen Sonnesyn for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts. I am very grateful to Frieda van der Heijden and Rozanne Versendaal for their assistance with the Middle Dutch translations.*

<sup>1</sup> 'Sacred song' is here understood, according to Strohm's definition, as 'a melody with a poetic text in a strophic or patterned form, a piece that can be isolated, transferred, and reworked'. See R. Strohm, 'Sacred song in the fifteenth century: cantio, carol, lauda, Kirchenlied', in *The Cambridge history of fifteenth century music*, ed. A. M. Busse-Berger and J. Rodin (Cambridge, 2015), pp.755–70, at p.755.

<sup>2</sup> On the *Devotio moderna* in general, see R. R. Post, *The modern devotion:*

*confrontation with Reformation and humanism* (Leiden, 1968); J. van Engen (ed. and trans.), *Devotio Moderna: basic writings* (New York, 1988); and K. Goudriaan, *Piety in practice and print: essays on the late medieval religious landscape*, ed. A. Dlabáčová and A. Tervoort (Hilversum, 2016). On Christmas songs within this movement, see T. Schmidt-Beste, 'Psallite noe! Christmas carols, the *Devotio moderna* and the Renaissance motet', in *Das Erzbistum Köln in der Musikgeschichte des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. K. Pietschmann (Kassel, 2008), pp.213–32; and U. Hascher-Burger, 'Gender und Fokus: Weihnachtsmeditation in Leiden der *Devotio Moderna*', in *Die Devotio moderna. Sozialer und kultureller Transfer (1350-1580)*, ii, ed. I. Kwiatkowsky and J. Engelbrecht (Münster, 2013), pp.185–205.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from J. Busch, *Chronicon Windesheim*, ed. K. Grube (Halle, 1886), p.207, in a chapter devoted to Johannes Cele, rector of the Latin school of Zwolle between 1377 and 1415. Translation cited from A. Blachly, 'Archaic polyphony in Dutch sources of the Renaissance', *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*,

liii/1 (2003), pp.183–227, at p.184. The fact that Johannes Busch, a major reformer of the monastic branch of the *Devotio moderna*, included this anecdote in his chronicles suggests that it was a shared concern within this spiritual movement. On Busch, see B. Lesser, *Johannes Busch: Chronist der Devotio moderna: Werkstruktur, Überlieferung, Rezeption* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> U. Hascher-Burger, *Gesungene Innigkeit: Studien zu einer Musikhandschrift der Devotio moderna* (Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms. 16 H 34, olmi B 113). *Mit einer Edition der Gesänge* (Leiden, 2002), at pp.185–205. For traces of *discantus* in the lessons for the night Office of Christmas, see A. Blachly, 'Archaic polyphony in Dutch sources of the Renaissance'.

<sup>5</sup> M. van Dijk, 'The *Devotio moderna*, the emotions and the search for "Dutchness"', *BMGN—Low Countries Historical Review*, cxxix/2 (2014), pp.20–41, at p.25.

<sup>6</sup> See J. van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio moderna and the world of the later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2008) and *Monasticon Windeshemense*, ed. W. Kohl, E.

Persoons and A. G. Weiler (Brussels, 1976–1984); H. van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus in het middeleeuwse bisdom Utrecht. Een bijdrage tot de institutionele geschiedenis van de Moderne* (Hilversum, 2006); J. G. R. Acquoy, *Het klooster te Windesheim en zijn invloed*, 3 vols. (Utrecht, 1875–80).

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed introduction to this movement with further bibliographic references is provided in A. Bollmann, ‘The influence of the *Devotio moderna* in northern Germany’, in *A companion to mysticism and devotion in northern Germany in the late Middle Ages*, ed. E. Andersen, H. Lähnemann and A. Simon (Leiden, 2014), pp.231–59.

<sup>8</sup> N. Staubach, ‘Die *Devotio moderna* als Textgemeinschaft’, in *Schnittpunkte: Deutsch-Niederländische Literaturbeziehungen im späten Mittelalter* (Münster, 2003), pp.19–40.

<sup>9</sup> C. de Morrée, *Voor de tijd van het jaar: Vervaardiging, organisatie en gebruikscontext van Middelnederlandse devote liedverzamelingen (ca.1470–1588)* (Hilversum, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> See T. Mertens and D. van der Poel, *Het liederenhandschrift Berlijn 190: Hs. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz germ. oct. 190* (Hilversum, 2013), at pp.186–7 and pp.167–9, as well as J. Janota, ‘Puer natus in Bethlehem’, in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, xi, ed. W. Stammler and K. Langosch (Berlin, 2/2004), p.1282.

