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**Medieval Music:   
To Sing and Dance**

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I began last week with the life of a saint. This time I open with something that is even more unlikely, you might suppose, to reveal anything very much about the lighter and more festive sides of medieval music and musical experience. I am referring to a dossier that was assembled, early in the fourteenth century, to make a case for the canonization of a particular English bishop. Although the Catholic Middle Ages have long been presented in Protestant tradition, and not only there, as a time of superstition and mystification, nothing falsifies that picture quite like the painstaking and even forensic way in which monks or clergy assembled the materials to support their claim that someone from their diocese or monastery deserved to admitted into the ranks of the blessèd. Our candidate for sainthood in this instance is Thomas Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford, who died in 1282. As you might expect (especially if you heard my last lecture in this series) a great deal of the dossier is concerned with the miracles of healing that the saint is reputed to have performed. One of these accounts, presented with almost legalistic care and attention to detail, casts a shaft of light upon events one Sunday in the rural parish of Marden, approximately five miles from the city of Hereford, during the Spring season. I am going to read you an extract from the deposition of a witness who was called before the procurator of the Chapter of Hereford and a Roman delegation. I quote:

“The witness stated that about fifteen years or more ago, around the time when rumours were going about concerning the miracles God was said to have performed through Master Thomas, it happened one Sunday in April, before the Feast of the martyr Saint George [23 April], that there was a certain beer-tavern in the parish from which the witness came, that is to say of Marden, in the house of Walter de la Wile. The witness went with his wife Caecilia to that inn after the service of Nones along with a good hundred people or thereabouts from the aforementioned parish. When they went to the aforementioned inn, they left in their home, along with her other brothers and sisters, their daughter, Joanna. But when they came close to the inn, they saw Joanna, who was then about five years old, following them. They were not concerned, because there were many other neighbours’ children there.

But after Joanna had been standing for a little while in the said inn with the other children, in the presence of the said witness and many others, she went out of the inn with the other children and entered the garden of the inn where there was a certain pool, either used as a fishery or fishpond. It ran to a depth of six feet or thereabouts and there was a broad ditch twenty-four feet across and about sixty feet long…Joanna went into this garden, approaching the pool, fishpond and started to throw pebbles into it.

But while they were throwing stones into the pool, a certain John, who was the same age as Joanna, pushed her towards the pond in order to frighten her. She fell into the water and sank beneath the surface…The witness and the others were unaware of what had happened, and according to their custom and manner, once they had finished their drinking, the young members arranged themselves into a dance (or carol) and wound their way through the garden near to the ditch into which the said Joanna had sunk. Some people in the carol saw the girl’s clothes in the water and saw her lying motionless at the bottom, and they believed that it was the daughter of Christine de Greenway, who came from the same parish, and who was a destitute woman along with her daughter, and that because of the anguish of poverty and misery, Christine had thrown her daughter into the ditch….”

I end the quotation there. Needless to say, the miracle that Thomas of Hereford performed in this case was to restore the drowned child, named Joanna, to life. Since my theme today, as I said at the beginning, is song and dancing, I am sure you can see why I have lingered over this report. It gives an exceptional glimpse of a dance taking place one day in a medieval village. And it all happens because the young people, according to their custom, were dancing in the garden of a Herefordshire tavern.

Such dances, performed in a ring or a line, often with the dancers holding hands and singing, were commonly called ‘carols’; they were a constant feature of medieval life in the villages and towns. You have an illustration of one, from an Italian source, on your handout. (I will be returning to the issue of why the image only shows women). You will not be surprised to hear that the civil and ecclesiastical authorities often disapproved of them. We are dealing here with something very ancient in the civilization of the Middle-Ages; indeed you might say something pre-medieval. In the year 597, for example, the clergy gathered for the Third Council of Toledo, in the Visigothic kingdom of Spain, fulminated against what they called…

…an impious custom that the people often observe on the feast days of the saints and which is utterly to be stopped. Those who should be at Divine Service keep watch with dances and obscene songs, not only harming themselves but also distributing the offices of the churchmen. This holy synod commits this matter to the care of the bishops and judges so that this custom be banished from all Spain.

