2012

Music and the Writings of the Helfta Mystics

Christian Gregory Savage
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF MUSIC

MUSIC AND THE WRITINGS OF THE HELFTA MYSTICS

By
CHRISTIAN GREGORY SAVAGE

A Thesis submitted to the
College of Music
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

Degree Awarded:
Fall Semester, 2012
Christian Savage defended this thesis on August 29, 2012. The members of the supervisory committee were:

Charles E. Brewer  
Professor Directing Thesis

Frank Gunderson  
Committee Member

Douglass Seaton  
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the thesis has been approved in accordance with university requirements.
For Helen and Ernest Arvanitis.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While it is my name that appears on the title page, this thesis was made possible with the assistance of many other people. I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Charles E. Brewer, for his encyclopedic knowledge and invariably helpful research leads, Dr. Douglass Seaton, for his eagle’s eye when it comes to editing, and Dr. Frank Gunderson, for his enthusiasm and insights. I appreciate the effort the staff at the Allen Music Library and Dirac Science Library put in to get me my ILL books in a timely manner (and I apologize for those books I returned two months late). Thanks are also due to my parents, John and Allison, my brother, Nikolas, and my girlfriend, Jenn; without their gentle comforting during times of emotional distress and incessant prodding during moments of lassitude this project would never have gotten finished.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. vi

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................................ 1

1. BACKGROUND ON MEDIEVAL MONASTICISM AND MYSTICISM .............................................................. 6

2. ST. GERTRUDE THE GREAT .......................................................................................................................... 22

3. MECHTHILD OF HACKEBORN ..................................................................................................................... 38

4. MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG ........................................................................................................................ 61

5. MUSIC AND THE BROADER MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE .................................................................................. 81

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................................... 100

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................................................................................ 104
ABSTRACT

In the latter half of the thirteenth century, the convent of St. Mary’s at Helfta, Saxony, represented one of the greatest literary, artistic, and spiritual centers of medieval Germany. Helfta was also the site of a flowering mystical tradition, demonstrated by three of the sisters: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Gertrude the Great. These three mystics each wrote books that relate the quest to come to an emotional understanding of the divine. More important for the purposes of this thesis, these books also contain numerous references to music in their authors’ lives. The works contain many of the same musical elements (e.g., references to liturgical chants or stringed instruments), though each mystic uses these in a slightly different way. However, in the end, all three are united in viewing music as an integral part of the mystical experience.

This thesis explains the numerous ways in which the nuns of Helfta understood and described music, relating these not only to each other but also to the larger context of thirteenth-century Germany. An investigation into the musical elements of the nuns’ mysticism informs recent work that has been done in the fields of sociology and gender studies: this includes arguments over whether the nuns were proto-feminists, how much they were influenced by medieval conceptions of women as inferior to men, and the extent to which they were rebelling or reinforcing a male-dominated Church hierarchy. Following a general introduction to the thesis, Chapter 1 examines the state of the medieval Catholic Church, medieval mysticism, and the monastic life at Helfta. The next three chapters consider the musical thoughts of each of these three nuns, as detailed in their spiritual autobiographies: Gertrude’s *Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis* (Chapter 2), Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Liber specialis gratiae* (Chapter 3), and Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Das fliessende licht der Gottheit* (Chapter 4). Reflecting the emphases of the authors, the particular details of each chapter vary: all include references to liturgical music, the presence of music in mystical visions, the use of musical instruments, and the importance of songs of praise. However, Gertrude’s also considers ways in which she uses Biblical citations, Mechthild of Hackeborn’s includes a more detailed consideration of Mass and Office chants, and Mechthild of Magdeburg’s examines some of the poetry and love songs she composed for God. The final chapter (Chapter 5) synthesizes the preceding information and considers the implications of a varied musical life at Helfta: namely,
how music is a constructive, rather than destructive force (i.e., is used to support, rather than subvert Ecclesiastical authority), and is inextricably linked to the mystical experience.
INTRODUCTION

The history of esoteric thought in the West has been described as a golden thread: a thin line of secret wisdom of the inner aspects of a religion or philosophy, “not suitable for the majority of the faithful, but for those with sufficient interest, motivation, and capacity to benefit from them,” and oftentimes at risk of being wiped out by exoteric religious forces.¹ This esoteric thought is characterized by two features: one, it tends to build on the wisdom of past generations, and two, the wisdom it provides is ultimately timeless. While it is difficult to identify the origin of the golden thread, esoteric philosophy may be seen moving from centers in India and Chaldea to Pythagoras, Plato, and the ancient Greeks, from there being incorporated into Roman religion (e.g., the cults of Isis, Attis, and Mithras) and Christianity (e.g., Gnosticism). Esoteric thought survived during the Middle Ages, in part due to the respect given to the writings of certain early Church fathers (e.g., Origen and Dionysius the Areopagite) and later medieval commentators (e.g., Boethius, John Scotus Euiugena, Meister Eckhart), before being rediscovered in the form of Hermeticism at the dawn of the Italian renaissance.

While it is possible to trace the flow of ideas throughout Western history, and scholars have endeavoured to demonstrate how the various esotericists and mystics are connected,² not all periods are equally studied. For example, considering the medieval era, a great deal of work has been done on twelfth-century mystics, particularly the abbess Hildegard of Bingen (with Hadewijch of Brabant representing one of the next most popular subjects). Likewise, the early fourteenth-century Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart, has been a favorite of theological and esoteric study. However, one lacuna in medieval research which this thesis is intended to fill is the study of the thirteenth century mystics, particularly the visionary nuns residing at the convent of St. Mary’s at Helfta, Saxony: Gertrude the Great, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Mechthild of Magdeburg. This neglect is particularly lamentable because the nuns occupy an important place in the golden thread: strongly influenced by earlier writers, they (or more specifically, the

revelatory books which they wrote) were in turn a font of inspiration for a number of later figures. For instance, Gertrude’s *Legatus divinae pietatis* was spread throughout Europe by Carmelite and the Dominican friars; translated into Castillian by Leander of Granada, it was even read by St. Theresa of Avila.³ Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Liber spiritualis gratiae* (in translation) was especially influential in England from the fifteenth century onward; often paired in manuscript sources with works by Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe, it was popular with the Bigittines, Carthusians, and wealthy lay women readers who commissioned copies of her work.⁴ Lastly, portions of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Das fliessende Licht von Gottheit* were incorporated into a biography on St. Dominic by the Dominican Dietrich von Apolda, and from there passed on to the community at Erfurt (home of Meister Eckhart). Additionally, Heinrich von Nördlingen translated the work into Middle High German and helped spread it throughout the religious houses of Germany.⁵

It should be noted that the nuns of Helfta have not been entirely neglected by scholars. However, the research that has been done lies in the fields of sociology and gender studies. It will be useful to introduce here a couple of the main themes running through the scholarship, as these examples will provide a lens through which the background information of Chapter 1, and the specific elements described in the mystics’ books, may be viewed. However, as the social context of the Helfta mystics forms the basis of Chapter 5, it is unnecessary to go into too much detail at this point.

Previous investigators have used the case of the nuns of Helfta (and other female mystics of the time) to consider the interplay between feminine mysticism and the established medieval socio-cultural norms and beliefs. The essence of recent scholarship trends can be distilled into the question: to what extent did the misogyny and gender separation in medieval society influence female mysticism? Theoretically, responses to these constraints could take a variety of

---

³ Theresa was even reported to have said she had taken Gertrude as her mistress and guide. For more on the Gertrude-Theresa connection see Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 111-12.
forms: mystics might adopt a combative and “proto-feminist” stance against discrimination, they might pay lip-service to male dominance while quietly establishing their own power, they might docilely accept the *status quo* and the view of themselves as inferior to men, etc. At its base, the issue can be understood as one of authority: who possessed authority in medieval society, where did this authority come from (ostensibly from God), how strong and durable was this authority, were there ways and/or the desire to circumvent the established authority, etc.? As will be demonstrated below, the issue of authority informs all aspects of the mystics’ lives, and can be called on to help understand the mystics’ understanding of themselves and their relationships with God, the nature and dissemination of their visions, the appearance of surprising examples of eroticism therein, and finally the interactions between the mystics and other individuals (both their sisters and the male ecclesiastical hierarchy).

While these sociological and gender studies works have begun to explore the wealth of detail regarding thirteenth-century female mysticism, a more musicological focus is all but absent from the scholarship. This thesis is intended to help address the problem (and demonstrate the utility of a musical analysis of mysticism) by explaining the ways in which the nuns of Helfta described music in their mystical experiences and how this relates to the larger social context of medieval Germany. However, my study will go farther than simply reporting the variety of ways in which music is used in the nuns’ writings. I believe that through analysis of the texts it becomes clear that not only did the nuns conceive of music as integral to their religious understanding, but also that all of these musical examples serve to enumerate a universal hierarchy founded on the principle of Love.

In closing, it is important to mention the nature of the primary sources used for this document. For simplicity’s sake I will use the English translations of the mystics’ books in the body of the text: Gertrude’s *Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness* (*Herald* for short), Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Booke of Gostlye Grace* (after the medieval translation; *Booke* for short) and Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*Light* for short). In each of these cases, the abbreviated title is consistent with current scholarly practice in the field. Furthermore, citations from the three nuns’ writings will adhere to the following format: the body of the thesis will contain the modern English translation, while the original language(s) will be located in the
footnotes. Each of the mystics’ works is divided into multiple books and short chapters; thus in addition to page numbers, I will provide this information in the footnote citations. In the uncommon cases where the translation and the original differ in book or chapter I will notate both.


A word must be said regarding the use (and appropriateness) of translations. As this is a music thesis, and not a document on literary analysis, I believe that it is more important to understand the general message of the mystics’ texts than to identify the subtleties of their use of language. While specialists in medieval Latin and Middle High German may see this as an unfortunate decision, I believe that the musical conclusions drawn from the texts are fully substantiated. For this reason, when considering Gertrude and Mechthild of Magdeburg I have left most of the English translations by Winkworth and Tobin unaltered. However, where the translator was not clear in his/her choice of words, or where the English significantly alters the meaning of the original,6 I have substituted my own translations, providing the appropriate German or Latin word in brackets. In the case of Mechthild of Hackeborn, where no modern

---

6 This is primarily of concern when dealing with words that have musical connotations, e.g., “harmony” or “playing/plucking/sounding [an instrument].” In general, the problem arises when the translator choses a musical English word where the original language text does not have musical overtones.
English translation exists, I have attempted to render as literal as possible a translation of the Middle English text, relying on the Latin when the Middle English meaning is unclear. I believe that this sort of approach foregrounds the themes in Mechthild’s book, and that an overly poetic or ornate translation would end up being more of a distraction or impediment to analysis. Once again, in the cases of cognate words that may or may not have musical connotations in modern English, I have included the original text in brackets. I accept full responsibility for any flaws in translation, and apologize to Mechthild (and the other mystics) that putting indescribable mysteries into words often fell beyond my ability.
CHAPTER 1
BACKGROUND ON MEDIEVAL MONASTICISM AND MYSTICISM

Monasticism and the Church

In order to examine the ways in which music played an important part in defining the loving mysticism of the Helfta nuns, it is necessary to begin with a general overview of the religious, philosophical, and socio-political currents circulating in the thirteenth century; the mysticism at Helfta did not proceed in a vacuum, but was rather influenced by a wide range of sources. This chapter presents a brief history of the medieval Catholic Church, the institution that provided the spiritual framework for the nuns’ lives. Following this history, the chapter describes the two possible religious vocations open to a woman of the era: living in a convent as a nun or living in the world as a beguine. The chapter concludes with a summary of the Office and the Mass; given the dominant role these play in the writings of all three mystics, it is necessary to have some foundation in the rituals.

Barbara Walters, in her article “Women Religious Virtuosae from the Middle Ages,” offers a good summary of medieval Church history. In the early Middle Ages the Church hierarchy had been closely (at times seamlessly) enmeshed with the aristocracy: as the right of primogeniture ensured that possession of property passed to the oldest male child of a family, aristocrats would purchase bishoprics, abbotships, or other positions in the Church for younger sons. Not only did this lead to numerous unqualified individuals occupying positions of spiritual authority, it ensured that Church officials constantly meddled in secular politics. Starting in the eleventh century popes instituted a series of ecclesiastical reforms with the ultimate goal of raising papal authority and prestige: the moral reform of the clergy, particularly combating simony and demanding celibacy (1040-1070); the establishment of the supremacy of the pope over lay control (the Investiture Controversy of 1075 between Pope Gregory VII and Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV); the end of the investiture struggle and the growth of monasticism (1100-1130); and the intense concern for the moral well-being of all Christians (1130-1160, later to lead to the Albigensian Crusade).

---

8 Walters, 71.
The reforming spirit also expressed itself in the growth in the number of individuals who, eschewing the opulence of the medieval Church, sought to return to the asceticism and poverty of the apostles. As Walters explains, at times this reforming spirit produced tension between what she terms the “bureaucratic ecclesia” (priests, bishops, and other members of the church hierarchy) and the “strict religious virtuosi” (i.e., mystics, ascetics, and others strongly devoted to experiencing God firsthand). 9 This tension played out most strongly in the religious movements that flourished in the early thirteenth century: two of the most extensive were the beguines (who will be discussed in more detail below) and the Cathars. Members of these groups were constantly at risk of being labeled heretics by the hierarchy. At times the Church would allow these groups to exist; when Pope Innocent III assumed the papacy in 1198, he tolerated preachers and devotees of apostolic imitation who also maintained reverence for the hierarchy and orthodox doctrine. Into this category fell most of the beguines. However, those who preached against the Church or established doctrine were in mortal danger; Innocent was responsible not only for creating the Inquisition, but also for instituting the Albigensian Crusade against the Gnostic-leaning Cathars.

In contrast with the unaffiliated reformers, the semi-autonomous monastic houses found a better balance between the influences of the established bureaucracy and the reforming religious virtuosae. Not only were they linked to the hierarchy of the Church through obedience to the Pope, they were also relatively isolated from the corruption and chaos of the secular world. 10 By the thirteenth century monasticism had a history almost as long and varied as the Church itself, 11 and a number of different orders existed. Almost all the orders followed a set rule, the most popular being the guidelines laid out by Benedict in his Rule, written in about 530 CE. Benedict saw the purpose of the religious life as the renunciation of one's own will and the taking up of arms under the banner of Christ; he sought through his Rule to guide monks to “reach those

9 Walters, 72.
10 Walters, 71.
11 The roots of monasticism can be traced back to the third century, when the Egyptian desert became the destination for devout Christians who sought to lead lives of rigid asceticism, isolation, and constant prayer. Over time, efforts were made to form communities of these individuals, with the intention of bringing together ascetics who sought to lead a contemplative life but did not have the skills needed to survive alone in the desert. For more information, see: George Cyprian Alston, "Rule of St. Benedict" in The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02436a.htm (accessed June 11, 2012).
greater heights of learning and virtues.”

Benedict’s rule covers the entirety of monastic life, including detailing a hierarchical structure based on a familial model, stressing the virtue of obedience and poverty, emphasizing the need for a strong component of physical labor mixed with contemplative reading, etc. However, what is most important for the purposes of this thesis is his prescription for prayer. To Benedict, the chief work of monks was to participate in daily public prayer, or what he termed the *opus Dei*; this was to be “the source from which all other works took their inspiration, their direction, and their strength.”

In his *Rule*, Benedict organized the day into eight Offices. These began with Vespers at sundown, and ran until the following day:

As the Prophet says: “Seven times during the day I have spoken thy praise” [Psalm 118/119]. This sacred number of seven is thus observed by us if we fulfill the obligations of our service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline; since he says of these day hours, “Seven times during the day I have spoken thy praise.” And of the nightly Vigils [Matins] the very same prophet says: “I arose in the middle of the night to confess thee.” Therefore let us render praise to our Creator “for his just judgements” at these hours [...] 14

Benedict further divided these into the major hours (Matins, Lauds, Vespers, Compline) and minor hours (Prime, Terce, Sext, None). As might be expected, the services varied in length and content. The minor hours included the singing of a versicle, hymn, and a few psalms, along with reading from the Old and New Testaments. The major hours expanded on this model: in addition to having longer scriptural readings, major hours included set chants (e.g., the *Te Deum* at Matins and the *Magnificat* at Vespers) and might incorporate other canticles from the Old and New Testaments. With regard to the psalms, Benedict’s *Rule* lays out an organizational scheme dictating which are to be sung at each service and on each day of the week:

The order of the daily psalmody thus arranged, all remaining psalms are to be distributed equally over the seven nightly Vigils; twelve can be assigned each night by dividing the larger psalms. We strongly recommend that whoever is not pleased with this distribution of the psalms, should arrange them in some other way that he considers to be better. But in any event let him see to it that every week the complete Psalter with its one hundred and fifty psalms is sung, always starting from the beginning at Sunday Vigils. For monks who sing less than the Psalter with its customary canticles in the course of a week display

---

13 Venarde, 229.
a lack of dedication and devotion, whereas we read of our holy fathers who arduously fulfilled in a single day what we tepid souls accomplish in an entire week.\textsuperscript{15}

Between the Mass and the weekly Office, over the course of a liturgical year monastics would be exposed to most of the New Testament, all the psalms (fifty-two times), and much of the rest of the Old Testament. It is thus unsurprising that both Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn provide a stunning number of Biblical references in their writing, and use the various Offices and Masses as a means of organization.

It should be noted that Benedict’s \textit{Rule} did not apply solely to male religious communities. From the beginning, women played an integral role in the Church, and the first convents were founded at about the same time as the first monasteries (at about the fourth century). A full treatment of female monasticism is outside the scope of this thesis; for the purposes of this discussion it is only necessary to introduce the order present at St. Mary’s: the Cistercians. The Cistercian order was founded in 1098 by a small group of Benedictines as a movement seeking to reform the practices of the abbey of Cluny (which had grown immensely rich on tithes, rents, feudal rights, and donations from pilgrims, and which suffered from a lack of ecclesiastical oversight).\textsuperscript{16} The group took its name from the village of Cîteaux (Cistercium in Latin), where they founded their first abbey. The Cistercians endeavored to return to a literal observance of Benedict’s \textit{Rule}; this included “resuming manual labour [particularly agriculture], adopting a more severe regimen, and restoring in monastic churches and church ceremonies the gravity and simplicity proper to the monastic profession.”\textsuperscript{17} From their original monastery the Cistercians spread rapidly: founding their first colony in 1113 (a year after Bernard of Clairvaux joined the order – he was later to become their greatest spokesman), and their first convent in 1125. By the end of the thirteenth century the order included hundreds of houses, and rivaled Cluny in terms of power.