<sup>11</sup> U. Hascher-Burger, ‘Religious song and devotional culture in northern Germany’, in *A companion to mysticism and devotion in northern Germany in the late Middle Ages*, ed. E. Andersen, H. Lähnemann and A. Simon (Leiden, 2014), pp.261–83, at p.267. C. de Morrée makes a similar observation (‘Dit betekent dat er door zowel zusters als broeders werd gezongen en verzameld’), but concludes that the biggest song collections were perhaps mainly used

by women: de Morrée, *Voor de tijd van het jaar*, at pp.32–3.

<sup>12</sup> P. Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied: von der ältesten Zeit bis zu Anfang des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1864), i, pp.204–6, and U. Chevalier, *Repertorium hymnologicum* (Louvain, 1897), ii, p.369, no.15790.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the interpretation and biblical references of the text, see K. Ebinger-Möll, *Die Liedersammlung Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Don. A III 18* (Münster, 2016), pp.60–1.

<sup>14</sup> Translation adapted from Peter Lockwood in the booklet of Camerata Trajectina, *Cantiones natalitiae: Kerstliederen uit de tijd van Rubens* (1995), GLO 6033. See also <http://www.liederenbank.nl/text.php?recordid=99968&lan=en> (accessed 6 February 2022).

<sup>15</sup> The term ‘mouvance’ was coined in P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris, 1972). An overview of its use in medieval studies is provided in R. Rosenstein, ‘Mouvance’, in *Handbook of medieval studies*, ed. A. Classen (Berlin, 2011), pp.1538–47.

<sup>16</sup> J. S. van Waesberghe, ‘De herkomst en de oorspronkelijke wijs van “Puer nobis nascitur”’, *Gregoriusblad*, lxxx (1959), pp.176–86. The *Benedicamus Domino* melody is numbered 68 in Barclay’s catalogue: B. M. Barclay, ‘The devotional repertory of polyphonic untroped *Benedicamus Domino* settings’ (PhD diss. University of California, 1977), i, p.77. Latin songs used in private devotion were frequently adapted from chants sung during the Divine Office. Hascher-Burger explains that liturgy and meditative devotion were closely associated since early Christianity and that this association reached its peak in the late Middle Ages, of which the *Devotio moderna* is a clear manifestation. Hascher-Burger, *Gesungene Innigkeit*, pp.150–1.

<sup>17</sup> See A. W. Robertson, ‘“Benedicamus Domino”: the unwritten tradition’, *Journal of the American*

*Musicological Society*, xli/1 (1988), pp.1–62, at p.16.

<sup>18</sup> Barclay, ‘The medieval repertory of polyphonic untroped *Benedicamus Domino* settings’, i, p.49.

<sup>19</sup> Barclay, ‘The medieval repertory of polyphonic untroped *Benedicamus Domino* settings’, i, p.49, and Robertson, ‘“Benedicamus Domino”’, p.33.

<sup>20</sup> See also the modern edition in T. Mertens and D. van der Poel, *Het liederenhandschrift Berlijn 190: Hs. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz germ. oct. 190* (Hilversum, 2013), at pp.170–2.

<sup>21</sup> On *Puer nobis nascitur* in Utrecht 16 H 34, see Hascher-Burger, *Gesungene Innigkeit*, nos.66 and 67; and in Brussels IV 421, see E. Bruning, *De Middelnederlandse liederen van het onlangs ontdekte handschrift van Tongeren (omstreeks 1480)* (Gent 1955), pp.55–8.

<sup>22</sup> For more a detailed musical analysis, see R. Strohm, ‘Song composition in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: old and new questions’, *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft*, ix (1996/97), pp.523–50, at pp.539–41.

<sup>23</sup> Because it reflected the unity of the heart, uniformity in spiritual and material practices, including in singing, was central in the *Devotio moderna*, in particular in its monastic branches. See the discussion and bibliography in M. Louviot, ‘Controlling space, disciplining voice: the congregation of Windesheim and fifteenth-century monastic reform in Northern Germany and the Low Countries’ (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2019), pp.30–6 and pp.183–99.

<sup>24</sup> F. Lefèvre (ed.), *L’Ordinaire de la collégiale, autrefois cathédrale, de Tongres d’après un manuscrit du xv<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Leuven, 1967), i, p.29.

<sup>25</sup> Lefèvre (ed.), *L’Ordinaire de la collégiale, autrefois cathédrale, de Tongres*, i, p.31.

<sup>26</sup> Maastricht, Historisch Centrum Limburg, toegangsnr, 18A, no.523 (hereafter: *Officia propria*),

fol.325r. See also the edition by J. Schoenmakers, *Officia propria: Liturgische rituelen en gebruiken in het sticht voor adellijke dames in Thorn* (Tilburg, 2014), p.696.