Notice the reference to ‘keeping watch’ in that passage. Christian holy days, like those of the Jews on which they are based, begin the evening before, so these dances were nocturnal affairs, vigils that is to say, through the night hours with fires and torches, while the clergy and monks were trying to sing their Night Office.

Trained musicians of the Middle-Ages, insofar as we know their views, were inclined to look down on the music performed for such dances which was no doubt often relatively simple, tuneful and rhythmic, as dance music usually is. There is only one explicit remark from such a musician working and writing in England; we find his comment in an early fifteenth century commonplace book where he mentions what he calls ‘Rondels, balades, carolis and ‘springis’ (presumably some kind of leaping dance) and he says: ‘I do not need to discuss the music of these because they are fantastical and frivolous, and no composers of music have exerted their art or knowledge upon their texts’.

Fortunately for us, that author was quite wrong.

You will remember the gospel story of the Massacre of the Innocents: the children whose murder was ordered by Herod in the hope that the new-born king would be found and killed in the general massacre. The Catholic church of the Middle-Ages celebrated the Feast of the Holy Innocents on 28 December. Most great churches had their staff of choirboys, often called the ‘the innocents’ or innocentes. The song you are about to hear was written for that Feast and was to be sung, I strongly suspect, by the choirboys and alter servers, and quite possibly to be danced as well, for the tradition of clerical dance in the Middle Ages was far richer than you might suspect. The text runs:

Let our company of boys, rejoicing with great joy, celebrate in song and dance this anniversary feast! In honour of the innocents let harps and drums sound! Let songs and instruments witness to a happy mind! Rightly festive, let us rejoice and be merry with the court of heaven, eia! Let sport and gladness, laughter, peace and courtesy make up our household!

Boys, let us rejoice! Herod is dead, we have conquered, our enemy is overcome. Suffering eternal torment, he will not be able to rise again, and we shall follow the immortal lamb wherever he may go. Rightly festive, let us rejoice and be merry with the court of heaven, eia! Let sport and gladness, laughter, peace and courtesy make up our household!

*Performance: Magno gaudens gaudio*

In medieval England, these dances were often performed in churchyards, another ancient practice. It was in such open spaces, and especially to the land around ecclesiastical foundations, that the dancers in the towns and cities tended to congregate. The author of one treatise specifically attacks the dancers for choosing a place dedicated to saints, while the French Dominican Guillaume Peyraut, author of the most elaborate of all the surviving tracts against carolling, declares that dancers do grave offence to a saint when they dance in a place dedicated to him or her. An anonymous treatise on confession, now in the Bodleian Library, confirms the suspicion that these places ‘dedicated’ to saints were often the cemetery lands around churches, for the author inveighs, as well he might, against carols performed ‘around the bodies of the dead’. A revealing story from the later twelfth century tells of a priest in the diocese of Worcester who was trying to sleep one night, but could not because the dancers in the churchyard were singing the same dancing song over and over again with a refrain which kept coming back; the refrain was in English, and the author I am following, Gerald of Wales, actually breaks out of Latin to give the text in the vernacular. It was Swete lemman dhin are: ‘My beloved, your favour! The next day, when the priest was standing at the altar for Mass and the moment arrived for him to sing ‘Dominus vobiscum’ he sang Swete lemman dhin are which caused a public scandal. The Bishop of Worcester banned that song from being sung in his diocese – a ban that was no doubt singularly ineffective, but which shows that a song, and a dance, can be a dangerous thing.

The carols were company dances, and often prearranged events which took place on (or near) the feasts-days of saints as an informal and carnivalesque counterpart to the official celebrations of the Church’s services and seeking the same spot of holy ground. Remember that the dance described in the dossier of bishop Thomas Cantilupe took place on the Sunday before St. George’s day, a detail which is just as significant as the late April and therefore springtime setting of the events described. The presence of the dead – who were, after all, not really dead – was no disincentive. I am reminded of the last stanza of Philip Larkins poem Church Going, on the residual power of a church even for those who are not devout:

A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

Are recognized, and robed as destinies.

And that much never can be obsolete,

Since someone will forever be surprising

A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,

Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie round.