While the growth of the Cistercians (and other orders) provided a spiritual opportunity for women, monastic life was not appropriate or possible for everyone. As Dennis Devlin notes

\textsuperscript{15} Treitler, 54
\textsuperscript{16} Walters, 72.
in his article “Feminine Lay Piety,”18 women who wished to lead religious lives in the early Middle Ages had very few choices: they could become nuns, or they could become anchoresses. The former often required a substantial dowry, while the latter entailed living a life of isolation not suitable for most individuals. As a result, the High Middle Ages saw the birth of a new type of religious movement: the beguines.19 Beguines were uncloistered lay people who lived in towns, either in their own homes or in communal houses. Like tertiaries (lay people affiliated with religious orders) they did not take vows, nor did they follow a formal rule. This combination of informality and lack of a need for a dowry opened up the movement to a number of poor and middle-class women who could not otherwise have become nuns. With regard to their philosophy, the beguines hearkened back to the early Church, seeking to lead lives of apostolic poverty, contemplation, and good works (particularly ministering to the poor and sick). These elements, combined with the emphasis beguines placed on chastity and the value of mystical visions, brought them close to Cistercian theology; in fact, many contemporaries made little distinction between beguines and Cistercians.20

Devlin divides the history of the beguine movement into four stages.21 The origins can be traced to a confluence of individual women’s desires to lead more intensely spiritual lives combined with the currents of mysticism, Church reform, crusading fervor, and socio-economic

---

19 The beguines had male counterparts, the beghards. However, the female movement was historically much larger and more influential than the male. A number of different summaries of beguine history and philosophy are available; in addition to Devlin’s thorough article, readers are directed to Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 51-56; Mary Jeremy Finnegan, The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 12-14; and Mary Sudyam, “Bringing heaven down to earth: beguine constructions of heaven,” in Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages, Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 91-95. The origin of the term “beguine” is disputed: Finnegan proposes it comes from the name of Lambert le Bègue, a priest of Liège (14), while Petroff suggests it might have been a derogatory label for a heretic or a reference to the robes members wore (53).
20 Devlin, 189. The author continues by listing a number of visionary elements shared by beguines and Cistercians: experiences of communication with saints and angels, visions of Christ and the Virgin Mary, appearances of the infant Jesus, Eucharistic phenomena, and a variety of ecstatic trances/out-of-body experiences/revelations of the future. Many of these will return in the writings of the three Helfta mystics.
21 Devlin, 184.
changes of the late twelfth century. From this point the history of the beguines is one of decreasing independence and increasing Church control. By the early 1200s many beguines were associated in informal circles under the guidance of sympathetic clergy, though they still did not take any long-term vows. In 1233 Pope Gregory IX granted the beguines quasi-legal recognition in the bull *Gloriam virginalem*; as a result, beguine houses had to accept some sort of modified rule (usually Cistercian), but were more protected than other popular movements from the occasional charge of heresy. The incorporation of the beguine houses into parishes, mostly under control of the Dominican order, followed not long after.\(^\text{22}\) However, it should be noted that incorporation was not a fail-safe protection for the women; as time progressed, the Church increasingly viewed the beguines with suspicion, and they were ultimately condemned on charges of pantheism and antinomianism by Pope Clement V at the Council of Vienne (1311-12).\(^\text{23}\) Despite this setback, the beguines had an important influence, not only at Helfta but also on later mystical thought.

It is perhaps remarkable that this populist movement managed to survive for as long as it did. Dyan Elliott, in her book *Proving Women*, argues that the threat of heresy, a new emphasis by the Church on the sacraments (which could only be provided by male priests), and the introduction of the Inquisition increasingly served to criminalize female spirituality.\(^\text{24}\) The beguines were “anti-heretical” in their confessional practices: they endorsed the practice of auricular confession, venerated their (male) confessors, and publicized visions they had of Purgatory. This endorsement of the Church-centered penitential framework was probably one reason why the beguines were able to survive for over a century before being declared heretical.\(^\text{25}\)

The final element of Catholicism to consider here is the ritual of the Mass. As with the Divine Office, references to the Mass abound in the writings of all three Helfta mystics, particularly in the context of visions, so it will be useful to consider both the history and the medieval understanding of this ceremony. As Joseph Jungmann notes in his authoritative volume on the subject, in the medieval period “the Mass is understood as a dramatic presentation

\(^{22}\) Finnegan, 14.
\(^{23}\) Devlin, 185.
\(^{25}\) Elliott, 84.
of an action in the divine economy, especially of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, beginning with the longings and sighs of the patriarchs and prophets and concluding with our Saviour’s ascension into heaven.”

Furthermore, while the Mass was a moment of gathering for all the faithful, it was nevertheless still a communion between an individual and God.

Jungmann continues by describing the overwhelmingly allegorical method of contemplating and understanding the liturgy in the thirteenth century; despite the growth of Scholasticism, intellectuals still saw the Mass in a Platonic sense as a reflection of higher reality. This gave rise to a variety of interpretations in which every reading, chant, prayer, and action of the Mass might be related to some numerologically significant aspect of Christ’s life and suffering (e.g., the number of years of his life or the Stations of the Cross). The allegorizing may even be seen in the colors assigned to various days of the liturgical year; for instance, the reforming pope Innocent III specified which colors should be assigned to holy days, ordinary Sundays, etc. (and what they signified), and how each of the priestly vestments related to an attribute of Christ.

The issue of allegory in particular is interesting because the Helfta mystics return to it often in their writing. For example, Mechthild of Hackeborn describes in her Booke a vision of Christ:

> Then she prostrated herself before our Lord’s feet, and saw how our Lord had upon his right foot a sapphire, and upon his left foot a garnet. She wondered at this, then our Lord said to her: “Just as a sapphire, by its virtue, voids evil humors, my wounds put away the venom of the soul and purifies it from all filth. And just as a garnet gladdens a man’s heart, my wounds make a soul rejoice in me after he is cleansed of his sin.”

---


27 Jungmann, 178.

28 Jungmann, 113. The one major way in which Scholasticism influenced the Mass was by assigning an order to the various parts. For instance, the Mass was traditionally divided into the liturgy of the catechumens (culminating in the reading of scripture) and the liturgy of the Eucharist (culminating in communion). During the Middle Ages a number of additional divisions were put forward; one of the earliest was by Albertus Magnus, who separated the Mass into three parts: *introitus*, *instructio*, and *oblatio*. See Jungmann (113-15) for further details and schemes.

29 Jungmann, 112.

30 “Than sche felle prostrate to oure lordys feete, ande saight howe oure lorde hadde opon his ryght foote als itt hadde been a saphyere, ande opon the left foote als itt hadde bene a garnete. Of this sche hadde wondere, and than oure lorde sayde to here: ‘Ryght als a saphyere be his vertewe voydes wykkede humours, ryght so my woundys puttys awaye the venyme of the sawle ande purifieth itt fro alle fylth. Ande als a garnette gladdys a mans herte, ryght so my wondyes makes a soule ioye in me eftere that he es amendede of hys synne’” (Booke 2:1, 325-26). “Tunc solito more ad pedes Jesu se prosternens, vidit Dominum habentem super dextro pede quasi
The other important element of the Mass for a consideration of Helfta is the nature of the Communion, or Eucharist. Not only did the Church preach that the bread and wine consecrated in the ritual of the Mass literally became the body and blood of Christ, commentators understood them to become the “total Christ” through transubstantiation. In other words, the Eucharist was not a thing so much as it was a real person (Jesus Christ) who was to be accompanied on his path of death and redemption. Jungmann notes that, beginning in the twelfth century, spectators even began to report the occurrence of Eucharistic miracles, for instance having a vision of Christ at the Elevation of the Host. These events in particular helped temporarily move the focal point of the Mass in the thirteenth century from receiving Communion to witnessing the Elevation. The writings of the Helfta mystics do place more importance on the act of Communion over the Elevation. However, it is interesting to consider the larger issue of journeying with the “total Christ.” The mystics’ references to the sacrament are inevitably linked to dialogues with Christ, and Communion is often a time for having visions. In other words, while the mystics are partaking in a momentary ritual, they simultaneously experience a much deeper knowledge of God.

**Medieval Mysticism**

With this background on Catholicism it is now possible to consider the Catholic understanding of mysticism. Only by understanding the overarching beliefs and spiritual framework for the visions can one come to an informed analysis of the more specific function of music therein. Petroff provides a useful general definition of mysticism as “an experience, not an idea,” this furthermore being a “real and unmediated experience of God.”

---

sapphirum, et super sinistro grantum. De quo dum miraretur, dixit ad eam Dominus: ‘Sicut sapphirus sua virute malos depellit humores, sic mea vulnera animae depellunt virus, et eam a maculis purificant; et sicut granatum cor hominis laetificat, sic mea vulnera, post emendationem peccatorum, animam in me gaudere faciunt’ (Liber 2:1, 135).

31 Jungmann, 118.
32 Jungmann, 119-20. The author notes that the veneration of the Host led to “showings” (e.g., on the feast day of Corpus Christi) where the consecrated Host was uncovered and processed around town. More humorously, Jungmann also writes how many people would rush from church to church on Sundays, trying to see the Elevation as frequently as possible, in the belief that it would aid in their salvation.
33 Petroff, 3-4.
more intellectually oriented branches of esoteric thought, mystics tend to emphasize union with a higher power, often going so far as to surrender the individual ego and fall into an ecstatic union with the divinity.\textsuperscript{34} While a full discussion of the history and varieties of mysticism is outside the scope of this current project, it is possible to briefly introduce some of varieties found in the medieval era. Oliver Davies, in \textit{God Within}, identifies three main branches of mysticism in the High Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{35} The simplest form provided a chance for an individual to communicate with God in a real and meaningful way. The rarer second school, practiced by the three Helfta mystics, was a sense of personal dialogue with Christ. This school was inspired by the traditions of Courtly Love and \textit{Brautmystik}, and the practice of self-mortification, and led practitioners to experience visions. The final form of mysticism, \textit{Wesenmystik}, was a pan-religious, direct, unmediated experience of God.\textsuperscript{36} Examples abound in the writings of the Helfta mystics where they submit wholly and unquestioningly to the will of the divine, in the process experiencing visions. For instance, Mechthild of Hackeborn had a vision wherein

\begin{quote}
After these words Love said again to this maiden: \textit{Intra in gaudiam domini tui}; that is to say: “Enter into the joy of thy Lord” [Matt 25:21]. With that she was carried up [raudyschede] whole into God. Just as a drop of water poured into wine is changed all into wine, so too when the soul of this blessed maiden passed into the soul of our Lord God it was made all one spirit with him. In this union the soul was not in herself, that is to say, felt not of herself.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Gertrude, too, describes the experience of union with the divine:

\begin{quote}
After these words Love said again to this maiden: \textit{Intra in gaudium domini tui}; that is to say: “Enter into the joy of thy Lord.” And with that she was rauyschede alle hoole into God, thatte ryght als a droppe of watere when itt es pourrede into wyne anone itt es chawngele alle into wyne, ryght so when the sowle off this blessed maiden passede into the sowle off oure lorde God itt was made all oone spryite with hym. In this vnyoun the sawlle was nootede in hereselfe, that es to saye, felte noght of hereselfe” (\textit{Booke} 2:19, 357). “Dixitque iterum amor ad animam: ‘Intra in gaudium Domini tui.’ In hoc verbo totaliter in Deum rapta est, ut sicut aquae stilla infusa vino, tota mutatur in vinum, ita haec beata in Deum transiens, unus cum eo spiritus est effecta. In haec unione anima in se adnichilabatur [...]” (\textit{Liber} 2:17, 152).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Walters, 74.
\textsuperscript{36} All three of these expressions of mysticism have their origin in the philosophy of Plato, who preached the process of ascent to a higher reality; Plato’s ideas were introduced, in a modified version, into the West by Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, along with Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Gregory of Nyssa. (Davies, 5-6)
\textsuperscript{37} “After thees worde love sayde agayne to this maydene: \textit{Intra in gaudium domini tui}; that es to saye: Entre into the ioye of thy lorde. And with that sche was rauyschede alle hoole into God, thatte ryght als a droppe of watere when itt es pourrede into wyne anone itt es chawngele alle into wyne, ryght so when the sowle off this blessed maiden passede into the sowle off oure lorde God itt was made all oone spryite with hym. In this vnyoun the sawlle was nootede in hereselfe, that es to saye, felte noght of hereselfe” (\textit{Booke} 2:19, 357). “Dixitque iterum amor ad animam: ‘Intra in gaudium Domini tui.’ In hoc verbo totaliter in Deum rapta est, ut sicut aquae stilla infusa vino, tota mutatur in vinum, ita haec beata in Deum transiens, unus cum eo spiritus est effecta. In haec unione anima in se adnichilabatur [...]” (\textit{Liber} 2:17, 152).
Then she willingly abandoned herself to God’s good pleasure, as an instrument designed to show, in and through herself, the operations of his love to such an extent that she did not hesitate to play the part of an equal with God, the Lord God of the universe.\(^{38}\)

In both of these cases the soul of the mystic is joined to such an extent with God that it is no longer possible to distinguish the two.

The description of mysticism so far perhaps obscures its inherent social character; unlike solitary ascetic practice, medieval mysticism flourished in a number of subcultures (the monastery being the subculture par excellence), where individual members constantly reinforced one another.\(^{39}\) In the case of Helfta, the nuns describe numerous cases of mutual assistance. Gertrude’s *Herald* offers a variety of examples of how she and Mechthild of Hackeborn supported one another. At times, this included reassurances as to the nature of visionary experiences:

> When [Gertrude] reflected on her wretched and worthless state, she thought she was quite unworthy of such great gifts as those with which she knew God was constantly enriching her. She went to Dame Mechthild of happy memory, who was held in great esteem and honor for her grace of revelations. She humbly begged her to ask the Lord about the gifts mentioned above, not because she was in any doubt or wanted to be reassured, but because she wanted to arouse in herself a greater sense of gratitude and to be confirmed in faith, lest afterwards she should be led to doubt by her sense of her extreme unworthiness. Dame Mechthild, as she had been asked, took counsel with the Lord in prayer.\(^{40}\)

In other instances, the nuns advised one another on proper spiritual meditation techniques:

\(^{38}\) *Herald*, 1:10, 68-69. “[...] excepto, ut praedictum est, quando largiorem divinae clementiae persensit influxum, quod tunc Dei beneplacito in omnibus libere consentiens, reddbebat se velut instrumentum ad ostendendum omne opus amoris in ipsa et cum ipsa, in tantum quod non cunctabatur cum Domino Deo universorum ludere de pari” (vol. 2, 166).


\(^{40}\) *Herald* 1:16, 83. “Vilitatem ergo suam et indignitatem perpendens, cum se valde indignam judicaret tantorum donorum Dei quibus se sciebat a Domino fideliter muneratam, accessit ad felicis memoriae M. in gradia revelationum tunc nominatissinam et reverentissinam, humiliter supplicans quatenus super his præscriptis donis Dominum consuleret, non quasi dubia volens super acceptis certificari, sed pro tam gratuitis desiderans ad majorem gratitudinem provocari et in posterum confirmari, si quandoque nimietas indignitatis suae cogeret ipsam ad dubium decline. Unde cum Domna M. secundum quod ab ea rogata fuerat, se ad consulendum Dominum dedisset in orationem [...]” (vol. 2, 206-8).
Suddenly [Christ] appeared, inflicting a wound in my heart, and saying: “May all the affections of your heart be concentrated here: all pleasure, hope, joy, sorrow, fear, and the rest; may they all be fixed in my love.”

At once it occurred to me that I had heard it said that wounds have to be bathed, anointed, and bandaged. You had not then taught me how to do this, but afterwards you showed me through another person [Mechthild]. She was more accustomed, I believe, to listen more frequently and consistently, for the sake of your glory, to the soft murmur of your love (Job 4:12) than was I, alas. She now advised me to meditate devoutly on the love of your heart as you hung on the cross, so that from the fountains of charity flowing from the fervor of such inexpressible love I might draw the waters of devotion that wash away all offenses; and from the fluid of tenderness exuded by the sweetness of such inestimable love, I might derive the ointment of gratitude, balm against all adversity; and in efficacious charity perfected by the strength of such incomprehensible love, I might derive the bandage of holiness, so that all my thoughts, words, and deeds, in the strength of your love, might be turned toward you and thus cleave indissolubly to you.41

Finally, Gertrude, along with a second, unknown colleague, was responsible for writing down Mechthild of Hackeborn’s dictations into the Liber specialis gratiae. Such close collaboration raises the question of how much the nuns influenced each other’s beliefs. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, Mechthild and Gertrude in particular shared a number of similar elements of theology.

Medieval mysticism was also associated with charity and good works. As Petroff notes, in the High Middle Ages mysticism was not “a retreat from the negative aspects of reality but a creative marshaling of energy in order to transform reality and the perception of it.”42 Part of this may be traced to the spirit of philanthropy permeating all aspects of Christianity; even cloistered individuals were expected to help the surrounding community (e.g., by catering to the

42 Petroff, 5-6.
needs of visitors and pilgrims, offering advice when sought out, and providing religious education to the general populace).

One of the most widely publicized elements of mysticism hitherto left untreated in depth is the vision, the personal revelation to the individual mystic of some higher truth from the divinity. All three mystics make reference to music helping to prompt visions, and often of its being sounded throughout their visions. For these reasons, a brief treatment of the phenomenon is warranted. Two different types of visions were recognized in the Middle Ages. The first was a spontaneous, unsought occurrence, presumably from God, as described in Biblical sources ranging from the prophet Ezekiel to the Revelation (Apocalypse) of St. John. The second, by contrast, was not unsolicited; rather it came as a result of an intense yearning, coupled with assiduous spiritual discipline carefully cultivated through years of practice. Cloistered life in particular, with constant daily prayer and contemplatio, was ideal for inspiring the latter. In both cases, while the actual experience of a vision might be unique, medieval visions tended to be highly stylized when transcribed into text. As will be demonstrated in the examples cited in the coming chapters, this pattern is maintained in the writings of Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn. The standard model may be seen in this passage from Gertrude’s Herald:

At the Offertory of the Mass, Recordare, Virgo Mater, at these words “that you may plead in our favor,” as she was concentrating her attention upon the Mother of all grace, the Lord intervened with these words: “You and your sisters do not need anyone to plead in your favor, for I am myself entirely favorably disposed toward you [...]. My own natural goodness leads me to look on the better side; embracing this with the whole of my divinity, the imperfect is concealed by the perfect.” Then she said: “O most bountiful, how can you now give me, so unworthy and so ill-prepared, such great and consoling gifts of your grace?” He replied: “Love compels me.”

43 Newman, 3. An offshoot of the latter, a curious tradition of the “scripted vision” developed in the later Middle Ages (see 25-33 for more details). For those individuals (unlike the Helfta nuns) who were poorly educated, a number of popular manuals were published that provided scripted and formulaic patterns, akin to modern practices of guided meditation; one of the most popular was the Meditations on the Life of Christ. As the title might suggest, these books laid out basic scenes from the Bible which one was intended to focus on (imagine) with the mind. Through such exertions, and with the aid of a good imagination, one might experience limited visions of the divine. As the more scholastic visions were treated with suspicion, it is no surprise that religious authorities were even more ambivalent about this practice of scripted visions.

44 There was a long history of the stylized method of literary transmission of visions. For a fuller discussion, see Newman (4-5).

While an analysis of the mystics’ visions will be saved until their respective chapters, this example demonstrates how the experience evolves from a standard introduction into a unique vision (or dialogue, as in this case).

Despite a long history of visions stretching back into Biblical times, the Church was ambivalent about the nature of visions: on the one hand members of the cloistered spiritual elite cultivated visions as a form of devotion, while on the other many priests expressed their fears that visions were satanic delusions putting laypeople’s souls at risk. This ambivalence towards visionary experiences grew out of late Classical theories of perception, particularly those of Augustine (though Macrobius and Calcidus were also represented, especially with regard to dream theory). In his *De Genesi ad litteram* Augustine divided perception into three levels: visual/corporeal, visionary/spiritual, and intuitive insight/intellectual. Only the highest of these three levels could be trusted to yield true accounts of reality. Most medieval visions fell within the second category, and thus might represent divine truth, but could equally represent a subjective experience or the work of a demon. Augustine’s rubric was taken up by the twelfth-century Cistercian Alcher of Clairvaux, who in his *De spiritu et anima* acknowledged that the potential for deception is great in corporeal vision, less so in spiritual vision, and absent in intellectual vision. While a study of the nature of visions is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to remember the real antipathy many felt towards visions, and to keep in mind that this might have impacted the attitudes of the Helfta nuns: each of them required constant reassurances from their fellows and from God before consenting to record their visions.

