

The joyful exclamation *Benedicamus Domino* (Let us bless the Lord) sounded in song several times a day in churches, monasteries and private chapels across medieval and early modern Europe. As a moment that was part of both Mass and Office liturgies, as well as a text regularly performed outside the church walls in celebratory processions and in informal, sacred, devotional and festive contexts, the *Benedicamus Domino* enjoyed an unprecedented amount of musical licence and interest. The versicle played an especially important role within sacred communities of women, communities whose musical activities have received serious scholarly attention only in recent decades.

The articles gathered in this issue, ‘*Benedicamus Domino* as Female Devotion’, explore the *Benedicamus* as a significant locus of diverse forms of female music-making. This closing versicle is a focus for five individual case-studies of singing, composition and copying by women religious across Europe in the period c.1250–1600. The articles result from a symposium at the University of Oslo, 13–15 October 2021, which was part of the project *BENEDICAMUS: Musical and Poetic Creativity for a Unique Moment in the Western Christian Liturgy c.1000–1500*, funded by the European Research Council. They spotlight far-flung locations that have traditionally been perceived as somewhat peripheral to a ‘central’—predominantly French—musical tradition.

The first three articles converge temporally, at the turn of the 13th century into the 14th, and thematically, in their scrutiny of lavish royal foundations with nuns of noble status. Hana Vlhová-Wörner surveys the substantial repertory of *Benedicamus* tropes that adorned the liturgy of the Benedictine convent of St George’s in Prague, while the frequent use of polyphonic *Benedicamus* settings among the Poor Clares in Poland is examined by Agnieszka Budzińska-Bennett, and David Catalunya investigates the prominence of the versicle among the polyphonic music of the Cistercian nunnery of Las Huelgas in Burgos. The final two articles shift the emphasis to the late 14th and 15th centuries and to female communities that enforced a consciously austere aesthetic. Karin Lagergren introduces the unique repertory of ferial Marian *Benedicamus* tropes that were sung at least twice daily—with a different trope designated for each day of the week—by the Birgittine sisters. Finally, Manon Louviot charts the fate of the widely transmitted Christmas song *Puer nobis nascitur* and its Middle Dutch contrafacta, sung under the special provision for a polyphonic *Benedicamus* granted within the Christmas celebrations of the *Devotio moderna*.

Although some of these sources and songs—the Las Huelgas Codex and *Puer nobis nascitur*—are well referenced in the scholarly literature, they are analysed and

contextualized here from new perspectives. The tropes from St George’s Prague and of the Birgittines are only recently available in modern editions or digital facsimiles and are still largely unstudied. Access to manuscript fragments in Stry Śląc and Kraków has long proved frustratingly elusive: the high-quality colour images that illustrate Budzińska-Bennett’s article (and the cover of this issue) are collected here for the first time. As a whole, the cluster of articles reveals continuity and variety in musical approaches to the *Benedicamus* by disparate female communities, within private devotion, everyday liturgies and on the highest feasts in the Christian calendar. The relationship of nuns and their music to related male houses and singers, and the potential for musical collaboration between women and men, is a recurring theme.

The *Benedicamus Domino* as a moment offers a productive framework within which to consider environments for—and kinds of—music-making that sit outside established early music canons. Musical responses to this versicle pose historiographical challenges because they cut across existing chronological narratives and generic typologies: the article cluster resists any artificial separation of medieval and Renaissance music, or of monophony and polyphony, whose boundaries are revealed to be porous. More importantly, the contributions expand traditional geographical parameters. The earliest scholarship on music in the Czech, Polish and Spanish convents studied here, and within the Birgittine Order and *Devotio moderna* movements, has previously been largely inaccessible to and thus overlooked by Anglophone musicology. Where this early scholarship was read, moreover, its desire to identify and champion ‘local’ musical or poetic compositions ultimately reinscribed conventional narratives of centre and periphery. Previous discussions often simply ended once borrowing from ‘central’ practices or works was identified, while individual pieces were frequently dismissed as too modest to merit sustained analytical attention. The five articles in the current issue illuminate specific social and liturgical contexts of little-studied communities of religious women in Europe before 1600, engaging closely with their musical activities and legacies. They thereby serve to foreground cultural and devotional diversity, not only deepening understandings of the significance of the *Benedicamus Domino* versicle, but also revealing how this particular ritual exclamation opened up an important space for female musical performance and creativity.

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