To find out more about the dances of the medieval squares, churchyards and streets we can turn to the writers who disapproved of them so strongly that they cannot resist giving details of what it was they loathed. In other words, we have much to learn from those who denounced the dances in their sermons, treatises on the seven deadly sins or in their manuals of confession. Here, as an illustration, is a cautionary tale preserved by the Dominican friar Thomas of Cantimpré in his collection of stories entitled the Bonum universale de apibus completed in 1263. It reveals the kind of material that many such works preserve, but also shows how information bearing upon the social history of music in the Middle Ages is often to be found in literary sources where it is least expected: the guiding theme of much that I have to say in this season of Gresham lectures. The mere title of Thomas’s work, ‘A Universal Profit Extracted From [the study of] Bees’, makes it seem unlikely source of information about the carol, but the location of the material within the book is more surprising still, for it appears in a section on clairvoyance. I quote:

Here is a cautionary tale of a physician who predicted that a girl singing sweetly was about to die, and by means of it I shall prove that men of great skill can predict the future. There was a count of Loosbroek in the province of Brabant, named Ludwig, who had a highly expert physician in his household. One day, when his passage through a certain town led him by a carol, a girl with a beautiful face and a wonderful sweetness of voice was leading the dance. The count crossed the town with his retinue and admired her excessively for an hour. When the physician saw him in this reverie he said: ‘You marvel, count, at the voice and the beauty of the woman who leads the dance. You should rather marvel that she is about to die.’ These words were scarcely out of the physician’s mouth when a mighty wailing went up in the town, and he learned, having sent messengers there to find out, that the girl had suddenly collapsed and died.

An English theologian of the early fourteenth century, the Dominican friar John Bromyard, records one of the most revealing stories about the carol. In his manual for preachers, entitled Summa predicantium, Bromyard tells how some saintly men approached a certain city. I quote:

They saw a demon sitting upon the ramparts of the city, and when he was asked why he sat there alone he replied: ‘I do not need the help of anyone, because all the city is obediently subject to us [the forces of the Devil].’ Entering the city they found the population in a state of greatest dissoluteness, that is to say dancing carols and occupied with diverse other entertainments. Terrified, they left that city.

The saintly men in this story had stumbled across a city in holiday mood, perhaps celebrating the day of a patron saint.

Given that my overarching theme is the sheer unlikeliness of the places where we can find information about medieval musical life and practice, I would like to continue excavating pieces of music with a dance connection from corners where we might not expect to find it. You are now going to hear a melody embedded in a three-part composition of the thirteenth century, again with a text in Latin, which celebrates the passage of the Israelites over the Red Sea. Given the shape of the melody, and the way it keeps returning to a refrain, I suspect that the composer was thinking of the dance of Miriam, with her timbrel and fellow female dancers, which the account in Exodus 15:20 places after the safe crossing. The text of the song, in translation, runs

Free from mud and brick [Exodus 5:7-19]

the Hebrew freely passes over,

a new man marked with a new sign.

On dry foot, with a pure mind,

the Hebrew freely crosses,

cleansed by the water of baptism. [Exodus 14]

*Performance: Luto carens et latere*

The texts say little about the choreography of carols and there was perhaps no single way of dancing them. To judge by scattered references in sermon literature the dances might be convened in various ways: by a minstrel playing a wind instrument, by someone beating a drum or by the appointed lender calling out through the streets a la touche de karoles! Once convened, the dance could take various forms. No doubt the place chosen for carolling was a decisive factor in establishing the actual shape of the dance. In some contexts there was abundant room, for a common location for these dances, often mentioned by the moralists, is a public square or platea, giving us the French word place. We also read of dances in the ‘thoroughfares’, which explains why an anonymous preacher adorns his section on the carol with Ecclesiasticus 9:7 ‘do not look around you in the streets of the city’. On these occasions it would often have been impractical to dance in a ring and we may therefore understand why Guillaume Peyraut refers to the ‘procession of the carol’, and another author to the carol as a processio diabolica, suggesting that the dances were sometimes performed in a line as narrow medieval streets would often have required.