**History of St. Mary’s**

With this background it is now appropriate to consider the more specific case of mysticism at Helfta. The convent of St. Mary’s was founded in 1229 by Elizabeth of Schwartzburg and her husband, Burchard, count of Mansfeld, who were petitioned by Cunegard

---

est necesse ut aliquis loquatur pro vobis, quia ero per memetipsum totus placatus sum vobis [...] Mea naturalis bonitas inflectit me, quod meliorem partem respicio; et eam tota divinitate mea complector imperfectiores perfectioribus subducens.’ Tune illa: ‘O largiflue, quo modo potuisti mihi tam indignae et imparatae nunc tanta et tam consolatoria gratiae tuae dona impertiri?’ Cui Dominus: ‘Amor coegit me’” (vol. 3, 68).

46 A summary of visionary theory, of which I have extracted some of the highlights, may be found in Newman (6-14).
of Halberstadt (later the first abbess of the community, r.1229-1240) and seven Grey, or Cistercian, sisters.\textsuperscript{47} The first location of the convent was Mansfeld proper, but during the rule of Cunegard the community was moved, first to Rodarsdorf, and then to Helfta. These frequent moves point to the general instability of the era: not only were there ongoing conflicts between the papacy and the royal houses of France and the various German states, but the nuns also had to contend with moral laxity among the clergy and laity and recurring famines, plagues, wars. Almost paradoxically, it has been argued that these multiple sources of unrest were in fact the reason why monastic life flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and they might account for the construction of hundreds of new monasteries and convents.\textsuperscript{48}

Regardless of any positive outcomes of societal unrest, the fact remained that the convent of St. Mary's was almost perpetually under threat. In addition to the constant issues of debt, theft, and assault, marauding armies were not an uncommon problem. The convent under Gertrude of Hackeborn’s leadership (r.1251-1291)\textsuperscript{49} suffered during the conflict between the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and the papacy, and the subsequent turmoil of the Great Interregnum (1250-1273) following the Emperor’s death. Even worse problems came at the hands of Gebhard of Mansfeld, who attacked the convent in 1284, even though his sister and cousin were members of the order. (For this, and related actions, Gebhard was ultimately excommunicated by Pope Martin IV.) During the reign of the third abbess, Sophia of Mansfeld, the convent was at risk due to a war fought across Thuringia between Adolph of Nassau and his rivals. In 1296, for reasons possibly related to financial difficulties, the convent was temporarily put under interdict (described by Gertrude in the \textit{Herald}, 3:16, and by Mechthild in the \textit{Booke}, 1:27). The worst blow came when Albert of Brunswick attacked Helfta in 1342. Elected to the episcopacy of Halberstadt, he was snubbed by the Pope, who confirmed Albert of Mansfeld in his place. Albert of Brunswick retaliated by sacking and burning the convent (it was probably a

\textsuperscript{47} This greatly condensed political history of the convent is summarized from a number of sources. See in particular Finnegan (1-8); Gertrude, \textit{Oeuvres Spirituelles, vol. 2}, trans. Pierre Doyère (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967), 8-13; and Gertrude, \textit{The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn}, ed. Theresa Halligan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979), 33-34.

\textsuperscript{48} See for instance Halligan, 33-34. The theory that social issues helped foster a growing mystic spirit among the population, especially among women, will return, most notably in the discussion of Mechtild of Magdeburg.

\textsuperscript{49} Abbess Gertrude bore no relation to the mystic and saint, Gertrude the Great. Rather, the abbess was, along with Mechtild, part of the influential Hackeborn family.
disadvantage to the nuns that their current abbess, Luitgard, was the other Albert’s sister). Four years after the destruction, Luitgard’s father transferred the community to Eisleben, where it would remain for the next century.

Given the numerous tribulations economic and political, it is remarkable that the convent was able to achieve a high degree of intellectual and spiritual development. Part of this was due to a longstanding tradition in Germany of educating women, which stretched back as far as the example of Boniface and his disciple Lioba. This education included, in addition to theology, studies on drama (particularly Terence), and the subjects of the trivium and quadrivium. Part of this was also due to the special arrangement of the convent. Although Helfta was founded by Cistercian nuns, the General Chapter of 1228 had forbidden the creation of new affiliated houses. Thus, Helfta was technically unaffiliated, although there was a strong sense of Cistercian spirituality, and Gertrude in particular drew heavily on the works of Bernard of Clairvaux in her writings. Additionally, there was a strong Dominican presence at the convent. As per papal order, the monks of the nearby monasteries at Halle and Magdeburg were responsible for seeing to the spiritual needs of the sisters (recall that Communion, confession, and other sacraments could only be administered by men). Commentators have also remarked how closely the mysticism at Helfta is tied to the older school of St. Benedict, the same tradition that informed the spirituality of Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth of Schönau, and a number of female mystics from the Low Countries. Finally, by simply examining Gertrude’s *Herald*, one also finds references to the works of St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, and Hugh of St. Victor. Clearly the nuns had access to centuries of religious thought.

**Organization and Chapter Summaries**

Building on the information covered above, the following chapters in this thesis explore in detail the ways in which the mystics of St. Mary’s understood and described music, and how these examples demonstrate an understanding of a universe founded on the power of Love. Chapter 2, which deals with the *Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis*, considers how Gertrude uses musical quotations from Biblical sources, and how she describes the importance of

---

50 Finnegan, 9.  
51 Finnegan, 7.  
52 Halligan, 35-36.
music in a liturgical setting, in visionary experiences, and in her daily life. Chapter 3, an analysis of Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Booke of Gostlye Grace*, examines Mechthild’s references to liturgical chants, and how she incorporates music into her praise of God, uses musical moments in the Mass or the Divine Office as sources for visions, and uses musical instrument imagery as allegory for the mystical experience. Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Das fliessende Licht von Gottheit* forms the basis of Chapter 4. Like the works of the other two nuns discussed earlier, Mechthild’s *Light* considers some of the same ideas regarding music: e.g., the use of chants in visions and the Mass, as well as references to musical instrument imagery. However, Mechthild’s work is unique for the emphasis she places on the act of singing, as well as for the number of poetic “songs” she composes and sings to God. Finally, Chapter 5 describes some of the characteristics common to all three women (as well as important moments where their experiences differ). The chapter ends with a full review of pertinent scholarship in the fields of mysticism and gender studies, and the ways in which the role of music at St. Mary’s supports an understanding of a cooperative, rather than combative, relationship between the nuns and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.
CHAPTER 2
ST. GERTRUDE THE GREAT

Unlike most of the other women at Helfta, who were members of the aristocracy, Gertrude was an orphan, given to the convent at the age of five. She concentrated on intellectual pursuits until the age of twenty-six, when she suffered a spiritual crisis and subsequently devoted her entire life to the mystical, rather than intellectual, contemplation of the divine. As her biographer notes, “[Gertrude’s] love of learning now became desire for knowledge of God.”

Gertrude served as a spiritual advisor for many of her sisters, and like Hildegard of Bingen earlier, also offered advice to pilgrims who corresponded with her or traveled to see her in the convent. In addition to being an internationally influential and respected advisor, Gertrude also served as a scribe for her sisters, most notably Mechthild of Hackeborn. This was not the only example of the closeness of the two nuns; under Mechthild, Gertrude also served as the assistant choir director.

Gertrude’s own visions and theological beliefs were recorded in a number of works, including the five-book *Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness* and a collection of seven *Spiritual Exercises*. Concerning the former, Gertrude herself wrote in her own hand only the second of the five books; she dictated the last three, while the first was a posthumous tribute written by her fellow nuns. The *Herald* is notable for the sheer variety of musical references. This chapter will discuss each of these in turn, including quotations regarding music from books of the Bible, the importance of music in a liturgical setting, music in Gertrude’s heavenly visions, and finally, more general appearances of music.

**Music and the Bible**

One of the most straightforward uses of music in the *Herald* is in the context of general excerpts of praise from the Bible. These begin in the first book (the biography of Gertrude, written by a fellow nun):

---

53 *Herald* 1:1, 53.
54 Finnegan, 62-65.
In those days she could never tire of the sweet pleasure she found in the contemplation of God and in the study of Scripture, which was for her honey in the mouth (Ps. 118:3; Rev. 10:9, etc.), music in the ear, and spiritual jubilation in the heart.\(^{55}\)

And one chapter later:

May praise and thanks be given to the Lord God, who freely bestows his good and true gifts, by all things that are within the circuit of heaven, the circumference of the earth, and the depths of the abyss! (cf. Sir. 24:8). And may they sing the praise eternal, immense, immutable, proceeding from uncreated love which finds in itself full satisfaction!\(^{56}\)

It is unsurprising that the author of this book, who elsewhere structures Gertrude’s hagiography in a standard format repeated in the examples of many other saints of the period, chooses to fall back on traditional imagery. Of particular interest is the connection among taste, hearing, and spiritual jubilation; the reference to this point in John’s Apocalypse, where the disciple is given the command to prophesy to the kings and nations of the world. It is fitting that the introduction to a visionary should include a reference to one of the most famous examples of a biblical vision. Furthermore, the omission of the first half of the verse, “it will be bitter to your stomach” (Rev. 10:9), which refers to the severity of God’s judgments, stresses the overwhelming joy of the mystical experience for Gertrude. As for the latter example, it is one of the first instances of many (and introduces Biblical substantiation) where the main purpose of music is described as praising God.

The pure pleasure of the mystical experience (and the role of music therein) is made even more explicit one book later, where God refers to Gertrude as follows:

“She is my dove without gall or bitterness, because she whole-heartedly detests all sin like gall. [...] She is a melodious sound echoing sweetly in my diadem, for from it hang

---


\(^{56}\) **Herald** 1:2, 55. “Domino Deo largitori verorum bonorum grates referat quidquid coeli ambitu, terrarum circuitu et profundo abyssi concluditur; et laudem illi decantent aeternam, immensam, et incommutabilem illam, quae ab amore increato procedens, inseipso plenissime efficitur, pro supereffluenti abundantia pietatis [...]” (vol. 2, 128).
all the sufferings she endures, like little golden bells ringing in the ears of the inhabitants of heaven (cf. Exod. 28,29).”

This reference is to Exodus, specifically the chapters where God directs the Israelites in the creation of the priestly vestments. The bells on the high priest’s ephod (Exod. 28:31-35) served as a visual (and aural) reminder of his station, as well as protecting him from death when he entered or left the Holy of Holies. It is important to note that Gertrude’s position here (or more specifically, the suffering Gertrude endures on God’s behalf) is ornamental, contributing to the glory of the High Priest (i.e., Christ). In the sense that music is seen as a spiritual element, this is similar to examples where Gertrude sings praises to God. However, what is different here is that instead of singing songs of praise, Gertrude’s sufferings speak for themselves.

While the aforementioned examples came from Gertrude’s hagiography, she is equally adept at quoting scripture when offering up praise to God. One of the clearest examples of this comes in the second book of the Herald, where Gertrude exclaims,

You, the splendor and crown of celestial glory (cf. Wisd. 18:14; 1 Thess. 2:19,20), seemed to be descending, softly and gently, from the royal throne of your majesty; and through this condescension there flows across the heavens such a flood of sweetness that all the saints, bowing down in gladness, quench their thirst with joy (cf. Is. 12:3) at the torrents of pleasure (Ps. 35:9), waters sweet as nectar, breaking into melodious songs [dulcisonum] of praise of the divine glory. Meantime, I heard you say: “Consider how harmoniously these desirable praises strike the ears of my majesty, reaching the most intimate recesses of my loving heart, causing it to melt.”

Not for the first time does Gertrude display her command of multiple biblical sources. The reference to Isaiah comes at a point where the prophet sings hymns of praise to God, particularly for “drawing water from the well of salvation” (Is. 12:3); Psalm 35/36 meanwhile expresses David’s thanks that God allows all people to feast at his house and drink from the fountain of life. Gertrude even goes beyond the original sources, using them as a foundation upon which she

forms her own definition of music as the “highest expression of spiritual jubilation,” the redemption of the soul through God’s love. In the process, Gertrude displays both her intelligence and willingness to connect her mystical experiences to Biblical precedents.

One final example of Gertrude’s writing will serve to demonstrate her propensity for biblical citation. Though long, it is necessary to quote much of it at length. The context is as follows: on the feast of the Purification, Gertrude was ill and forced to remain in bed rather than attending the service at daybreak. After sorrowfully praying, Gertrude had a vision wherein the Virgin Mary appeared to her and comforted her.

[Her] words consoled me, and just before the procession was due to start, after I had received the food of life and as I was meditating on God and myself, I saw my soul, like wax melting in the heat of the fire (Ps. 21:14), being placed close to the Lord’s most sacred breast, as though to take the imprint of a seal (Song 8:6; Wisd. 9:10). Suddenly, as I looked, it seemed to be spread around and even to be drawn into the interior of that treasury, wherein all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally dwells (Col. 2:9). Thus it was sealed with the imprint of the resplendent and ever tranquil Trinity.

O devastating coal (Ps. 119:4), my God, burning inextinguishably with living heat, heat which it has within it and gives out and impresses with such strength on the damp and slippery morass of my soul, first drying up in it the tide of earthly pleasure, and afterward softening the hardness of my self-will, which with time had become so extremely obdurate. O truly consuming fire; you who exert your power against our vices in order then to let the soul feel your gentle anointing! (Deut. 4:24, Heb. 12:29) From you alone and not otherwise can we receive the power to be reformed (Acts 3:12,18) to the image and likeness of our original state. O fiery furnace of ever-increasing heat (cf. Dan. 3:6), in which is seen the joyous vision of true peace, whose action transforms dross into gold (Is. 1:25), fire-tried and precious, as soon as the soul, weary of illusions, aspires at last with all the ardor of which she is capable to be attached to you alone, her very Truth!

While this is so far unsurprising, God’s reaction to the music of the saints is more interesting; a full discussion of the heart of God will follow below, but Gertrude ascribes to musical praise the power to penetrate to the core of the divinity. These images recall Boethius’s description of *musica humana* in relation to *musica instrumentalis*, and Plato’s descriptions of cosmic unity in the *Timaeus*. In both cases physical music is part of a deeper network that connects not only to the individual soul but also to the divine.

---

59 While this is so far unsurprising, God’s reaction to the music of the saints is more interesting; a full discussion of the heart of God will follow below, but Gertrude ascribes to musical praise the power to penetrate to the core of the divinity. These images recall Boethius’s description of *musica humana* in relation to *musica instrumentalis*, and Plato’s descriptions of cosmic unity in the *Timaeus*. In both cases physical music is part of a deeper network that connects not only to the individual soul but also to the divine.

60 *Herald* 2:7, 105. "Unde ex his alleviata, cum instante hora Processionis sumpto vivifico alimento Deo mihique intenderem, recognovi animam meam in similitudine cereae diligenter ad ignem emollitae adesse quasi sigillo imprimendam Dominico pectori; et subito videbatur illi circumposita et partim intracta ipsi thesaurario in quo habitat corporaliter omnis plenitudo divinitatis, insignita charactere fulgidae semperque tranquillae Trinitatis. O carbo desolatorius, Deus meus, continens et extrahens ac imprimens vivum ardorem, dum tam inextinguibiliter convaluisti in humido lubricae animae meae, desiccans primo in ea fluxum mundanae delectionis et postmodum etiam emolliens eam a rigore proprii sensus, in quo per tempus..."
This passage introduces some new points into the discussion. First of all, Gertrude’s passionate description of the mystical experience (with God as a purifying, transforming fire) helps readers understand the nature of her relationship with the divine. The passage also demonstrates Gertrude’s level of erudition, and her ability not only to draw upon a number of biblical citations, but also to choose ones that reinforce one another. In addition to these citations, it should be noted that Gertrude’s reference to the “joyous vision of true peace” might be a reference to the hymn *Urbs beata Jerusalem dicta pacis visio*:

Urbs beata Jerusalem, / dicta pacis visio / Quæ construitur in coelo / vivis ex lapidibus, / Et angelis coronata / ut sponsata comite.\(^61\)

Blessed city of Jerusalem / called the vision of peace/ Which was built in heaven / out of living stone, / And by angels crowned / as a bride for her consort.

By referring to a hymn traditionally used in the Vespers service for the dedication of a church, Gertrude draws the connection between God, the creator of the New Jerusalem, and God, the one who helps create a new soul.

**Music in the Office and Mass**

By far Gertrude’s most extensive use of music is in reference to the hymns, antiphons, responsories, and other liturgical music of the Office and Mass; in general Gertrude shows great familiarity with these assorted chants. This usage is divided into two general categories, both of which will be considered below. At times, Gertrude will cite (or paraphrase) the words of a specific chant in a larger passage, most often in praise of God. Alternately, sometimes it is the

\[\text{induruerat tam vehementer. O vere ignis consumens, qui sic vim tuam exerces in vitia ut vicem uctionis suaviter exhibeas in anima! In te et non omnino in aliquo alicio recipiemos hanc virtutem, ut ad imaginem et similitudinem originis nostrae valeamus reformari. O invalescens caminus in jucunda visione verae pacis, cujus operatione scoria verti in aurum probatum et electum, cum anima fatigata fallaciis tandem tota mentis aviditate perquirere gliscit quod sibi est a te vera veritate!” (vol. 2, 260-62)}\]

\(^{61}\) Extant in a number of breviaries, the hymn has been revised numerous times since its composition in the seventh or eighth century. For a full history, see: Hugh Henry, "Urbs Beata Jerusalem dicta pacis visio" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912). 11 June 2012 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15222a.htm>.
act of singing/listening to a Mass as a whole (e.g., the Mass of Quinquagesima Sunday) that puts Gertrude in a contemplative mood and prepares her for some sort of divine revelation.  

Beginning with the citation of chants, when Gertrude incorporates these into her writing they often serve to embellish or add additional layers of meaning. Many of these examples are relatively straightforward, even when she cites multiple chants in one sentence:

In the same way, to compensate for all my negligences I offer you the holy life of your only-begotten Son, perfect in all his thoughts, words, and deeds, from the hour when he was sent from his heavenly throne and entered by the ear of a Virgin into our earthly regions until the hour when he presented to your fatherly eyes the triumphant glory of his victorious humanity.  

The first chant reference in the passage is to a responsory from the Matins of the Feast of the Nativity:

---

62 There is a third example of the use of chants: as vehicles for gnosis. Though extensive, and no doubt important, these are relatively straightforward and do not require much discussion. For those interested, a noteworthy instance where Gertrude’s biographer lists over ten chants in quick succession may be found in book 3, chapter 30. I shall present only a few examples here: “In Advent, at the responsory Ecce veniet Dominus protector noster, sanctus Israel, she understood that if someone applies himself with all his heart to desire that his whole life will be governed, in prosperity and adversity, according to the most laudable will of God, then by such thoughts, with God’s grace, he would be giving as much honor to God as one would give to an emperor in placing the imperial crown on his head. [...] When they were singing the verse of the psalm: ‘The words of the wicked (Ps. 64:4), she understood that if anyone who commits a sin through human frailty is too severely reprehended for his fault, the mercy of God is provoked, and the merits of the culprit are increased. [...] On the feast of several martyrs, while they were singing ‘The glorious blood...’, [Viri sancti gloriosum, the second Responsory at the Matins of Martyrs] she realized that although blood is in itself an unpleasant thing, it is praised in Scripture because it is shed for Christ; similarly, the neglect of religious duties, for motives of obedience or fraternal charity, pleases God so much that it too might well be termed glorious. Through these words, which are sung of John, ‘He drank the mortal poison...’ [the Responsory for the Feast of St. John] she understood that, as John was preserved from mortal poison by the virtue of faith, so the fidelity of the will keeps the soul immaculate, however poisonous what is insinuated into the heart against the will might be.” (Herald 3:30, 192-195). The Latin version may be found in Doyère, vol. 3 (136-44).