<sup>27</sup> Respectively, *Officia propria*, fols.328v–329r and fol.325r.

<sup>28</sup> Munich, Universitätsbibliothek, Cim 100, fol.247r.

<sup>29</sup> Johann Spangenberg, *Alte und Neue Geistliche Lieder und Lobgesenge von der Geburt Christi unsers Herrn für die Junge Christen* (Erfurt, 1544): <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB00005DC200000000> (accessed 6 February 2022), fol.11v.

<sup>30</sup> T. G. Duncan, *A companion to the Middle English lyric* (Cambridge, 2005), p.164.

<sup>31</sup> The *Rationale* by Durandus is relevant here because of its importance and influence throughout the Middle Ages. In addition, surviving sources indicated that it was widespread in monastic houses of the *Devotio moderna*. See the analysis of the book inventories from *Devotio moderna* houses in P. Obbema, *De middeleeuwen in handen: Over de boekcultuur in de late middeleeuwen* (Hilversum, 1996), pp.103–20, esp. at p.116. The following printed version has been used: Guillelmus Durandus, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* (Strasbourg, 1484), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k94009976> (accessed 6 February 2022), hereafter: Durandus, *Rationale*. See also the modern edition of the text in *Guillelmi Duranti Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, ed. T. M. Thibodeau (Turnhout, 1995–2000).

<sup>32</sup> Durandus, *Rationale*, v, iv, i, fol.127rb–127va: ‘Hac eciam hora mundum et angelos creavit qui statim post creacionem suam cantico laudes creatori suo iubilauerunt.’

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Durandus, *Rationale*, v, ix, i, fol.135r: ‘In hora vespertina. significat ecclesia primum adventum domini. qui fuit vergente vespere mundi in vltima.’

<sup>34</sup> Barclay, ‘The medieval repertory of polyphonic untroped *Benedicamus Domino* settings’, i, p.77.

<sup>35</sup> Durandus, *Rationale*, v, ii, lxiii, fol.122vb.

<sup>36</sup> Durandus, *Rationale*, iv, lviii, vii, fol.113rb.

<sup>37</sup> U. Hascher-Burger, ‘Music and meditation: songs in Johannes Mauburnus’s “Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium”’, *Church History and Religious Culture*, lxxxviii (2009), pp.347–69, at p.364.

<sup>38</sup> It is not possible to establish with certainty whether the vernacular contrafacta of *Puer nobis nascitur* also had a liturgical function, though a liturgical function for vernacular songs from the *Devotio moderna* cannot be excluded. See D. van der Poel, ‘Late-medieval devout song: repertoire, manuscripts, function’, in *Dialog mit den Nachbarn. Mittelniederländische Literatur zwischen dem 12. und 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. B. Bastert, H. Tervooren and F. Willaert (Berlin, 2011), pp.67–80, at p.79.

<sup>39</sup> Hascher-Burger, ‘Gender und Fokus: Weihnachtsmeditation in Leidern der *Devotio Moderna*.’

<sup>40</sup> On the Vorau fragment, see R. Flotzinger, ‘Die Vorauer Motettenfragmente’, in *Annäherungen: Festschrift für Jürg Stenzl zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. U. Mosch, M. Schmidt and S. Wälli (Saarbrücken, 2007), pp.88–99. In the vernacular contrafacta of *Puer nobis nascitur*, it seems that the vocable ‘o’ was transferred from the Latin model to the vernacular, rather than emerging within the new vernacular poem itself, as was more often the case, at least in earlier traditions of Latin songs. See M. C. Caldwell, ‘Texting vocality: musical and material poetics of the voice in medieval Latin song’, in *Ars antiqua: music and culture in Europe, c.1150–c.1330*, ed. G. Bevilacqua and T. Payne (Turnhout, 2020), pp.35–72, at pp.40–2.

<sup>41</sup> The ‘O’ vocalization could be used either to express joy or lamentation. Its use has mainly been studied in earlier periods, in particular in 12th-century Latin songs. See, for instance, M. C. Caldwell, ‘Singing, dancing, and rejoicing in the round:

Latin sacred songs with refrains, circa 1000–1582’ (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2013), pp.290–301.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Ideoque saepe uerbis dimissis, cum neumis iubilamus.’ Sicard of Cremona, *Mitralis de Officiis* iv.5, ed. G. Sarbak and L. Weinrich (Turnhout, 2008), p.255. Many thanks to Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn for alerting me to this reference.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted from Hascher-Burger, ‘Gender und Fokus’, p.197.