When the place chosen was a churchyard, however, or a town-square, the carol often took the form of a ring. The sermon materials are explicit about this detail. According to Peyraut, the dancers often moved ‘in a circular motion’ (motu circulari). The basic position was for the dancers to hold hands (whence the call a la touche de karoles), a detail which moralists such as Peyraut found particularly disturbing. You can see this on your handout. This touching of hands constituted one of the formal categories of sin which carollers committed: a sin of physical contact. However, it is clear that the clasping of hands was sometimes released for clapping, accompanied by stamping (whence Peyraut’s use of Ezekiel 25:6 ‘because you have clapped with your hands and stamped with your feet’. You would be amazed how much of the Bible the preachers and homilists found useful when they attacked these dances). The circular motion of the dance, which led to the left, could also be interrupted, to judge by Peyraun’s reference to dancers ‘that go back and forth and to the right and to the left’.

On great feast-days of the church year the dance could become a major public event, and the preachers attack the way that young women preened themselves for the occasion. The amount of detail in their polemics is extraordinary. We hear of girls adorning themselves with wigs made from the hair of dead women, painting their faces and accepting garlands from their sweethearts. Some even wore pearls to the dance, according to one moralist, and those unable to adorn themselves in this way looked on with jealous eyes, blushing (as he says) with shame and envy.

It would be wrong to present the carol as an entertainment restricted to the young, however, though that is certainly what we met in the story about the parish of Marden with which I began. The social meaning of these dances was more comprehensive than that. Sermons and treatises on the Seven Vices (where carols are often discussed under the heading of illicit desire or Luxuria) reveal that old women sometimes took their place in the dances. Usually, however, the carol was too strenuous for them. The English Dominican author John Bromyard reveals that old women were usually content to lead the girls to the dance, just as old knights lead young squires to the field, while another account cruelly confirms this picture, adding that these ‘wrinkled old women’ lend their dancing-clothes to the young girls. Presumably these were more traditional than they were fashionable, and it is tempting to believe that many other details of the carol, including the music, were traditional in the same way.

Since carolling was closely associated with holidays granted for the Feasts of the most important saints of a region, and since carols often seem to have taken place in an urban environment, it is possible that many different social classes came together in them: the daughters of peasant families in town for the holiday and middle-class women with husband among the burgesses. Did the daughters of local nobles take part also? A passage in a sermon by the Franciscan Nicholas de Bayard suggests that the daughters of good (indeed noble) families did not join the carols in the towns, but rather stayed at home, busy with their private devotions, but it is surely wishful thinking:

A noble dog, while others fight in the town, will sit at home peacefully and remain silent; so noble girls, daughters brought up in the most respectful fashion, will stay in the house sitting and praying while others sing in a carol.

One rather unexpected side of the carol emerges when we recognise how frequently, and throughout the Middle-Ages, the dance-songs that were sung and often apparently composed by women were satirical or even, as we might say now, political. A twelfth-century life of the Anglo-Saxon rebel Hereward the Wake records that ‘…the people of the region of Ely praised Hereward above all others; women and girls sang of him in their carols.’ We might compare this passage from the thirteenth-century Life of Arnold of Villers:

One day, a wanton and impudent woman came to him saying that she wished to improve her condition, subject to him wishing to help her in the necessaries of life. He, keen for the salvation of a neighbour, agreed to her request and gave what he could to the woman. She however, going away and mocking the simplicity of the man, composed a song about him and sang it leading a carol.

According to the Dominican friar Guillaume Peyraut, the refrain of one carol sung by young women was Povre mari, fi! ‘Fie on you wretched husband.’

For the history of lyric and song in medieval England, one of the most important aspects of the carols is their use of a refrain: a recurring section of music and poetry quit distinct from the verse. It really want your ears to seize this without you actually seeing the text printed out, so here again is are the two verses of Magno gaudens gaudio.