63 Herald 2:23, 129. “Item in suppletionem omnium negligentiarum mearum, offero tibi, Pater amantissime, omnem conversationem illam sanctissimam, quae in omnibus cogitationibus verbis et factis perfectissima ab hora qua missus, ab arce throni introvit per aurem virginis in regionem nostram tuus Unigenitus, usque post illam horam qua tuis paternis vultibus praeuentavit gloriam carnis victricis” (vol. 2, 332). I have added italics to make the connection between Gertrude’s text and the chant more apparent.
Descendit de caelis missus ab arce patris introivit per aurem virginis in regionem nostram indutus stolam purpuream et exivit per auream portam lux et decus universae fabricae mundi.

Coming down from heaven, he was sent from the citadel of the Father. He entered into the earth, clothed in a purple robe, through the ear of the Virgin. He exited through the golden gate of our country in the light and glory of the fabric of the whole world.64

The second recalls the third verse of the Ascension hymn Optatus voti omnium:

Magni triumphum prælìi / Mundi perempto principe / Patris præsentat vultibus / Victricus carnis gloriam.

O triumph of the great battle! Having defeated the prince of the world, Jesus presents to his Father the Flesh that had won the glorious victory.65

These citations come at a point (Chapter 23) where Gertrude offers thanksgiving to God for ensuring that even in her youth, she had the sense of upright behavior. However, Gertrude also notes that before the age of 25, when she experienced her “conversion” to the mystical path, she was still relatively blind to the goodness of God. The juxtaposition of her experience with Christ’s (his entire life being holy, as reinforced by these hymns) is poignant. In offering up Christ’s entire life to God, Gertrude acknowledge how she herself, especially in her youth, often fell short.

In her Herald Gertrude often isolates specific Sundays for further consideration, usually with the pattern: on the Sunday of X feast [here Gertrude will name the Introit for the day], God revealed to me the following.66 By far the most often-discussed feast in the Herald is that of Esto mihi,67 or Quinquagesima Sunday, which appears three separate times. These moments are

---

64 Translation by the author.
66 This nature of revelation, as well as the particular pattern of introducing the Sundays, returns with even more frequency in the writings of Mechthild of Hackeborn, suggesting at least some mutual influence.
67 Though space precludes analysis of additional masses, the next-most prominent example in Gertrude’s writing is the Second Sunday in Lent (Herald 2:21). In this case however, Gertrude focuses on her reaction to one specific Responsory, rather than the Mass as a whole. A third example comes in Herald 3:17. Having an altogether different emphasis, here Gertrude describes a vision of heaven; at each point in the Ordinary, she sees the corresponding event unfold (e.g., at the Gloria, Christ, the celebrant, offers up praise and glory to his Father).
interesting because they demonstrate not only Gertrude’s grace, but also how she incorporates (and at times reworks) the message of the day to her own life.

As the liturgical significance of Quinquagesima may not be well-known, a brief introduction is needed before considering Gertrude’s text. The last Sunday before Lent, Quinquagesima focuses primarily on the vocation of Abraham: God’s foresight that most of the world would abandon his ways, his desire to select a nation to preserve his spiritual truths, and Abraham’s fidelity, submissiveness, abandonment, and sacrifice. Furthermore, Quinquagesima is intended as a time for Catholics to focus on the goal of achieving eternal life, and (more practically) a reminder to practice penance during Lent and not to overindulge beforehand. As a reminder of such, the gospel reading of the day concerns Jesus’s foretelling his imminent suffering and death to his disciples.

At this point a closer examination of Gertrude’s experiences is in order. All three come from book 2 of the Herald and are located within a few chapters of one another. The first deals specifically with the responsories of the Matins service:

After this, on the Sunday of Esto mihi during Mass, you roused my mind and increased my longing for those more magnificent gifts which you intended to grant me, by two phrases in particular, which made a deep impression on my soul: the verse of the first Responsory: “I will bless thee...” and the verse of the ninth Responsory: “All the land which thou seest I will give to thee and to thy seed for ever.” With this, you placed your adorable hand on your most blessed breast, giving me to understand that that was the promised land of your infinite generosity.

Both of these responsories are taken from the book of Genesis; the first is God’s command to Abram to depart to the chosen land in exchange for the blessing of siring a great nation (Gen. 12:1-2) while the second reiterates God’s gift of Canaan to Abram and his descendants (Gen. 13:18, 14-15). It is fascinating that at this point Gertrude places herself in the position of Abraham, the patriarch (with an emphasis on the masculine overtones of the word) of the entire

---

69 Guéranger, vol. 4, 181-82.
70 Herald 2:8, 106. “Post haec in Dominica Esto mihi, inter Missam incitasti mentem meam et dilatasti desiderium meum ad ea nobiliora quae mihi collaturus eras dona, specialius per duo verba quorum efficaciorem in anima praeensi effectum, scilicet in versu primi Responsorii: Benedicens benedicam tibi, etc., et in versu noni Responsorii, scilicet: Tibi enim et semini tuo dabo has regiones, etc. Inter quae venerabili manu beatissimum pectus tuum tangens demonstrasti mihi quas regiones incontinentisima liberalitas tua polliceretur” (vol. 2, 262).
Jewish nation; although God is obviously not offering her tracts of land or many children, the gift she is to receive is a spiritual equivalent.

In the second appearance of *Esto mihi* (she does not specify whether it was the same year) Gertrude focuses instead on the introit chant:

Once, on the Sunday before Lent, when Mass was just about to start – it was the Mass of *Esto mihi* – you gave me to understand that you were being tortured and persecuted in various ways and that this Introit was a direct appeal to me, and was a request for a home in my heart in which to rest. And during the next three days, each time I entered into my interior, I seemed to find you resting, like a poor weak invalid, reclining on my breast. And during those three days I could find no more fitting way of caring for you than by prayer, silence, and other mortifications, for your honor and for the conversion of worldly people.\(^{71}\)

Instead of God’s offering a gift to his chosen one, here Gertrude herself assumes a position of power and is the one to succor God in need. Considering the meaning of the introit (taken from Psalm 30/31), which describes how God is the strength and refuge for the speaker, the role reversal is even more striking:

*Esto mihi in Deum protectorem, et in locum regufii, ut salvum me facias: quoniam firmamentum meum, et refugium meum es tu: et propter nomen tuum dux mihi eris et enutries me.*

*Be thou unto me a God, a protector, and a house of refuge, to save me; for thou art my strength, and my refuge; and for thy name’s sake thou wilt lead me, and nourish me.*\(^{72}\)

The final example of the Mass of *Esto mihi* returns to the Lenten themes of penance and reforming one’s way of life:

More than all of these favors and in a marvelous way, much to be preferred to all others, several times, particularly on the feast of the holy Nativity, and one Sunday (it was the Sunday of *Esto mihi*) and another Sunday after Pentecost, I was introduced by you – rapt, rather – into so close a union with yourself that it seems more than miraculous that, after such hours of ecstasy, I could still live as a mortal among mortals. What is really

\(^{71}\) *Herald* 2:14, 114. “Tempore quodam, ante Quadragesimam, in Dominica, dum imponeretur Missa, scilicet: *Esto mihi*, dedisti mihi hoc intelligere quasi tu, a diversis conviciatus et persecutus, per verba praedicti Introitus expeteres a me domicilium cordis mei ad requiescendum; et exhinc per illos tres dies, quoties ad cor meum redii, videbaris mihi ad similitudinem languentis super pectus meum decumbere; per tots etiam illos tres dies nihil investigavi quo tibi gratiorem refectionem possem ministrare quam ut orationibus, silentio et caeteris afflictionibus pro emendatione mundanorum instarem pro tuo honore” (vol. 2, 286).

\(^{72}\) Guéranger, vol. 4, 186.
amazing, horrible rather, is that I have not amended my faults as it was just and right that I should do so.\textsuperscript{73}

While it does not mention the same type of role reversal as the others, once again Gertrude emphasizes her unique closeness with God, as well as the grace/power/gifts which he bestows upon her. In what was missing from the other examples, Gertrude also returns to one of the primary themes of her book, God’s condescension and her unworthiness; more so than even the other two mystics, Gertrude’s writing is notable for these (at times extreme) laments. In a sense, Gertrude’s attitude as a whole is very penitential, which might account for the abundance of Lenten-season examples in the \textit{Herald}. However, one must also wonder whether this style of writing might not have served a more practical purpose, placating clergy who would have been otherwise unhappy at the rank which Gertrude accorded to herself.

\textbf{Music in visions}

Although Gertrude’s visions often begin with (are inspired by) the singing of a specific chant, after that starting point music does not usually play an important role. Exceptions can be found to every rule, however; there are some rare instances in Gertrude’s writing where a vision is built around a core musical idea. These will be the focus of this section, starting with an event that Gertrude describes at the very beginning of book 2:

At the stated hour, then, I was standing in the middle of the dormitory. An older nun was approaching and, having bowed my head with the reverence prescribed by our rule, I looked up and saw before me a youth of about sixteen years of age, handsome and gracious. Young as I was, the beauty of his form was all that I could have desired, entirely pleasing to the outward eye. Courteously and in a gentle voice (cf. Gen.50:21) he said to me: “Soon will come your salvation; why are you so sad? Is it because you have no one to confide in that you are sorrowful?”

While he was speaking, although I knew that I was really in the place where I have said, it seemed to me that I was in the Choir, in the corner where I usually say my

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Herald} 2:23, 132. “\textit{Super haec omnia, quod miro modo praeferendum est multoties, sed specialius in festo sacratissimae Nativitatis, et in una Dominica, scilicet \textit{‘Esto mihi.’} et alia etiam Dominica post Pentecosten, induxisti, imo rapuisti me ad talem tui unionem, quod supra miraculum miror quod post illas horas amplius potui vivere sicut homo inter homines, et quod magis stupendum imo horrendum in me est, quod heu! defectus meos postea, ut jure debuissem, non emendavi}” (vol. 2, 340-42).
A number of important elements may be found here, not least of which is the fact that angelic youth quotes from the first responsory at Matins of the second Sunday of Advent:


O Jerusalem, your salvation comes quickly. Why then do you cry out? Is it because you have no one to counsel you that you are sorrowful? Do not be afraid, for I will save you and deliver you.  

The words of the text contain a wealth of meaning, being appropriate both for the Christmas season and for Gertrude’s moment of conversion – that is, her move away from an earlier life of intellectual frivolity and towards the contemplative, mystical path. Once again, music is also related to beauty, with the fair features of the angel mirroring the responsorial words he speaks.

In the course of her writings, Gertrude also describes a couple of curious instances that have in common an emphasis on adornments of the soul:

She was assisting at Mass one day as devoutly as ever she could; they had reached the “Kyrie eleison” when it seemed to her that guardian angel had taken her up into his arms like a little child and was presenting her to God the Father for his blessing. [Gertrude proceeds to get blessed.] Then she offered to God the Father by way of thanksgiving all the most perfect life of his only-begotten Son. At this, the gems with which her garments were adorned seemed to vibrate [commotae] together, giving out the sweetest and most delectable melody in praise of God the Father. By this, she understood how very pleasing it is to God the Father when one offers up to him the most perfect life of his Son.

---


75 My translation.

From a liturgical standpoint, the reference to the Kyrie eleison (the only time this part of the Ordinary appears in her Herald) is somewhat puzzling: there are more explicit moments in the liturgy when one offers oneself up to the will of God, including confession, the prayers before Communion, etc. In fact, Gertrude’s experience is reminiscent of an infant’s forty-day blessing or baptism; this might be one of the few instances where the background music does not relate to the foregrounded vision. Aside from this point, however, the most important element of this passage is how Gertrude’s offering of Christ causes the gems in her garments to be set in motion. This example of sympathetic music making is remarkable; instead of Gertrude’s singing praise (indeed, the text does not mention her singing, or even speaking, at all), her deed causes what seem to be inanimate objects to make music.

A few chapters later, the musical vibration of jewels returns, along with an explanation of what these gems represent:

Another time, although still very weak, she had got up for Matins. She had just finished one Nocturn when she was joined by another sick person with whom she had the charity to recommence Matins, not without great fatigue. During Mass, when she was praying still more devoutly to the Lord, it seemed to her that she saw her soul very marvelously adorned with precious jewels and shining with a wonderful brightness. Divinely instructed, she understood that she had merited this adornment because she had humbly and charitably recited again with the younger nun that part of Matins which she had recited before, and that the shining ornaments were equal in number to the words she had thus repeated.  

sua videbantur ornata, in invicem commotae, suavissimum ac delectabilissimum melos resonare videbantur in Dei Patris laudem aeternam. Per quod dabatur intelligi, quam gratissimum sit Deo Patri, cum quis sibi offert perfectissimam Filii sui conversationem” (vol. 3, 116).

77 Compare the example from Herald 3:46 above - the offering of Christ to his mother. These are part of a larger trend in Gertrude’s mysticism, and reinforce the extreme love she felt for Christ: “She was wont, as lovers are, to refer to her Beloved everything that she liked or savored. Whatever she heard read or sung, any praise or homage of the blessed Virgin or some other saint, whatever moved or charmed her, always made her turn her thoughts to the King of Kings, who was rightly the Lord of her choice and her one delight, rather than to the saints whose feast or memorial was being celebrated” (Herald 3:20, 186). “Moris erat sibi, sicut amantium est, totum quod placet et sapit retorquere in amatum. Unde quodcumque audiebat legi vel cantari in laudem, seu salutationem Beatae Virginis, aut aliorum sanctorum, quod suavius afficere potuit affectum, per hoc semper magis intendebat ipsi Regi regum Domino sibi prae omnibus, ut justissimum erat, unice dilecto et electo, quam ipsis Sanctis quorum festum vel memoria recolinebatur” (vol. 3, 110).

This example offers some new light as to the nature of the gems, which are revealed to represent merits earned in life. Furthermore, unlike the previous example, it is also made clear that praising God is not the only way to earn merit, and that charitable deeds are equally deserving (though ultimately Gertrude’s actions are inspired by her love of God and desire to please him). In addition to providing music, Gertrude explains soon after that these gems of charity, “like the warmth of the sun,” destroy venial sins. Although it is not the music itself that has this effect, there is a definite correlation between a godly state and an audible marker. However, this vision also raises the question of the relationship between Gertrude and her spiritual outfit. In both visions it is her heavenly garment (i.e., a depiction of her soul), rather than the habit she wears on Earth, that is decorated with gems. At times, particularly in the first example, it appears as though the good deeds take on a life of their own and sing without any conscious direction from Gertrude herself.⁷⁹

Music and Sickness

The final element of the Herald to consider is the correlation between music and illness. Like many other mystics (most notably Hildegard), Gertrude is often struck by various maladies, particularly headaches. Even though she may lament her fate, these often turn into learning experiences:

Once sickness prevented her from following the regular observance, and she remained seated during Vespers. Her heart filled with longing and sadness, she said to the Lord: “Would I not be praising you better, Lord, if I were in Choir with the community, praying and strenuously following all the other regular exercises instead of being kept here now through this infirmity, wasting so much time doing nothing?”

The Lord answered: “Do you think that the spouse takes less pleasure with his bride when he is alone with her in the privacy of the nuptial chamber, and they can

relegisset valde laboriose, inter Missam dum devotius intenderet Domino, recognovit animam suam valde mirandis ornatibus et miro modo coruscantibus gemmis pretiosis honorifice decoratam. Intellexitque divinitus instructa, se talem ornatum inde meruisse, quod in charitate humiliiter cum juniori iterato legerat partem Matutinarum ante lectam, unde et tot ornatibus praefulgebat, quod verba relegitat” (vol. 3, 246).

⁷⁹ This discussion of ornamenting the soul with good deeds appears elsewhere in the Herald without musical overtones, as well as in the works of the other mystics (to be considered in later chapters). Furthermore, all denizens of Heaven wear symbolic clothing, gems, and other garb which reflects the deeds and prayers, along with method of serving God (e.g., Church hierarch, saint, virgin martyr, etc.), performed during life.
delight one another with the charm of intimate converse and tender embraces, than when he leads her forth in all her beauty to be seen by crowds?"  

This example emphasizes a number of important themes in Gertrude’s writings: the deep bond between herself and the Godhead, the spousal desire to be constantly close to one another, and the near constancy of the praise Gertrude offers up. However, God also seems to imply that while Gertrude’s presence in the Choir is important as an expression of devotion on her part (and additionally serves to further glorify himself—to when others see the effort with which Gertrude praises God), is not necessarily the most valuable form of worship. This is not to say that the singing of the Office, or any other forms of worship prescribed by the Church, is unimportant; indeed it has been demonstrated that these communal gatherings may lead to individual experiences of God via visions.

Sometimes in the Herald the message God is trying to get across is much more direct, as can be seen in a following passage:

One feast-day, when she was prevented from singing by a bad headache, she asked the Lord why he so often let this happen to her on a feast-day. She received this reply: “Lest perchance you are carried away by the pleasure of singing the sacred melody and become less receptive of grace.” And she said, “Your grace, Lord, can protect me from that.” He rejoined: “But it is easier for a person to be perfect if an occasion of falling into sin is taken away from him by his being brought low by some affliction or trouble. This brings him a twofold growth in merit, for he increases in both patience and humility.”

This example is somewhat reminiscent of a section from St. Augustine’s Confessions, in which the early church father confesses to being moved sometimes by the beauty of the melody of a chant (and the sweetness of the singer’s voice), rather than the meaning of the text:


Yet, I confess, I still surrender to some slight pleasure in those songs to which your words give life, when they are sung by a sweet and skilled voice, but not so much that I cleave to them, unable to rise above them when I wish. But yet, these chants, animated as they are by your words, must gain entry to me and find in my heart a place of some dignity, even if I scarcely provide them a fitting one. Sometimes it seems to me that I grant them more honor than is proper, when I sense that the words stir my soul to greater religious fervor and to a more ardent piety if they are thus sung than if not sung, and when I feel that all the diverse affections of my soul have their own proper measures in voice and song, which are stimulated by I know not what hidden correspondences.\textsuperscript{82}

It is interesting that Gertrude does not dispute the possibility that she might be moved by the beauty of the chant, but as a solution she asks God to simply keep her from falling into that trap (a solution, God rightly responds, that does not result in any personal growth). By contrast, Augustine occasionally sought to banish the thought of the music from his mind entirely, furthermore showing much more guilt at his weakness.

This passage also provokes some unanswerable questions. Gertrude constantly refers to visionary experiences related to the music of a specific feast (especially \textit{Esto Mihi}). Most of these descriptions mention how Gertrude was inspired by the music, but they do not give any indication that she was actually singing it. This passage allows for the possibility that even though she was standing in the Choir, at times Gertrude could have been a passive listener. If this is the case, then it might be the act of listening, rather than the act of singing, that is more important for prompting visionary experiences.