<sup>44</sup> J. van Aelst, ‘An urban anchoress: Berta Jacobs’, in *Women’s writing from the Low Countries 1200–1875: a bilingual anthology*, ed. L. van Gemert (Amsterdam, 2010), pp.99–111, at pp.100–1. For a discussion and full edition of the original text, see J. van Aelst (ed.), *Mi quam een schoon geluit in mijn oren: het werk van Suster Bertken* (Hilversum, 2007), pp.96–103.

<sup>45</sup> Van Aelst, ‘An urban anchoress’, pp.100–3.

<sup>46</sup> Van Aelst, ‘An urban anchoress’, pp.102–3.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted from Hascher-Burger, ‘Gender und Fokus’, p.196.

<sup>48</sup> About *Wildi horen neuwen sanc* in Brussels iv 421, see Bruning, *De Middelnederlandse liederen van het onlangs ontdekte handschrift van Tongeren (omstreeks 1480)*, pp.50–8.

<sup>49</sup> Deventer, Athenaeumbibliotheek, 101 F 25, fol.124vd. See also Hascher-Burger, ‘Gender und Fokus’, pp.197–8. On the importance of inner sensory experiences in the meditations of Modern Devots, see R. T. M. van Dijk, ‘Towards imageless contemplation: Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen as guide for *Lectio Divina*’, in *Spirituality renewed: studies on significant representatives of the Modern Devotion*, ed. H. Blommestijn, C. Caspers and R. Hofman (Leuven, 2003), pp.3–28.

<sup>50</sup> Van Aelst, ‘An urban anchoress’, pp.102–3.

<sup>51</sup> On singing with *jubilatio* during meditation, see Hascher-Burger, ‘Music and meditation’, pp.360–4.

<sup>52</sup> On singing in the heart or with the mouth, see A. M. J. van Buuren, ‘“Soe

wie dit lietskyn sinct of leest”: De functie van de Laatmiddelnederlandse geestelijke lyriek, in *Een zoet akkoord: Middeleeuwse lyriek in de Lage Landen*, ed. F. Willaert et al. (Amsterdam, 1992), pp.234–54 and 399–404, and H. Joldersma, “Alternative spiritual exercises for weaker minds”? Vernacular religious song in the lives of women of the Devotio Moderna, *Church History and Religious Culture*, lxxxviii/3 (2008), pp.371–93, at pp.381–3.

<sup>53</sup> On the sweetness in music and meditation in the *Devotio moderna*, see U. Hascher-Burger, ‘Ene suete eersame stemme: Katharina van Naaldwijk en de muziek in de Diepenveense zustersviten’, in *Door mensen gezongen: liturgische muziek in portretten*, ed. M. Hoondert, I. de Loos, P. Post and L. van Tongeren (Kampen, 2005), pp.105–17, and Louviot, ‘Controlling space, disciplining voice’, pp.201–17.

<sup>54</sup> M. van Dijk, ‘The *Devotio moderna*, the emotions and the search for “Dutchness”’, p.40. On the *Devotio moderna* and emotions, see also A.-K. Hanselaer and J. Deploige, “Van groeter bannicheit hoers herten”. De conditionering van de alledaagse gevoelswereld in vrouwelijke gemeenschappen uit de laatmiddeleeuwse Moderne Devotie, *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, cxxvi/4 (2013), pp.480–99.



Manon Louvriot

## ***Benedicamus Domino* as an expression of joy in Christmas songs of the *Devotio moderna***

Christmas, as the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, is a central and joyful feast of Christian worship. In medieval and early modern Europe, this translated into a rich musical tradition, of which Christmas songs were a significant part. Song collections from the *Devotio moderna*, a spiritual movement that spread in the Low Countries and Germany during the 15th and 16th centuries, are an important witness to this Christmas tradition. However, because of their wide dissemination and their simple musical style, these songs have presented an historiographical challenge: it has proved impossible to detail in full the ubiquitous circulation of the well-known songs adopted within the *Devotio*

*moderna*, as well as to subject their music and texts to close analysis of the kind usually undertaken for more 'complex' polyphony. In this context, the *Benedicamus Domino* offers a new and productive perspective: not only was the *Benedicamus Domino* singled out for special permission to be sung in polyphony at Christmas, but many Christmas songs are in fact *Benedicamus* tropes. I trace the uses and functional implications of the *Benedicamus Domino* within a single and very widely transmitted song, *Puer nobis nascitur*. Based on an analysis of its polyphonic versions in Latin and of its transmissions with a mix of Latin and vernacular texts, I argue that the *Benedicamus* was one element deliberately used in Christmas songs to guide spiritual exercises and meditation, inspiring and expressing joy during the Christmas season.

*Keywords:* *Benedicamus Domino*; *Devotio moderna*; Christmas; song; joy; *Puer nobis nascitur*; emotions; female devotion