*Performance: Magno gaudens gaudio*

Many of the manuals that were written for the use of priests and friars, required or licensed to hear confession, reveal the Church’s battle against carollers from the front line. These handbooks sometimes give lists of questions which confessors may wish to put to penitents during confession; these are some of the very words, in other words which laymen and laywomen in the cities and villages heard as they knelt to be shriven – the pleasures of the carols seeming very remote, perhaps even dreamlike, in the discomfiture of the moment. So, for example, in a section entitled ‘Concerning Pride’, the priest or friar must ‘enquire whether the penitent has celebrated carols which may be done in many ways : in assembling together, in buying fine clothes, in disturbing young girls, and in doings of this kind. Carols come into view a second time when the confessors turned to the sin of Luxuria, or not quite that same as ‘lust’ but certainly encompassing it. There, amidst questions about visiting prostitutes and courting widows, we find are these pointers to a confessor’s catechism: ‘enquire whether [the penitent] has polluted himself with a prostitute, deflowered a virgin or visited a widow. Enquire also whether the penitent has taken part in carols much, or in spectacles of his kind, and delighted in others.

In the eyes of many churchmen the carol was a diabolic substitute for the holy liturgy. One story tells that there was once a certain young man who was the most devoted of carollers; for this reason he liked to take part in every carol that was going forward, perhaps obeying that summons *a la touche des karoles* heard in the streets. Since his parents were in danger of being brought to poverty by this (presumably because of his expenditure on clothes or on girls whom he met there) they shut him up in a high chamber and locked him in chains. In that same hour a carol passed through the street, and the young man leading it was in every way like their son. But…it was actually Satan, the Devil. The parents, not realising that this diabolical impersonation was taking place, and thinking that their son must have broken out of his captivity, ran to the chamber where they found him, chained up as before. Astonished, they came angrily to the carol calling out to the young man that he reveal his identity. He said, with due candour, ‘I am the Devil, whose liturgy your son used to perform, and since you hold him bound in chains so that he can no longer conduct the liturgy he was wont to celebrate with such keenness, I am doing this for him and for myself.’

Strange though it may seem, some parents encouraged their children to attend carols. Peyraut tells how mothers adorned their daughters and led them to the dance. Special clothes, floral garlands in the hair, the generous application of striking facial cosmetics – these and other such details recorded in the same sermon literature suggests that carols could function as a marriage market in which young girls of marriageable age could be shown to potential suitors.

I end with something that may have been in your minds all along, especially since it will soon be Christmas. Surely all these references to ‘carols’ have something to do with the Christmas carols we know and love? Well, yes they do, in a way. These dances gave rise to a common form in Middle English poetry where the poem begins with a refrain, has a verse, goes back to the refrain, has a verse and so on, the rule being that one must always begin with the refrain, alternate refrain and verse, and must end with the refrain. This is what medieval English poets knew a carol form and there were indeed carols of Christmas, as of many other festivals. As you can imagine, the alternation of refrain and verse derives from the dancing songs where the company would sing the chorus of the song and the soloist reply with the verses. So here to end, and to draw you towards Christmas, is one of the finest of the medieval English carols with its original music.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay*

*Mid dere moder, sing lullay.*

Als I lay upon a night

Alone in my longing,

Me thoughte I saw a wonder sight

A maiden child rokking.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

The maiden wolde withouten songe

Hir childe o slepe bringge;

The child thoughte sche ded him wrong

And bad his moder sengge.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

‘Sing nou, moder’, seide that child,

‘What sall me befalle

Hereafter wan I cum to eld; come of age

So don modres alle’.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

‘Sweete sune’, seyde sche,

‘Weroffe suld I singe?

Wist I nevere yet more of the

But Gabriels grettinge’.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

‘He grett me goodli on his kne

And seide: Heil Marie,

Ful of grace, God is with the,

Beren thou shalt messye’.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

‘I wondred michil in my thought,

For man wold I riht none;

Marie, he seyde, drede the nouth,

Lat God of hevene alone’.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

‘Ther, als he saide, I the bare

On midwinter night,

In maydenhed, withouten kare,

Be grace of God almiht’.

*Lullay, lullay, la, lullay…*

‘Ther schepperds waked in the wolde

Herden a wonder mirthe

Of angles ther, as thei tolde

In time of thi birthe’.

‘Serteynly this sight I say,

This song I herde singe,

Als I lay this Yolis day,

Alone in my longingge’.

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