The hypothesis that Gertrude may sometimes have taken a passive role while standing in the Choir (despite her position as assistant choir director) is supported by certain other examples from the \textit{Herald}:

When through infirmity she was unable to take part in the choral Office, she often went to the Choir to hear the Hours, so that at least thus she might exercise her body in the service of God. And as she considered that her devotion to God was less fervent than she could have wished, she frequently complained of this to the Lord, saying in a spirit of dejection: “How, my dearest Lord, can you derive any honor from me while I sit here negligent and useless, scarcely attending to one or two words or notes?” To which the Lord at length made this answer: “What good would you derive from it if a friend offered you once or twice some sweet, freshly made mead from which you might hope for much relief? Know, then, that I take far greater pleasure in each single word or note that you are now able to concentrate upon for my glory.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{82} Treitler, 22-23.

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Herald} 3:59, 224. “Dum ex infirmitate chorum frequentare non posset, saepius tamen ibat ad Horas audiendas ut vel sic in servitio Dei corpus suum exerceret. Et cum perpenderet se Deo
At first, this might be read as a tacit understanding by God that “it’s the thought that counts,” rather than the actual act of singing. However, God’s response is also reminiscent of the practice of *lectio divina*, a method of reading scripture that emphasizes meditative, prayerful contemplation, rather than a theological analysis. As in *lectio divina*, here Gertrude is not asked to follow the intellectual progression of the chant, but to contemplate key words or ideas. As has been demonstrated above (in the section on chants and Masses), Gertrude often used the text of a specific chant as a starting point for contemplation; this appears to be a related process. However, Gertrude’s concentration seems sometimes to have been more haphazard, and God’s response that a focus on single words is acceptable is probably a concession to her illness.

**Conclusions**

From this selection of what is in her *Herald* a much larger number of examples, it is possible to discern some of the main features of Gertrude’s use of music. Highest on the list is praise: whether citing Biblical verses, quoting responsories from various feast days, or singing songs herself, the majority of Gertrude’s efforts are expressions of thankfulness and adoration directed to God. In a related vein, music may serve as a vehicle by which Gertrude is able to achieve mystical union with Christ as her spouse. Gertrude also makes clear the power of music to both prompt her mystical visions and help her mind focus on the divine. At times Gertrude shows that she does not need to participate in actual singing; meditating on the music others sing is an equally appropriate form of worship. Finally there are more abstract notions of music in the *Herald*; by exploring both the harmony of the soul and cosmic vibrations, Gertrude takes her discussion of music in a fascinating direction. It should be remembered though that in all these cases it is impossible to divorce music from Gertrude’s mysticism.

tam studiosa devotione non intendere ut desiderabat, frequenter hoc Domino conquerebatur, cum dejectione spiritus dicens: ‘Quid, amantissime Domine mi, tu nunc habes honoris ex eo quod ego negligens et inutilis hic sedens, vix in uno vel duobus verbis, vel notis intendo?’ Ad quod Dominus tandemvice quadam sic respondit: ‘Et quid tu haveres ex eo si amicus tuus, una vice vel bis, porrigeret tibi haustum dulcissimi et recentissimi medonis, de quo sperares te multum confortari? Multo ergo majorem delectationem scias me habere de singulis verbis et neumis, quibus nunc laudi meae intendis’” (vol. 3, 242-44).
Mechthild of Hackeborn came from one of the most influential Thuringian families; the Abbess Gertrude, head of the convent at Helfta, was her older sister. Mechthild joined the convent at the age of seven; she had traveled with her family to Helfta visit her older sister, and was so overwhelmed with the experience that she begged to be allowed to remain. At St. Mary’s Mechthild ultimately rose to the position of choir director; her sisters called her “God’s nightingale” on account of her beautiful voice. Furthermore, Mechthild served as a teacher, counselor, and friend to many of the nuns, including Gertrude. Mechthild wrote down nothing herself, but Gertrude and a second nun compiled many of her visions into the seven-part *Liber specialis gratiae* (*Book of Spiritual Grace*). This book enjoyed wide popularity on the Continent for centuries after its composition. However, it was in England where, translated and condensed (the seven sections of the original reduced to five) as the *Booke of Gostlye Grace*, Mechthild’s text found its most receptive audience.

In its English form the *Booke of Gostlye Grace* is notable for being chronological, fitting all of Mechthild’s visions, prayers, and life events into a single liturgical year. However, the *Booke* also recalls many themes treated at the same time by Gertrude: the importance of proper and appropriate prayer for every season, the loving grace of God, and the use of vibrant,

---

84 See the *Booke* 1:1 for full details of Mechthild’s experience.
86 In giving the Middle English text in the footnotes, I have maintained the original spellings (and misspellings). In the case of the characters yogh and thorn, I have simplified them by using the letters z and th respectively.
87 Rosalynn Voaden, in “The Company She Keeps: Mechtild of Hackeborn in Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations” [in *Prophets Abroad*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer), 51-70], notes that excerpts from Mechthild’s writing appear in the Brigittine *Myroure of Oure Ladye* and Carthusian *Speculum devotorum*, and was particularly popular in libraries owned by noble women (54-55).
88 This organization, along with her narrative tone, has led some to draw connections between Mechthild and a (male) medieval preacher. See: Barbara Kline, “The Discourse of Heaven in Mechthild of Hackeborn’s *Booke of Gostlye Grace*,” in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jan Swango Emerson and Hugh Feiss (New York: Garland, 2000), 83-99; 87.
allegorical imagery in visions (Mechthild’s favorite symbols include sunbeams, gemstones, and articles of clothing). In terms of musical content, Mechthild’s Booke is remarkable primarily for the seventy-plus references to Proper and Ordinary chants. However, other recurring topoi include the importance of music in prayer, the use of chants and/or Masses as inspiration for visions, and the symbolic treatment of musical instruments.

**Chants and Visions**

By far the preponderance of musical examples in Mechthild’s Booke are references to liturgical chants. Many times these appear in the pattern seen before in Gertrude’s Herald: at a point in the Mass or Office when the responsory/offertory/etc. was sung, Mechthild had a vision. Furthermore, the vision almost always provides a gloss or interpretation of the associated liturgical text. An appropriate example comes in Mechthild’s description of the feast of St. Agnes:

*When the offertory Afferentur regi virgines was sung, she considered what she might offer up to God that would be acceptable to Him. Then our Lord said to her: “Whosoever offers to me a meek heart, patient and full of love, he gives me a pleasing gift [...] the meek heart is one which is joyful when it is insulted and which is glad in the face of pain and adversity.”*

89

The full text of the offertory, from the Vespers service, is taken from Psalm 44/45, portions of verses 14-15:


[The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes] she is led to the king; behind her the virgins, her companions, follow. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.

---

89 “When the offertorye: Offerentur regi virgines, was songgene sche bethought here whate sche myght offre vppe to God that myzt be acceptable to hymn. Anone oure lorde sayde to here: ‘Whosoeure offre to me a meke herte ande a pacyente ande fulle of charyte he gyffes me a fulle plesyngyte gyfte [...] that herte es meke whiche es ioyfulle whene hitt es dyspisede ande whiche es gladde in paynes ande in aduersitez’” (Booke 1:24, 135). “Alia vice cum Offertorium, Offerentur Regi virgines cantaretur, et illa cogitaret quid modo Deo gratum offerre posset, dixit ad eam Dominus: ‘Qui mihi cor humile, patiens, et charitativum obtulerit, satis gratum mihi munis tribuit [...] Cui gaudium est quod despicitur, et qui in poenis et quibuscumque adversitatibus gaudet, exultans pro eo quod passioni et humilitati meae aliquid adjicere valeat, et aliquid habeat unde mii sacrificet, hic vere humilis et patiens corde est’” (Liber, 1:11, 37).
St. Agnes is a popular figure both in Mechthild’s and Gertrude’s writing, and it is easy to understand why. According to her hagiography, Agnes chose to die as a bride of Christ at the age of 12 rather than submit to a forced marriage with a Roman official’s son. Her meekness, virginity, devotion, and willingness to suffer torments earned her a place of honor in the Church calendar. While at first it appears as though Mechthild’s revelation is unrelated to the feast at hand (i.e., at the offertory she simply asks what she should offer up to God), Christ’s response draws on the life of Agnes by emphasizing the need to be joyful when suffering adversity. On a more basic level, it should be noted here that Mechthild is using the music of the Vespers service as a starting point for her conversations with God.

While the example of *Afferentur regi virgines* is relatively limited in scope, Mechthild also frequently devotes long sections of prose to outlining how specific chants produced visions. In these cases, the visions often serve as educational or intellectual moments, revealing deeper meanings in the chants. One of the most colorful examples comes during the Vigil of the Nativity, where Mechthild saw Christ, surrounded by ministering angels, suddenly appear on the abbess’ throne. When the convent proceeded to say the *Miserere*,

> At the first *Miserere* there came from our Lord like to a flood of water which washed each sister’s face. At the second *Miserere* each of them went to our Lord and offered up to Him the prayers which they prayed for the holy Church. At the third *Miserere* our Lord reached out with a chalice of gold to the souls whom the sisters made mention in their prayers. And after this she heard how our Lord said: “This chapter I hold here each year.”

---

90 Guéranger, vol. 4, 357-61. For passages where Gertrude refers to St. Agnes, see *Herald* 2:17 and 3:3.

91 Att the furste *Miserere* thare come fro oure lorde like to a watere flode flowynge whiche waschede eche face of the sustrene. Ande att the secounde *Miserere* eche of thame on rawe wente to oure lorde and offrede vppe to hym the prayers whiche thaye prayede for alle holye cherche. Ande att the thrydde *Miserere* oure lorde reched furth a chaleys of golde to the sawles of the whiche the sostryne made mencyoun in thare prayers. Ande aftere this sche herde howe oure lorde sayde: ‘This chapitere I halde here eche zeere’” (*Booke* 1:8, 92-93). “Dominus autem loco Abbatissae in throno eburneo residebat [cf. *Herald* 4:2], de quo fluvius limpidus cum impetu effluens ad primum *Miserere mei Deus* singularum facies abluebat; ad secundum *Miserere*, singularae ad Dominum accedentes, offerebant ei preces suas quas illa hora pro Ecclesia effundebant. Ad tertium, Dominus aureum calicem habens animabus propinabat, quorum mentionem in oratione Sonores tunc faciebant; et ait Dominus: ‘Hoc Capitulum hic singulis annis teneo’” (*Liber* 1:5, 15).
The text in question is one of the penitential psalms, number 50/51. While the full text of the psalm is too long to reproduce, it is notable that Mechthild’s vision has many correspondences with the text. For instance, in the psalm water is twice used to clean away sins, in verses 2 and 7:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin [...] Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Christ’s washing of the sisters’ faces is a similar ritual of purification. The cleansing power of water appears throughout the Bible in other contexts (e.g., in the story of Noah’s ark). However, it is reasonable to suppose that, due to the timing of the episode, the words of the psalm provided the impetus for this vision. More generally, both the words of psalm and the plot of the vision move from an initial period of cleansing to a period of offering. In the case of the psalm, the psalmist writes how:

Then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

The nuns, in contrast, offer prayers for the Church. The acceptance of the golden chalice full of prayers, an image that will return below, recalls the fervent desire at the end of the psalm that God will be pleased with the offerings from the rebuilt Jerusalem.

Unlike many of the other chants mentioned in the Booke, Mechthild returns to the Miserere at a later point. While the first mention of the psalm was more like a gloss (or an attempt by Mechthild to teach her readers), later she is the student; Christ relates to Mechthild the proper method of saying the psalm: dividing it into four sections of five verses each, and singing before each the chant O beata et benedicta et gloriosa trinitas, pater et filius et Spiritus Sanctus (an antiphon from the Lauds service of the Feast of the Trinity). Furthermore, Christ makes it explicit just what each section of the psalm means:

Our Lord taught her to say the first five verses for wicked men entrenched in sin who would not be turned to God, so that God would bring them to Him out of His divine pity and His loving death which he suffered for the love of men’s souls. She was taught to say the second five verses for them who are repentant so that they may have full forgiveness and never from that time forth turn again to sin. She was taught to say the third five verses for the righteous, who profit daily from their good works, so that they may persevere and increase in righteousness. And she was taught to say the fourth five verses for all the souls who abide God’s mercy through the pains of Purgatory, who have a sickness that shall be healed when they drink in the blessed well of life everlasting and
reign in the kingdom of heaven with Christ, that they might soon be delivered and unbound, and be fed with our Lord in his bliss without end.\(^\text{92}\)

In general this interpretation preserves the penitential tone of the psalm, and the progression from lamentation and guilt to the hope for deliverance. However, Mechthild’s references to divine love stand out as particularly optimistic. It is interesting that in addition to offering a glimpse of the type of devotional regimen Mechthild practiced, here Christ takes the role of a spiritual father, a position that would have normally been filled by one of the Dominican friars who visited St. Mary’s. Furthermore, his guidance of interspersing a chant within the *Miserere* (reminiscent of the liturgical practice of interpolating antiphons between the verses of a psalm) is not unique to Mechthild’s writing.\(^\text{93}\)

Throughout the *Booke* readers are presented examples of Mechthild’s using chants as foci for intellectual contemplation. However, at times singing prompts a more emotional reaction, usually expressed through highly poetic visions. It is these visions in particular that the original meaning of the chant might be developed in surprising ways. One of the best examples of this is the tract *Vinea facta est*, sung during the Saturday night vigil before Easter:

\(^\text{92}\) “Oure lorde taught here to saye the ferste v veers for suche synfulle menne whiche be indurate in synne and wille noght be torned to God, that God wolde of his pytee clepe thame to hym be verray repentancz for his luffyle deth whiche he wolde suffre for luffe of manys soule. Sché schulde also saye the secounde v veers for thame that be repentant that thay maye haff fulle forgefnesse ande neuer fro that tyme forwarde turne agayne to synne. Thé thrjyde v veers sché schulde saye for thame that be ryghtfulle, whiche profette fro daye to daye in goode werkys, that thay maye encresse ande be perseuerant. Ande the ferth v veers sché schulde saye for alle the saules whiche abyde Goddes mercye in the peynes off purgatorye, which haffé a sykerneis that thay shulleene drynke hastelye that blessed drynke of the welle of lyffe ande euerlastynglye to regne in the kyngedome of hevene with Cryste, that thai mowe soone be deliuerede ande vnbounde ande be fedde with oure lorde in his blysse withoutyne anye ende” (*Booke* 2:2, 332-33). “Primos quinque versus pro omnibus peccatoribus, qui peccatis indurati, ad Deum converti nolunt, ut Deus per amarosam mortem suam, per veram poenitentiam eos dignetur revocare. Secundos quinque versus pro poenitentibus, ut optatam remissionem consequantur, et nunquam de caetero redant ad peccata. Tertios quinque versus, pro justis qui jam in bonis actibus et virtutibus proficiunt, ut in his perseverent. Quartos quinque versus, pro omnibus animabus purgandis, quae sunt in certitudine quod cito in coelesti regno sunt bibiturae poculum fontis vivi, et in aeternum cum Christo regnaturae, ut citius absolutae cum Domino epulenter” (*Liber* 2:2, 138-39).

\(^\text{93}\) Gertrude for one wrote an entire book devoted to the subject. This book, the *Spiritual Exercises*, intersperses a number of antiphons (and other chants) with both liturgical and newly-composed prayers.

My Beloved had a vineyard on a hill, in a fruitful place. He fenced it in, and digged about it: and planted it with Sorec, the choices of vines, and built a tower in the midst thereof. And he set up a wine-press therein: for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.  

The tract is in turn based on portions of the opening two verses of Isaiah, chapter 5. The entirety of both verses are as follows:

Now will I sing to my beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.

Mechthild describes her reaction to this particular tract in great detail:

And when they sang the tract Vinea facta est, this maiden, with great love in her soul, spoke to our Lord thus: “Oh Lord, if it would please you I would that I might offer my heart to you as a chosen vine after your heart and your will for all time.” Our Lord said to her again: “All that you desire I may perform.” And then she saw spiritually [gostelye] our Lord within her heart, walking about as in an entirely beautiful vineyard; around the border was a multitude of angels standing together as thickly as a stone wall.

In the next few pages Mechthild continues her vision by describing the four types of wine that she found in the corners of vineyard: sweet and clear wine, signifying the fruit of good works; red wine, signifying resistance to temptation; full fervent wine, signifying virtuous works performed out of love for God; and noble spiced wine, signifying the desire with which a man

---

94 Guéranger, vol. 6, 593-94.
95 Ande whan thay sange this tracte: Vinea facta est, this maydene in a grete affeccioun of here sawle spake to oure lorde ande sayde: ‘A lorde, zif hitt plese the I walde zat y myght zelde myne herte to the as a chochene vyne aftere thyne herte ande thyne wille in alle tyme.’ Oure lorde sayde to ere agayne: ‘Alle that thou desyres I maye performe.’ Ande anone sche sawe gostelye oure lorde within here herte goynge abowte as in a fulle fayre vynezerde, and abowte the vynezerde was a multitude of angyellys as thikke as nitt hadde bene a stone walle” (Booke 1:51, 219). “Cum autem cantaretur: Vinea facta est, haec in Christi virgo in affectu mentis dixit ad Dominum: ‘Eia utinam tibi cor meum vineam secundum Cor tuum electam omni tempore possem exhibere!’ ‘Cui Dominus: ‘Omne quod desideras valeo perficere.’ ‘Et statim, vidit se intra cor suum velut in vinea pulcherrima deambulare, quam Angelorum multitudo velut maceria in circuitu protegebat” (Liber 1:22, 79).
desires God in his old age with all his strength. In the center of the vineyard, meanwhile, is a well filled by water flowing directly from Christ’s heart. Interestingly, none of these details appears in the original biblical passage, which after the poetical opening curses Israel for yielding wild grapes instead of good fruit. Mechthild’s fervent longing (produced, one is led to believe, by the sound of the music) thus serves as an antithesis to the apostasy of ancient Israel. Her description of what she sees in the vineyard likewise transforms a reading about judgment into an affirmation of loving devotion to God’s will, not to mention the central importance of the Sacred Heart.

**Masses and Visions**

While the previous section considered individual chants, Mechthild also writes about how she was influenced by feast days generally. Like Gertrude, Mechthild refers to each day by the Introit of the Mass. While the musical significance ends there for many of the examples, some do treat music more in depth. Of these, the most interesting is the Mass of *Esto mihi*, which appears twice in the Booke. The first occurrence begins with Christ asking whether Mechthild will abide forty days and nights with him in the mountain (a reference to the upcoming Lenten season). After Mechthild agrees whole-heartedly, Christ proceeds to grant her a vision:

> Then he showed her an immensely tall and wide hill, stretching from the East into the West. This hill had seven tiers [degrees] through which men must walk to reach the summit, and each tier had a well. Our Lord took her and brought her to the first tier, called the tier of humility. In that place was a well of water which washed this maiden’s soul from all the sins of pride she ever committed. [Following this Mechthild visited the wells to wash away wrath and envy.] Then she fell before the feet of Jesus, and that sweet instrument, the voice of Christ, gave a sound and said: “Rise up, my friend; show me your face” (Song 2:13-14). All the company of saints and angels abiding at the top of the hill sang merrily with our Lord and in God with a full sweet song of love as if it were one voice. This melody was such that it is impossible to describe in words.

---

96 For a summary of the themes of *Esto mihi*, or Quinquagesima Sunday, see the previous chapter on Gertrude, particularly the section “Music and the Mass.”
97 “Thane he schewyd here ane hye hille ande of a wonderfulle gretnes lastyng fro the este into the weste. This hille hadde vij degrees wharebye men schulde go vppe to the hyght of that hille, ande to eche grees was a welle. Oure lorde toke here thane ande brouzt here to the furste grees whiche was clepyde the grees of mekenes. In that grees was a welle of watere which waschede this maydens sawle fro alle vyces that euere sche synned in be pride. [...] Than atte laste sche felle downe to the feete of Ihesu ande anone that swete instrumente, the voyce of Cryste, gaffe a sowne ande saide: ‘Ryse upp my frende, schewe me thi face.’ & alle the companye of sayntys ande of aungels whyche was abowne in the hyeste topp of the hille sange so merylye with oure
The vision continues with Mechthild visiting each of the other wells to wash away the stains of the remaining deadly sins. However, it is the level of love, whose water washes away the sin of envy, which is most interesting. It is unsurprising, given examples of Mechthild’s beliefs so far, that she singles out the level of love. None of the other six wells prompts such a showing of contrition from Mechthild, nor does any of them inspire Christ and the angels to sing; it is the thought of love that produces the most beautiful music imaginable.

Mechthild’s vision on *Esto mihi* continues with a description of the Trinity, whom she saw enthroned in glory on the top of the hill, and surrounded by all of the hosts of heaven:

The Virgin Mary then went forth from her throne with a company of virgins and worshipped her son with high praise and thanksgiving that no words can describe. The patriarchs and prophets, with untold joy, sang to the Trinity the responsory *Summe trinitati*. The glorious choir of apostles, with great gladness, sang the antiphon *Ex quo omnia*. They sang this because while they were living they knew Him from whom comes all things and goodness, and by whom all things in heaven and earth were made. After this came forth the host of the victorious martyrs who sang the song *Tibi decus*. Then sang the confessors: *Benedicio et claritas*, and among these Mechthild saw the holy father, St. Benedict, in white clothing mingled with red [...] This maiden wondered why the angels did not sing. Our Lord answered and said: “You shall sing with the angels.” Then these holy angels and that blessed maiden sang together the response *Te sanctum dominum in excelsis.*

---

lorde Gode ande in God with a fulle swete sange of love as hitt hadde bene oo voyce. Ande suche a melodye thare was that no mannys tonge suffycis to schewe hitt” (*Booke* 1:26, 142-44). “Tunc ostendit ei montem excelsum et mirae magnitudinis ab Oriente usque ad Occidentem, habentem septem gradus per quos ascendebatis, et septem fontes. Et assumens eam pervenit ad primum gradum, qui vocabatur gradus humilitatis, in quo erat fons aquae ablueens animam a cunctis vitiis quae superbia commisit. Post haec secundum ascendebatis, qui dicebatur gradus mansuetudinis: fons vero patientiae, mundans animam a maculis quas ira peregit. [...] Tunc anima procidit ad pedes Jesu; et statim organum illud dulcisimum, vox Christi melliflua, insonuit dicens: ‘Surge, amica mea; ostende mihi faciem tuam.’ Omnisque coetus Angelorum et Sanctorum qui erant in montis vertice, dulcifluo amoris epithalamio cum Deo et in Deo, ac si una vox esset, ita dulciter resonabant, et tam dulci modulatione psallebant, quod humana lingua non sufficit explicare” (*Liber* 1:13, 40-41).

98 “Oure lady than anone wente furth fro here thron with a companye of virgyns ande worschepe here sonne with so hye praysynges ande thankkyngges that no tonge maye telle. The patriarches ande the prophetes, with such a ioye that may nouzt be tolde, sange to the trinitye this response: *Summe trinitati et c.* Thee glorious queere of apostlys with grete gladnes sange this antyme *Ex quo omnia*. Thay sange that for while thay were in erth thay knewe hym of whome come alle goodes ande goodenesse, be whome alle thynge be made in hevene ande in erthe, ande in whome alle goodes and goodnesses be hydde. Aftere this comme furth the hooste of victorye, that es to saye, the companye of holye martyrs and sange this songe: *Tibi decus.* Than
Mechthild’s descriptions of heavenly praise in this part of the chapter are slightly more in keeping with the theme of sacrifice and penance dictated by the Church for the feast day. Interestingly, almost all these chants come not from Quinquagesima Sunday, but rather Trinity Sunday. In the order they appear in the text, they are: *Summae trinitati* (a Matins responsory), *Ex quo omnia* (a Vespers antiphon), *Tibi decus* (a Lauds antiphon), and *Benedictio et claritas* (a Lauds antiphon). It is unnecessary to reproduce all of the texts here, as they all have the same theme of glorifying the Trinity. The exception is the last chant, which is a responsory from the Vespers of St. Michael the Archangel:

*Te sanctum dominum in excelsis laudant omnes angeli dicentes te decet laus et honor domine.*

All the hosts of angels sing: to you belongs praise and honor, Lord in the highest.

The text of the chant clearly fits into both the collection of Trinitarian hymns and the plot of the vision. Why Mechthild is accorded a place with the angels is uncertain, though it might be a matter of practical importance, as she, a living human, would not fit into any of the other groups. Then again, angels traditionally serve two roles: as God’s messengers and, especially in the writings of Augustine and Gregory, as attendants at God’s throne. It is conceivable that Mechthild, who constantly transmits her heavenly visions to people on Earth, may be seen in a


---

sange the confessowrys ande sayde *Benedictio et claritas*, ande amonge these confessours speciallye sche sawe that hoolye fadere Saynte Benette in white clothynge medlede emonge with rede coloure. [...] This maydene wondre why the aungells sange nouzt. Ande owre lorde awnswerde ande saide: ‘Thowe shalte shalle syng with aungells.’ Ande anone these holy aungells ande that blyssede maydene sange togydders this responce: *Te sanctum dominum in excelsis*” *(Booke 1:26, 147-49).* “Tunc orabat beatam Virginem ut pro se Filium suum laudaret. Quae statim de throno suo procedens cum Virginum choro Filium suum laude ineffabili extollebat. Patriarchae quoque et Prophetae laudabant Dominum, cum jubilo dicentes Responsorium, *Summae Trinitati*. Gloriosus vero Apostolorum chorus cum tripudio decantabat Antiphonom: *Ex quo omnia*, etc. quia ipsa agnoverunt in terris eum *a quo omnia* bona profluerunt, *per quem omnia* facta sunt in coelo et in terra, *in quo omnia bona* sunt abscondita. Post haec Martyrum victorious exercitus cecinit dicentes: *Tibi decus*, etc. Dehinc Confessorum ordo hymnizabat dicens: *Benedictio et claritas*, etc. Inter quos specialiter beatum Benedictum Patrem eximium vidit, in veste candida roseo colore intertexta. [...] Cumque miraretur cur Angeli non cantarent, Dominus respondit: ‘Tu cum Angelis cantabis.’ Et statim Angeli sancti cum illa beata anima concinebant dicentes: *Te sanctum Dominum*, etc.” *(Liber 1:13, 43).*
similar light. Although her vision starts with the Lenten attitude of withdrawing from the world for forty days and nights, it does not remain there long. Instead, Mechthild moves to the events of Trinity Sunday. While it is true that she bypasses the more immediate feasts of Easter and Pentecost, all three of these are linked together by the events of Lent and celebrate the triumph and glory of God. It is interesting that Mechthild has such a foretaste of the post-Lenten period before Lent even begins in the physical world. Like Gertrude and the other Mechthild, she clearly seeks to emphasize the joyful, rather than mournfully penitential, spirit of religion.

The other example of Mechthild’s response to a Mass to be considered here is her description of what transpired during the Feast of the Assumption (August 15). In her Booke she complains how the nuns were troubled by a group of canons, who, acting under the authority of the bishop, suspended St. Mary’s from saying divine service until they were given a certain sum of money. Mechthild was greatly disturbed, but in a vision she saw Christ come and comfort her; he told her that by the end of the day she would see marvels:

After this, when the time came for the procession and the priest should begin the responsory Vidi speciosam, it seemed to this maiden that all the congregation was ordered to go and went forth in a procession. Our Lord went first with his glorious mother and bore a banner of white and red [...] After this our Lord sang the mass, dressed in a red chasuble and bishop’s trappings.  

The passage continues with how Christ assigns the epistle reading to St. John the Baptist, the task of ministering to him at the altar to the same and St. Luke, and the gospel reading and task of ministering to the Virgin Mary to St. John the Evangelist. It is easy to see how this is a direct response to the greed of the canons: not only does Christ, the highest authority in the Church, intervene and say Mass, but he is even described as dressed in the vestments of a bishop.

After this introduction, the vision continues for many more pages (of which only a reduction will be presented here), following the progression of the Mass. At the Introit,

\[100\] “Aftere this when the tyme was comme that thay schulde goo a processioun, ande the preste schulde begyn this responce: Vidi speciosam as the manere was, hitt semydde to this maydene that alle the congreggacion was ordeynede to goo ande wente furth a processioun. Ande oure lorde wente before with his glorous modere ande bare a banere of whiete colour ande of rede [...] Aftere this oure lorde arayede hym ande sange the masse cloythe in a reede chesyble ande in a byschoppe ornamente” (Booke 1:51, 251-53). “Cumergo Sacerdos ex more ad Processionem inciperet Responsorium, Vidi speciosam, videbatur sibi quod tota Congregatio ordinaret se ad Processionem, quam Dominus cum Matre praecebedebat, portans vexillum albi coloris et rubei. In albo erant rosae aureae, et in rubeo argenteae. [...] Tunc Dominus praeparavit se Missam celebraturus, indutas casula rubea et pontificali infulta” (Liber 1:27, 95).
Gaudeamus omnes, the Virgin Mary offers to Christ a large ornament of gold and gems to wear across his chest:

Then they sang the mass up until the last Kyrie eleison. And our Lord, with a full high voice, began: Gloria in excelsis Deo. Then Mechthild heard him say: “I give bliss to all from the joy of my heart.” At the offertory, she saw the sisters who did special spiritual service to our lady went up to the altar and offered rings of gold to Christ; he received them and put them on his fingers. And when the high priest, head of all priests, sang the preface and came to the words Cum quibus et nostras voces ut admitti iubeas deprecamus supplici confessione dicentes, then said our Lord to all the saints: “Sing now, and sing with psalms of melody.” Anon they sang together: Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus. Above all others, our glorious lady sang with such beauty that her voice stood above all others in the choir.¹⁰¹

This is one of the very few points in the Booke where Mechthild describes the Ordinary of the Mass in any detail; indeed, the passage continues with a long description of the Communion and final blessing. This level of detail might be intended to offer further emotional and theological support for her and the rest of the convent against the church hierarchy; particularly if this vision was to be a substitute for attending Mass, it would need to be as complete as possible. It is interesting that the Virgin Mary’s role in the proceedings is, if not unimportant, at least not as prominent as one would expect on Assumption Day. It is true that she offers praise to Christ at the Introit, reads the Gospel, and serves as the intercessor between Christ and the convent during

¹⁰¹ “Thane dydde thay furth the masse into the laste Kyrie eleyson. Ande oure lorde with a fulle hye voyce begane: ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo.’ Ande than sche harde hym saye: ‘Offe the ioye of myne herte to alle y gyffe blysse.’ Atte the offertorye here seemede that the sustrene whiche dydde specyalle gostelye servyce tooure ladye wente vppe to the awtere ande offrede ryngges of golde whiche owre lorde receyuede ande putte thame on his fynggeres. Ande whene that hye preste, hede of alle prestes, sange the prephace ande come to thes wordys: Cum quibus et nostras voces ut admitti iubeas deprecamus supplici confessione dicentes, than sayde oure lorde to alle the sayntys: ‘Syenges alle nowe and synges with psalmys of melodye.’ Ande anone alle thay sange togedders: ‘Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus.’ Botte emonge alle ande abowane alle owre glorious ladye gaffe such a sownde that be that sownde here boyce specyallye was knawene before alle the voyces of sayntys” (Booke 1:51, 253-54). “Tunc Missam prosequentes usque ad ultimum Kyrie Eleison, Dominus alta voce imposuit: Gloria in excelsis, dicens: ‘De gaudio Cordis mei omnibus vobis propino gloriam.’ Ad Offertorium autem, hae quae beatae Virgini specialia impenderant obsequia, accedentes ad altare, obtulerunt annulos aureos quos Dominus susciplens, digitis suis imposuit. Et cum Praefationem ipse summus Sacerdos et Pontifex decantasset, usque ad illud: cum quibus et nostras voces, dixit ad Sanctos: ‘Cantate omnes, cantate et psallite.’ Qui omnes cantabant: Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus. Inter omnes et super omnes beata Virgo dulcissimum datat sonum, quo prae omnium Sanctorum vocibus vox ejus specialiter agnoscebatur” (Liber 1:27, 96).
Communion. However, she assumes these roles at many other times in the Booke. Mechthild’s other non-liturgical interpolations (particularly the rings of gold, but also the preface to the Sanctus), reinforce the goodness of the convent. However, they can also be seen to clearly fit into the general model of the Catholic Mass. Rather than being revolutionary, Mechthild’s glosses preserve the spirit of each moment.

Music and Prayer

The next element of Mechthild’s work to discuss, and what Mechthild would consider most important, is the use of music as a vehicle for praising God. Examples of praise involving music, whether from the author herself, the choirs of angels and saints, Mechthild’s fellow sisters, etc., abound in the Booke. Each example provides a slightly different, nuanced view of how music can be used in prayer. For instance, one of the most common functions of music is as a means of transmitting an offering directly to the divinity; at one point Mechthild describes how she had a vision of Christ seated in glory on his throne while she rested upon his lap:

She saw coming from the heart of our Lord a gold pipe through which she should offer worship and thanksgiving and praise to God. But when she prayed to God that his own goodness and worthiness might be praise to Him, suddenly she heard the blessed voice of Christ, with a wonderful sweetness and melodiousness [melodye], singing the antiphon Laudem dicite Deo nostro, omnes sancti eius. The words of this antiphon are: “Offer praise to our God, all you His saints” (Apoc. 19:5). Then God inspired [inspyrede] her and showed her the inner meaning and clear understanding of these words.

Space precludes the thorough discussion of any more appearances of the Mass. However, one more example must at least be related which demonstrates how her interpretations could easily be fit into the model of the Mass. One day Mechthild was too weak to attend Mass, and she complained to Christ: “‘A my dere lorde, gyffe me somewhate of comfforth of the wordes of the masse which nowe bene sayde.’ Than owre lorde sayde: ‘Loo, nowe Agnus Dei es sayde thries atte masse. In the furste I offre me to God the fadere for zowe with alle myne mekenes ande alle my pacience. Atte the seconde I offre me to hym for zowe with alle the bitternesse ande scharpenesse of my passioun for a fulle reconciliacion. Atte the thridde Agnus Dei I offre me to hym for zowe with the hoole luffe of my deuyne herte in fulfilynge of alle goodnesse that zoew lakketh” (Booke 3:17, 452-53). “Tunc illa: ‘Eia me Domine, modo mihi aliquid ex praesentibus Missae verbis dona, unde anima mea spiritualiter consoletur.’ Cui Dominus: ‘Ecce jam mihi canitur ter Agnus Dei: in primo me offero Deo Patri cum omni humilitate et patientia mea pro vobis; ad secundum, offero me cum omni amaritudine passionis meae in plenam reconciliationem. Ad tertium, cum toto amore divini Cordis, in supplementum omnium quae homini desunt bonorum’” (Liber 3:19, 221-22).

Hitt semed also to here att that tyme as thare hadde come fro the herte of owre lorde a pype alle of golde thorowe the whiche sche schulde gyffe worscheppes thankkynges, and lawdeys to
This passage has a number of significant elements, including the use of the golden pipe as a conduit between the Sacred Heart and Mechthild (note that Mechthild does not sing her praises into God’s ear but rather into Christ’s heart) and the fact that Christ responds to the offering by singing in response with a beautiful voice. However, the most important aspect of this example is the antiphon *Laudem dicite Deo nostro, omnes sancti eius*, from the Lauds service of All Saints’ Day:

\[Laudem dicite Deo nostro omnes sancti eius et qui timetis Deum pusilli et magni; quoniam regnavit dominus Deus noster omnipotens. Gaudeamus et exultemus et demus gloriam ei.\]

Sing praises to our God all you his saints, and all you who fear God, both small and great: for the Lord God reigns omnipotent. Let us rejoice and be glad and give honor to Him.

As might be expected, the chant’s general tone of praise and affirmation of the universality of prayer provide an appropriate response to Mechthild’s prayer. The text goes even further, however, and in the next two pages Mechthild treats the antiphon in the manner of *lectio divina*. For example, she states that by the first word, *laudem*, “she had spiritual perception [knowynge] of how God worshipped Himself in Himself by a perfect worship without end [...] by *dicite*, she perceived that God, by his virtue and might, gives power to a soul to feel love for his creator and to worship Him,” and by each further word she understood why it is proper to praise God.104

---

104 “By *laudem* sche hadde knowynge howe God worscheppede hymselfe in hymselfe be a perfftute worscheppe withowtenene ende [...] by *dicite*, sche hadde knawynge that God, be his vertue and myght, gyeveth powere to a sawle to clepe ande styrre as be affeccioune alle creatures in evene ande in erthe to worschepe thare creature” (*Booke* 1:2, 77-78). “In hoc verbo laudem, qualiter Deus laudat se in seipso laude perfecta sine fine. In hoc autem verbo *dicite*, agnovit quod Deus de sua divina virtute tribuit potestatem animae omnes creaturas, quae in coelo et in terra sunt, ad laudem invitare sui Creatoris” (*Liber* 1:1, 8).
This is but the first of many instances where God uses the text of a chant as a starting point for a much deeper theological lesson.\textsuperscript{105}

While singing chants in order to praise God is usually considered a beneficial action, ironically sometimes the act of singing brought Mechthild suffering. On several occasions readers are presented with a picture of a nun whose spiritual zeal overwhelms her physical body:

\begin{quote}
One time this maiden had completely overtaxed herself in singing, as she was wont to do, and had lost all bodily strength and fainted as a result. Then to her it seemed as though she drew forth from the heart of God all the air that she breathed, and that she sang by the virtue of God alone, and not by her own strength. She was often in the habit of singing to God with all her might and with so fervent a love that it seemed to onlookers the she should die from the strain.\textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

In addition to providing an interesting commentary on the level of devotion at Helfta (or at least the devotion of individuals; Mechthild is the only one of the three Helfta mystics who describes being so overcome by her spiritual efforts while in the choir), this example is important because it identifies the Sacred Heart as the font from which humans draw support. Beyond this, Mechthild makes sure to note that it is not through her own strength, but rather through God, that she is able to sing. Furthermore, as seen earlier with the antiphon \textit{Laudem dicite Deo nostro}, Christ serves as both the object and the ultimate source of worship.

While Mechthild typically considers the texts of chants to be of greater importance than the music, in some instances she explicitly ranks both below the singer’s devotion. For instance, she had a vision during Matins on St. John’s night of that saint and Christ (in the form of a ten-year-old child) standing in the church:

\textsuperscript{105}A similar but more general example can be found in \textit{Booke} 3:29 (471-72). In this case, inspired by God, Mechthild glosses on the hours of the day; she describes what one should feel at the beginning of each hour, at the reading of the hour’s psalm, and after the psalms.

\textsuperscript{106}“In a tyme when this maydene hadde sungene fulle trauayllosye as sche was wonte ofte, and atte that tyme sche payntede gretye ande lakkede here bodylye strengthys becowse of here traualye, thane to here semyngye sche drought fro the herte of God alle the wynde that sche breytheede ande sange be the vertewe of God andre noght be here owne strengthes. For euere sche was wonte to synge to God with alle here myghttez ande withe so a feruente luffe that of alle itt semente to here that sche schulde gyffe vpp the spryitt be that trauayle, zitt wolde sche noght seese of that synnggyngye” (\textit{Booke} 3:6, 426). “Cum vice quadam valde laboriose cantasset, sicut pene frequenter solebat, et jam viribus defecisset, videbatur sibi quod omnem flatum quem spirabat de Corde Dei traheret, et ita non viribus suis, sed quasi divina virtute cantaret. Solita enim erat totis viribus Deo canere, et tam ferventi amore, ut saepe videretur sibi quod si etiam ex hoc spiritum exhalaret, non tamen a cantu cessaret” (\textit{Liber} 3:7, 205).
Saint John went about the choir with a chalice, which he put to the mouth of each member of the convent who sang. Therein he gathered the devotion and intention [devocion ande intencion] of their singing, and with great gladness took it to Christ.107

The use of a chalice recalls the sacrament of Communion. In fact, this example might be read as an inversion of the Communion ritual (or more likely a reference to the offering of the elements earlier in the liturgy), as the sisters put their songs into the chalice, rather than drinking the wine. It is also interesting to note that the text avoids mentioning the words of the chants St. John collects; it is the sisters’ devotion and intention which matter most (a parallel might be drawn here to Psalm 50/51, where the psalmist states that “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”).

Despite the risks of fervent devotion, Mechthild makes clear that singing praises to God is also one of the best forms of securing grace in the following life, especially if it comes at the expense of physical suffering:

While she prayed for one of her sisters, who suffered from the office she bore and the effort of singing in the choir, anon this maiden saw the same person for whom she prayed standing before our Lord. He said to her: “Whoever sings for my sake in her life will sing even more sweetly in heaven everlastingly. One day’s worth of obedient singing pleases me more than all the songs a man devises for his own pleasure and purposes.”108

This vision is entirely in character for Mechthild, who elsewhere emphasizes the importance of obedience and submission to the will of God. Indeed, the act of submission appears to be more important than the chant sung. Additionally, this vision suggests the correspondence between the

---

107 “Saynte Iohan wente abowte th eqwere with a chaleys, whiche chaleys he putt to the mowthe of ech of that covente that sange, ande thareyn he gadderede the deuocion ande intencion of thare syngynge, and with grete gladnesse toke hitt to Cryste” (Booke 1:13, 106). “Intra Matutinos autem sanctus Joannes chorum circumiens, calicem singularum ori apposuit, congregans in eo devotionem et intentionem psallentium, quam Christo laetus propinavit” (Liber 1:6, 22).

108 “While sche prayede for oone of here sustryne whiche bare greuouslye here offyce ande trauayle whiche sche hadde for labour in synggynge in the qwere, anone this maydene sawe this same persone for whome sche prayede stondyngne before oure lorde ande herde howe oure lorde sayde: ‘Wharefore synnges sche to me in here lyffe botte for y wille syngge fulle swetelye to here euerelastynge? A songe of o dayes synggyngne be obedience lykes me more than alle the songe that a man kanne schewe of his own auctorite or auysemente’” (Booke 1:77, 298). “Dum inter haec pro quadam persona orasset, quae ex officio suo gravabatur, vidit eam inter has virgines Deo assistentem, et Dominum dicentem: ‘Et quare mihi invita decantat, quia ego in aeternum dulciter sibi recantare volo? Cantus enim unius diei ex obedientia me plus delectat, quam omnis cantus ex propria deliberatione’” (Liber 1:35, 117).
earthly and heavenly worlds, insomuch as those who sing to God during their lives can expect to spend their time singing with even more beautiful voices after death.

Another aspect that needs be considered regarding the interplay between music and prayer is the way in which the heavenly population reinforces chants sung on earth. Like the other mystics of Helfta, Mechthild relates a number of visions where she saw the host of heaven singing during the celebration of an earthly Mass or service of the Hours (e.g., on the day of profession for new novices). At times readers are presented with a more interesting interaction between Mechthild and the saints. In one vision she describes how Christ told her,

“You shall understand that when you say any psalm or prayer which any saints prayed when they were alive on earth, then all of those saints pray to me for you. Additionally, when you are in your devotions and speak with me, then all of the saints are joyful and worship and thank me.”

As seen also in Mechthild of Magdeburg’s work, the saints serve as intercessors between humans and God. At times this connection might be unexpected, as if, for instance, Mechthild is engaged in solitary prayer. This sort of relationship between humans and the saints is not surprising given Catholic dogma, but it deserves mention because, while most other conversations between Christ and the mystics have the quality of lovers speaking in secret, it serves as a reminder of the larger spiritual community.

If there is an overriding theme concerning the relationship between music and prayer, it is that of loving joy. Even when relating moments of pain, weakness, or discipline there is a feeling of love behind the text. At points this jubilation moves to the fore:

Additionally, when a man hears a pleasing melody or anything else delightful, then should he think with a joyful spirit and say: “Oh Lord, how pleasing is that blessed voice which calls all things to Him, and from whom comes all sweetness and pleasing sounds of voice [...]” And when a man reads or sings he should think in his heart and say in his soul with a great joy: “See now what your dear love speaks to me and bids me in this

---

109 See Booke 4:7, 506.
110 “Thow schalte vnderstonde that when thou sayes anye psalme or prayere whiche anye seyntyts prayede whene thaye werre in erth, than alle thoo sayntys praye me for the. Also whene thow erte in meditacions ande when thou spekys with me, thane alle sayntis be ioyfulle ande worscheppe ande thonkkyne me’’ (Booke 3:9, 433-34). “Cum autem psalmos aut aliquam orationem tuam Sancti in terris oraverunt legis, omnes Sancti pro te orant. Cum vero meditaris, vel mecum loqueris, omnes Sanct gaudentes me bene dicunt” (Liber 3:11, 210).
verse or lesson.” In this thought he shall seek his love in all ways until he experiences the taste of that divine sweetness.\textsuperscript{111}

In addition to recognizing the power of music, which she ultimately traces back in origin to God, Mechthild seeks to set up a constant communication of song between humans and the divine. Her admonition regarding what a person should feel while singing speaks to her single-minded devotion. Though not going as far as Mechthild of Magdeburg, who frequently personifies love itself, Mechthild clearly considers song to be an expression of the love of creation, and the force that binds together all of creation.

\textbf{Musical Instruments}

The final aspect of music to be considered in Mechthild’s \textit{Booke} is the use of musical instruments. Like Gertrude, she references only a small selection of instruments, primarily cymbals and harps. It is difficult to say precisely why Mechthild refers to these instruments, as it is unlikely that she would have heard them in liturgical use.\textsuperscript{112} A more likely possibility is that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\footnote{\“Also when a mane hyeres a merye melodye or any other thynge whareyn he haffes delyte, than schulde he thenke with a joyfulle spyritte ande saye: A lorde, howe merye es that blessedde voyce which clepeth alle thynge to hym fro whome commeth alle swetnes and merye sowne of voyce [...] Ande when a man redys or syngges he schulde thenke in his herte ande saye in his sawlle with a grete ioye: A loo nowe whate thy dere luffe spekes to the ande byddes the in this veerse or in this lessone. Ande so in that thowzt he schalle seke his luffe in alle wayes abowte tylle he feele some taaste of that devyne swetnesse\” (Booke 3:39, 487-88). \“Cum autem suavem audit melodiam seu aliquid in quo delectatur, cogitet: eia, quam praedulcis erit vox illa te vocantis, unde omnis dulcedo et sonoritas vocum processit! Item cum audit homines loqui aut legi aliquid, semper ad hoc intendent audire, si aliquid audiat in quo Dilectum valeat invenire. Cum vero legit vel cantat, cogitet: eia, quid modo in hoc versu, vel hac lectione Dilectus tuus divinae dulcedinis aliquem persentiat gustum” (Liber 3:44, 247).}
\item\footnote{Edmund Bowles, “Were Musical Instruments Used in the Liturgical Service During the Middle Ages?,” \textit{The Galpin Society Journal} 10 (May, 1957): 40-56; 40. In his article, Bowles considers all of the evidence put forth in order to justify the claim that musical instruments were played in liturgical services, then proceeds to offer refutations. For instance, he notes that while there are many artistic representations of musical instruments in religious settings, these are best understood as symbolic and representing a supernatural reality (the World of Forms), rather than reality (42-43). Bowles continues by citing a number of prohibitions against allowing secular musicians to perform sacred music in the liturgy, along with polemics (beginning with the Church Fathers) that claimed sung chant was the highest form of praising God, and that musical instruments were a hallmark of pagan worship (45, 47). The one exception to this ban was the organ. For more details on the role of the organ, see John Caldwell, “The Organ in the Medieval}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
her source (and the source for the other mystics) is the book of Psalms, where a number of instruments appear, and which had a tradition of being considered allegorically.\textsuperscript{113} For instance, the text of Psalm 150 reads:

\begin{quote}
Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!
\end{quote}

One of the interesting things about the ways in which Mechthild treats these various instruments is that she clearly differentiates between the functions of percussion and chordophones. For instance, in a vision of the Virgin Mary, Mechthild reports,

\begin{quote}
In this same vision this holy maiden saw our blessed lady seated on the right side of her dear son. She drew out a girdle of gold, covered in golden cymbals, through the orders of angels and the various ranks of the saints. Each angel and saint touched the cymbals, which gave a wonderful sound of worship and thanksgiving to our Lord for the soul of that blessed nun, and for all of the gifts and graces which He had put in her and perfectly performed in her.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{113} James McKinnon, “Musical Instruments in the Medieval Psalm Commentaries and Psalters,” \textit{Journal of the American Musicological Society} 21/1 (Spring, 1968): 3-20. Like Bowles, in his article McKinnon argues that instruments cited in the psalms had nothing to do with liturgical usage. Instead, McKinnon notes that many Church Fathers (including Pseudo-Athanasius, Origen, and Augustine) interpreted the references to instruments in the psalms as allegory, and that these interpretations (particularly those of Augustine) formed the basis of medieval understanding (4-7). McKinnon also notes that a second theory, promulgated by John Chrysostom, and which was less popular in the Western church, held that instruments were actually played in the Old Testament (8). However, John argued that this was more of a function of the weakness of the Jews, and that God merely tolerated the use of instruments (the conclusion being that the current church did not suffer from the same weakness).

\textsuperscript{114} “In this same vysioun this holye maidene sawe owre blesfulle ladye on the ryght syde of here dere sonne drawe owte a gerdille of golde, to here semyng full of symbalys of golde, thorrweoute alle the orders of aungellys, ande be thame alle alange ande so forth be alle degrees of seyntis sche drowe furth the gerdelle. And eche aungelle and eche saynte towchede the cymbalys, and thay gave a wondefulle sowne zeeldynge worscheppes ande thankkynges to oure lorde for the sawle of that blesede nunne in alle his gyftes andgraces, whiche largelye God hadde putte in here ande perfytlye perfomede in here” (\textit{Booke} 1:2, 78). “Vidit etiam beatam Virginem a dextrolatere Filii sui zonam auream trahentem plenam cymbalibus aureis, per omnes ordines Angelorum et choros Sanctorum. Qui singuli tangentes cymbala sonum reddebant mirificum, laudantes Deum pro anima illa in omnibus donis et gratiis, quas large perfecerat in ipsa; et anima cum ipsis totis viribus pro seipsa Deum collaudabat” (\textit{Liber} 1:1, 8).
Most significant about this example is the way in which the cymbals are used in order to praise Christ. From a theological perspective it is interesting that the Virgin Mary, who is holding the girdle, serves as a channel between Christ and the other denizens of heaven. More for the purposes of this thesis though, given the number of times elsewhere where Mechthild emphasizes the importance of the words of chants, it is noteworthy that God would be pleased by a purely instrumental sound. However, although the text does not say so explicitly, it seems likely that the saints and angels were singing in addition to playing the cymbals. It should also be noted that the position of the cymbals makes them somewhat ornamental in nature.

At a second point in her book Mechthild makes recourse to the use of percussion instruments. This time it is after she prays that the virtues of holiness, prudence, chastity, meekness, charity, studiousness, and patience might be given to her. In a vision she sees each virtue personified, standing around the Virgin Mary:

And she looked towards them, and it seemed to her that each of them had in her hand a small, sharp spear. The sharpness betokens the virtue of perseverance [stabylnesse] by which a man resists sin. The little spears were set all about with golden cymbals; when these were moved they gave off a full sweet sound in the ears of God. The cymbals betoken the thoughts which a man resists, thereby making a victory and overcoming of sin and giving off a full sweet sound to our Lord.\footnote{Ande sche lokede to thame-warde, & itt semed to here that eche of thame hadde in here hande a lytelle scharpe spere. The scarpnes betokenes stabylnesse be the whiche vertue a man muste withstonde vyces. The lytelle speres ware sette alle abowte with cymbalys of golde, which cymbalys when they were mouede thay gaff a fulle swete sowne in the eeres of God. The cymbalis betokenede the thowzttes whiche a man withstondys ande of tham makys a victorye ande ouercomyng of vyces, whiche victorye gyffes a fulle swete sowne to oure lorde (Booke, 1:78, 301). “Et respiciens vidit quod unaquaque habebat in manu quasi lanceolam acutam: acutias significabat constantiam per quam vitii est resistendum; lanceolae autem erant circumpositae cymbalis aureis, quae cum moverentur, dulcissimum reddebant in Dei auribus sonum. Cymbalae significalunt cogitationes illas quibus homo resistit, faciens de vitii victoriam quae dulcissimum Deo reddit sonum” (Liber 1:36, 119).}

Elements discussed in the previous example return here: the reappearance of the Virgin Mary, the ornamental nature of the cymbals (this time on a weapon instead of an article of clothing), their valuable gold construction, and their ultimate function as tools to praise God. Mechthild clearly identifies the cymbals’ sound as symbolizing a man’s victory over vice, thus accounting for why it is so enjoyable for God. Importantly, once again the cymbals appear in a heavenly context. Significantly, the only place where instruments ever appear in Mechthild’s writing is in...
her visions. This would seem to suggest an association between instrumental music and God, a connection (supported by the use of instruments in the Psalms) that will be made even more explicit shortly.

While Mechthild uses cymbals in a relatively limited sense, harps (or psalteries) assume cosmic significance in her Booke; on two separate occasions she describes the harp not only as a stand-in for Christ, but also as a microcosm for creation.\(^{116}\) The first comes from the same Sunday when Mechthild had a vision of the vineyard (discussed above):

> And then she saw a harp of many strings come out from the divine heart. The harp was our Lord Jesus; the harp strings were all of the chosen souls who are all one in God through love. Then the high cantor of all cantors, our Lord Jesus, struck the harp, and with a pleasing sound all of the angels intoned this song in sweet tones: Regem regum etc.\(^ {117}\) The meaning of that song was this to our understanding: “Worship, all you saints, the king of kings and thank Him who has so graciously chosen this soul as his spouse and daughter.” Then all the saints sang to God with a full cheerful sound [meladye] and said: “Thanks we now give to God the Father for this soul whom He has made so rich with His plenteous grace.”\(^ {118}\)

\(^{116}\) In addition to these two examples, the harp appears once more: in a vision during the octave of Easter Mechthild describes her own and Christ’s hearts as two wooden houses nested one inside the other. At the door of Christ’s house stand two angels, who, at the sight of her, “gaffe a fulle swete sowne of melodye as thowz hitt hadde bene of an harpe” (Booke 1:44, 200-202). Unlike the other Helfta mystics, Mechthild does not tend to use this simile in her writing—this is the only time in the Booke where it appears. However, one should not over-interpret its presence, and it is likely of minor importance when compared to the other examples.

\(^{117}\) The specific song to which Mechthild refers is difficult to identify; there are a number of Introits for saints’ feast days beginning with Regem regum, but none of them have these precise words. As the original Latin simply gives the lyrics, and the song obliquely refers to Mechthild herself as the soul in question, it is conceivable that Mechthild was not referring to any preexisting chant (though she might have used these numerous Introits as models).

\(^{118}\) “Ande than sche saught anone an harpe come owte fro the deuyne herte whiche hadde many strengys. The herpe wasoure lorde Ihesu; the herpe strengis ware alle chosene saules whiche bene alle one in God be luffe. Than the hye chantour of alle chantours, oure lorde Ihesu, smote the herpe, ande alle the aungells with a delectable sowne intunyde this songe in duche tonge ande sayde: Regem regum et c. The substance of that songe was this to oure vnderstandynge: Worschepe, alle sayntys, the kynge of kynge ande thonkkes hym whiche haues so graciouslye chose thys saule into his spouse ande dowhttere. Anone than alle the sayntys sange in God with a fulle merye meladye ande seyde: thonkkes zelde we nowe alle to God the fadere for this soule whome he haffe made soo ryche with his plentevous grace” (Booke 2:2, 334). “Tunc vidit de corde Dei exire citaram; citara autem illa erat Dominus Jesus, chordae vero, omnes electi qui in Deo unum sunt per amorem. Tunc summus Cantor omnium cantorum Jesus, citharam percussion, et sono dulcissino insonabant omnes Angeli dicentes: ‘Laus aeterna tribus personis, quod Dominus elegit te in sponsam et in filiam.’ Deinde omnes Sancti cantabant in Deo dulci
In addition to returning to many important earlier themes, such as the role of songs in praise, the essential element here is that the source of the harp is the Sacred Heart. The harp itself is unusual, combining the strings, representing humans, with the frame, representing Christ. In a sense, the harp might be seen as a representation of the choir of saints mentioned elsewhere, except that their singing is depicted in more poetic terms. Additionally, the construction of the harp recalls imagery from the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, where the congregation of the faithful is described as the “body of Christ” (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:27). It is tempting thus to raise instrumental music to the same plane occupied by the voice.

The second instance where Mechthild describes a divine harp, while touching on many of the same themes, does offer some surprising deviations:

It seemed to her that love stood at the right side of God, and from the heart of God came forth an instrument of melody and of joyful sound which reached forth to the heart of this maiden. The instrument looked like a psaltery with ten strings, as it is written in the psalm of the psaltery: *In psalterio decem cordarum psallam tibi Deus meus*, that is to say: “My God, I shall sing to you in a psaltery with ten strings.” The nine strings betokened the nine orders of angels, in which orders all of the saints are ordained. The tenth string betokened our Lord himself, the king of angels and sanctifier of all saints. This maiden then fell down before our Lord and softly touched the first string beneath, gave praise and worship to God, and said: *Te Deum patrem ingenitum*. In the second string she said: *Te filium unigenitum*. [In like manner Mechthild repeats the next seven verses of the chant.] In the tenth string she could not sing, for she might not yet reach to the height of God.119

harmonia dicentes: ‘Grates nunc omnes reddimus Deo Patri, pro hac anima quam sua ditavit gratia. Benedictus Deus’” (Liber 2:2, 139).

119 “Itt semede to here syght that luffe stode atte the ryght syde of Gode and fro the herte of God schewede owte ane instrumente of melodye ande of a mery sowne whiche instrument rechede forth to the herte of this maydene. This instrumente was ane psawtere to syght whiche hadde x strenges, ane of that es wreyne in the psalme of the psawtere: *In psalterio decem cordarum psallam tibi Deus meus*, that es to saye: My God, I schalle syng to the in a psawtrye with x strengëys. Be the ix strengëys were betokened the ix orders of aungelëys, in the whiche ordyrs alle the peple of seynyst es ordeynede. Be the tenth strengë was betokened owre lorde hymselfe that es the kyng of aungelëys ande sanctyfioure of alle seyntes. This maydene than fell downe before our lorde ande softelye towchede the fyrste strengë beneth ande gaffe praysynge ande worschepe to God ande sayde: *Te Deum patrem ingenitum*. In the seconde strengë sche sayde: *Te filium vnigenitum* [...]. In the x strengë sche myght nought syngye for sche myght nouzt zitte areche to the heyght of Gode” (Booke 2:35, 392-93). “Deinde iterum visum est ei quasi amor staret a dextris Dei, de cujus Corde procedebat quoddam instrumentum suavissimum tendens ad cor illius Virginis, psalterium scilicie, habens decem chordas, sicut in psalmo dicitur: *In psalterio decem chordarum psallam tibi* (Psal. 32:2). Per novem chordas significabantur noven chori
More explicit in the connection between the hearts of Christ and Mechthild (and how music serves to join them together), this passage differs from the first in the way it conflates the saints and angels into the same strings. That Mechthild continues by singing a Responsory from Trinity Sunday (which also serves as a Matins Antiphon for the same feast) contributes an additional layer of meaning to the vision. The full text of the chant Mechthild says is as follows:

Te Deum Patrem ingenitum, te Filium unigenitum, te Spiritum Sanctum Paraclitum, sanctam et individuam Trinitatem, toto corde et ore confitemur, laudamus, atque benedicimus: Tibi gloria in saecula.

God the Father, unbegotten, the only-begotten Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the holy and undivided Trinity, with all our hearts we confess, praise and bless thee: To thee be glory forever.

However, the most notable observation is that the last note of the psaltery remains silent. This should not be taken as a sign that God is lacking in music, but that there are different levels of music in the universe, and God’s is beyond human comprehension. The choice of words here is key, for it suggests that at a later point Mechthild will in fact be able to sing with the tenth string, presumably once she joins the angels in heaven.

**Conclusions**

From these varied observations it is helpful to isolate some of the main features of Mechthild’s considerations of music. Most obviously, music is offered to God as part of a regimen of praise and prayer. Related to this, music is often a source of connection between Mechthild and God; through music Mechthild asks how she should pray, reaffirms her love, etc. This connection extends to the rest of the denizens of heaven, who along with the nuns on earth will share in a musical celebration of the Mass. Music’s role as the point of departure for most of Mechthild’s visions is constantly reinforced. While these are often spiritual in nature, it has

Angelorum, in quibus ordinatus est populus Sanctorum; per decimam vero chordam ipse Dominus, Rex Angelorum et sanctificator omnium Sanctorum. Tunc anima procidit ante Dominum, et primam chordam leviter tangens, laudabat Dominum dicens: Te Deum Patrem ingenitum; in secunda: Te Filium unigenitum [...] in decima autem chorda cantare non potuit, quia ad Dei celsitudinem adhuc attingere non poterat” (Liber 2:35, 181-82).

In doing so, Mechthild draws on a tradition whereby saints are divided into nine ranks, ranging from St. John the Evangelist down through apostles, martyrs, ascetics, and other categories.
been demonstrated how sometimes Mechthild’s visions serve as affirmations of the nuns’ power in a male-dominated church hierarchy. Music also serves an educational purpose both for Mechthild herself and for her readers, as when she treats hymns in the form of *lectio divina* or when she glosses on the meaning and imagery of chants. Even musical instruments appear in the *Booke*, both as symbols and as producers of beautiful noise befitting the heavenly landscape.
Mechthild of Magdeburg is the third member of the Helfta mystics. Unlike the other two, she came from a different generation and (for most of her life) lived in a different geographic location. Mechthild was born to an aristocratic family, but in 1233 she left home to live as a beguine (and later as a Dominican tertiary). She became abbess of the convent of St. Agnes in Magdeburg, and in 1281, at the prompting of her spiritual director, Henry of Halle, began recording her spiritual autobiography. In 1285 she left for Helfta (in part to flee the anger of the local church authorities, whom she denounced as corrupt), where she lived until her death. It was there that she wrote the seventh and final section of her autobiography.\textsuperscript{121}

Mechthild’s highly poetic and ecstatic composition, \textit{Das fließende Licht von Gotheit}, was written in Middle Low German (unfortunately no copies in the original language exist). Shortly after its composition, Henry of Halle translated it into Latin as the \textit{Lux divinitatis fluens in corda veritatis}; a later Middle High German version was compiled by Henry of Nördlingen. After its translation, Mechthild’s work was spread throughout the European continent by Dominican friars.\textsuperscript{122} Like the works of the other two nuns discussed earlier, Mechthild’s \textit{Light} considers many of the same ideas regarding music: for instance, the use of chants in visions and the Mass, as well as references to musical instrument imagery. However, Mechthild’s work is unique for the emphasis she places on the act of singing, as well as for the number of poetic “songs” she composes regarding God. This chapter will consider all these elements, beginning with the element of song.

### General forms of singing

The previous chapters have demonstrated the centrality of praising God to both Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn. Mechthild maintains the same focus, though the sheer variety of songs is a hallmark of her \textit{Light}. Not only is most singing in the \textit{Light} centered around praise,

\textsuperscript{121} Lagorio, 168-69.

\textsuperscript{122} For example, Boccaccio makes reference to the “laud of Lady Mathilde” in the first story of the seventh day of the \textit{Decameron}. Giovanni Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, trans. G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin, 2003), 486.
but different beings in the universe (humans, angels, members of the Trinity) sing their own unique songs:

Ah, now listen how the Holy Trinity praises itself with its wisdom that has no beginning, with its goodness that has no end, with its everlasting truth, and with its whole eternity. Now hearken to that sweetest, most sublime, and bliss-filled voice, as the Holy Trinity sings with full voice within itself from where have flowed forth the sweet voices of all the saints that have sung in heaven and on earth, and shall do so eternally.

The Father’s voice recites a hymn of praise to himself: “I am a flowing spring that no one can block; but a man can easily block up his heart with an idle thought, so that the restless Godhead that continually toils without toil cannot flow into his soul.”

The Son sings thus: “I am a constantly recurring richness that no one can contain except the boundlessness which always flowed and shall ever flow from God, and which comes again in its fullness with his Son.”

The Holy Spirit sings this in praise: “I am an insuperable power of truth. This one finds in a person who to his honor perseveres in God, come what may.”

Thus does the whole Trinity sing: “I am so strong in my undividedness that no one can ever separate me or shatter me in all eternity.”

This example is notable for a variety of reasons: not only do humans praise the Trinity, it also reflects upon itself. Furthermore, communication among the various parts of the divinity is achieved not through spoken words, but rather through music (Mechthild’s conception of heaven in general is a highly musical experience). These three songs in turn are intimately associated with the function of each member of the Trinity; it is almost as if the song and the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and the same. In particular, the imagery of the songs of the Father and the Son “flowing” (fliessende) returns to one of the overall themes of Mechthild’s

\[123 \text{Light 5:26, 207-8 (Tobin).} \]
work: in a blurring of senses and material/immaterial objects, music, water, and God’s love can all flow into the willing soul.\textsuperscript{124}

In addition to music concerning the Trinity, denizens of heaven also offer up praise to the deceased saints. In one vision Mechthild describes how she saw St. John the Evangelist, preserved uncorrupted in a state of glory. The saint’s body, lying with eyes closed, glows like a fiery crystal:

Beneath, above, and all around him everything is bright, and every seven hours the holy angels come to his body with a song of praise that goes like this: “Holy, pure, simple, wise, and dear to God’s heart.” The song has a sweeter melody than the sound of a thousand strings or harps.\textsuperscript{125}

The level of preservation of John’s earthly body (Mechthild even notes that the saint’s eyebrows are still brown) and the attention accorded to it take the medieval cult of relics to the extreme. However, while John’s body is the object of veneration it is ultimately God who is being praised. As with all saints (and their relics), it is by following God’s commandments that they are granted honor. Mechthild’s vision also introduces here the imagery of musical instruments (which will be considered in more detail in its own section); for now what is most important is that although instruments may produce a pleasant sound, it is the voice that produces the most beautiful music.

Given the presence of singing in heaven, it would be surprising indeed if it were lacking on Earth. In addition to providing a number of songs (discussed below), Mechthild also makes clear the value of participating in this form of musical worship:

When one honors the saints by remembering them well, together with all the throng, as one can do on the day that God honored them with a holy death, they are so grateful that they immediately come in all the glory that they received from their holy actions. I actually saw this on the feast of St. Mary Magdalene as one was glorifying God with songs of praise for the great honor that she received as a reward. She danced about in the choir to the holy song and looked each of the singers in the eyes. She came forward and said: “All those who honor my death, I shall be with them at the end and shall honor them

\textsuperscript{124} At other points in the \textit{Light} Mechthild describes the sensation of God’s presence: “I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit” (\textit{Light}, 4:13, 156). “Ich enkan noch mag nit schriben, ich sehe es mit den ogen miner sele und hoere es mit den oren mines ewigen geistes und bevinde es in allen liden mines lichamen die kraft des heiligen geistes” (107).

in return. I shall stand ever at their side, giving as much help as they are capable of receiving.\textsuperscript{126}

It is interesting how, as with Mechthild of Hackeborn, the action happening in heaven is mirrored on earth; just as angels sing chants to saints, so too do the faithful below. That Mary dances to the song deserves special attention; elsewhere in the \textit{Light} Mechthild also describes the union of music and dance (usually in her courtly poems). As the music is sacred, one assumes that the dance itself is not a secular entertainment but also assumes spiritual dimensions. There are many instances of spiritual dancing in the Bible; see for instance David’s dance to God upon the conquest of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:12-16). This passage also reiterates the point that although the saints are primarily conduits to God, they are also powerful allies.

As singing is accorded such an important position, it may come as no surprise that Mechthild valued the position of choir director. In a vision of the ideal spiritual convent, Mechthild lists each of the virtues: the abbess is sincere love, the schoolmistress is wisdom, the mistress of the sick is toiling mercy, etc. As for the director of the choir,

\begin{quote}
The choir mistress is hope.
She fills one with holy humble devotion
So that the impotence of the heart rings in song so beautifully before God
That God loves the notes
That sing in the Heart.
Whoever sings along with her
Shall share her success
In celestial love.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

It is the role of the choir, and music in general, to focus the individual’s mind on God. That it is the heart (rather than the throat) through which one offers up song suggests that Mechthild may

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Light} 6:9, 235-36. Das man die heligen eret mit schoener gehügenisse und mit aller der meine, so man haben mag in dem tage, als si got geret hat mit einem heligen ende, das ist in also wol ze danke, de si da gegenwirtig koment mit aller der herschaft, die si von vromekeit enpfangen habent. Das sach ich werlich an Sante Maria Magdalena tag, do man got erte mit lobelichem sange, vmb die grosse ere die si ze lone hat enpfangen. Si schrikete in dem kore nach dem heligen sange und si sach einem jeglichen senger in die ogen und si trat (hin) und sprach: Alle die jene, die min ende eren, zuo der ende wil ich komen, und ich wil si wider eren; alles nach dem als si moegen enpfan, so wil ich ïn ze statten gan” (184-85).

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Light} 7:36, 306. “Die sangmeisterinne, de is die hoffunge, / Ervület mit heliger, diemuetiger andaht, / De des herzen vmaht / In dem sange vor gotte so schoene clingen, / De got die noten minnet, die in dem herzen singen. / Der mit ir also singet, dem sol mit ir gelingen / In der himelschen minne” (250).
be speaking more of *musica humana* rather than *instrumentalis*, but certainly for her the role for music is purely one of contemplative prayer, rather than corporeal entertainment.

The final example of terrestrial singing is certainly the most colorful, and it provides a warning to those musicians who use their talents for the wrong purposes. In a chapter that is an allusion to Augustine’s *City of God*, and which is just as vivid as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* would be decades later, 128 Mechthild describes a vision she had of the city of Hell. As in Dante’s work, the law of *contrapasso* is used to humorous and frightening effect. In addition to such imagery as Lucifer swallowing sodomites whole (who then live in his belly until he coughs, and they are vomited forth), hideously kissing false prophets, copulating with the unchaste, and stringing up thieves to serve as lights for the city, Mechthild describes what happens to purveyors of frivolous music: “The bitterly poor minstrel who with high spirit can excite to sinful frivolity weeps in hell more tears than all the water contained in the sea.” 129 Although she singles out the performer, Mechthild does not describe what happens to listeners of courtly music; one presumes they also are subjected to an appropriate punishment. This statement clearly acknowledges music’s power; as in Plato’s *Republic*, the singer is recognized as having the ability to direct the minds and hearts of listeners in a variety of directions. Although (or perhaps because) she relies on the style of courtly poetry for her songs of praise, Mechthild is much less forgiving for those who do not use music in a way to get closer to God.

**Songs of Love and Praise**

Mechthild’s emphasis on songs of praise is similar to that in the writings of Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn. However, while these two rely mainly on references to the Office, the uncloistered Mechthild composes her own hymns. These are most remarkable for the vivid imagery she uses, and for the constant theme of love running throughout:

O noble Eagle, O sweet Lamb,

128 The question of a link between Dante and Mechthild is explored in Edmund Gardner, *Dante and the Mystics* (Oxford: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1913). Chronologically and geographically it is entirely possible that Dante would have had access to Mechthild’s *Light*. 129 *Light* 3:21, 129-30. “Der vil arme spilman, der mit hohem muote üntliche irlkeit machen kan, der weinet in der helle me trehnen, denne alles wassers si in dem mer” (84). In the endnotes to the English translation Frank Tobin notes that “high spirit” (hohem muote) is “a conventional term in courtly poetry which describes the feeling of exhilaration one should feel because one is a member of such a worthy society” (351, n.49).
O flaming Glōw set me on fire!
How long must I be so dry?
An hour is much too hard for me,
A day is like a thousand years
When you are of a mind
To be far away from me.
If it were to last eight days,
I would rather go down to hell –
I’m there already –
Rather than that God be away from the loving soul.
That is anguish beyond human dying
And beyond the torments of hell. Believe me!
The nightingale must ever sing,
For by nature it voices only melodies of love,
If that were taken from her, she would be dead.
Alas, great Lord, be mindful of my anguish! ¹³⁰

This example, one of two from a chapter entitled “Two songs of love of Him who was seen in love,” is notable for the earnestness in which Mechthild desires Christ’s presence. It is interesting that Mechthild makes a comparison between herself and the nightingale (understood to be the sweetest-singing of all of the birds); not only does she want to sing, Mechthild must sing, or else be overwhelmed by the lack of her spouse. This song of love no doubt serves some emotionally therapeutic purpose, but in Mechthild’s mind is primarily a chance to call her lover back to her.

The relative informality with which Mechthild addresses God might be surprising to a non-mystical individual. Even more so are the conversations she carries on with her lover. Unlike in the examples of Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn, in Mechthild’s writing these often take the form of sung dialogue:

[Mechthild:] “You shine into my soul
Like the sun against gold.
When I may rest in you, Lord,
My joy is rich.
You clothe yourself with my soul

And you are her most intimate garment.
That there must be a parting between them –
Never have I experienced greater heartache!
If you were to love me more intensely,
I would certainly pass away
To where I could love you as I wish unceasingly.
Now I have sung to you
And yet to no avail.
Were you to sing to me,
I would have to succeed.”

[God:] “When I shine, you shall glow.
When I flow, you shall become wet.
When you sigh, you draw my divine heart into you.
When you weep in longing for me, I take you in my arms.
But when you love, we two become one being.
And when we two are one being,
Then we can never be parted.
Rather, a blissful abiding
Prevails between us.”

[Mechthild:] “Lord, then I shall persevere in hunger and thirst
In pursuing and in pleasure
Till that playful hour
When from your divine mouth
The chosen words shall flow
That are heard by no one
But the soul alone
That has stripped itself of the earth
And puts her ear next to your mouth.
She, indeed, grasps the treasure of love!”

Once again Mechthild reaffirms the centrality of love in her mysticism, and she offers vibrant imagery concerning the union of herself and God. She also suggests that it is through singing that the soul and God conduct their communication; mere spoken words are insufficient. Even Mechthild’s description of the words of love “flowing” from God’s mouth is musical. There is also the suggestion that this communication is not achieved through physical sound; as in earlier discussions on the Sacred Heart, the music we are dealing with is *musica humana*.

A second example of the sort of dialogue interspersed throughout all seven books of the *Light* suggests that the soul has within itself a variety of songs:

[God:] “When you embrace the tree,
I shall teach you the song of the virgins –
The melody, the words, the dulcet sounds,
Which those cannot understand in the least
Who have led unchaste lives.
Still they shall receive sweet compensation.
Beloved, begin the song and let me hear how well you sing.”

[Mechthild:] “Alas, my dear Lover, I am hoarse in the throat of my chastity,
But the sugar of your sweet kindness
Has let my voice resound, so that I can now sing thus:
Lord, your blood and mine are one, untainted.
Your love and mine are one, inseparable.
Your garment and mine are one, immaculate.
Your mouth and mine are one, un kissed.
Your breast and mine are one, not caressed
By any man but you alone.”

These are the words of the song.
The voice of love and the melody of the heart must be left unrendered,
For they can be captured by no merely human hand.\(^{132}\)

---

\(^{132}\) *Light* 2:25, 95-96. “‘So du den bon vmuahest, so lere ich dich der megde sang, / Die wise, die worte, den suossen klang, / Den die eine an inen selben nút moegen verstan, / Den die eine an inen selben nút moegen verstan, / Die mit der vnkûsheit sint durgangen, / Si soellent doch suessen wandel han. / Liebû nu sing an und la hooren wie du es kanst.’ ‘O we, min vil lieber, ich bin heiser in den kelen miner kûsheit, / Mere das zukker dîner suessen miltekeit / Hat min kelen erschellet das ich nu singen mag, / Alsust, herre: Din bluot und min ist ein vnbewollen, / Din minne und minû ist ein vngeteilet, / Din kleit und min ist ein unbeveleket, / Din munt und miner ist ein vnkûst etc.’ ‘Dis sint dü wort des sanges der minne stimme, / Und der suesse herzeklang muesse bliben, / Wan de mag kein irdenschû hant geschriben.’” (52).
This imaginative example provides a clear link between physical human behavior (e.g., remaining a virgin) and the resultant song that the soul sings; just as in Gertrude’s writing jewels served as signifiers of good deeds, in Mechthild’s the task is accomplished by a beautiful melody. Not only this, but once again the melody flows from God; though it is Mechthild’s choice to remain inviolate, she does so for God’s honor, and God himself offers gifts to the soul accordingly. As none of Mechthild’s biographies makes any reference to her ever being married or committing acts of adultery, so her lament of hoarseness might be more poetical than based in reality. It is also fitting that this spiritual song cannot be written down by a human hand, as it exists on an entirely different plane.\footnote{133}

The last category of specific songs recorded in the \textit{Light} comprises hymns of praise offered up by the choirs of angels. Numerous medieval thinkers created schemes of the heavenly choirs, and many based their works on one of the earliest angelology books, the \textit{De Coelesti Hierarchia} of the fifth-century author, Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite. The Dionysian scheme features nine ranks of angels divided into triads; from highest to lowest these are: 1. Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; 2. Dominations, Virtues, and Potentates; 3. Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.\footnote{134} While Mechthild does not specifically name any of the orders of angels, she does rely on a tiered structure (with clearly differentiated highest and lowest ranks). Furthermore, Mechthild’s references to the choirs of angels are remarkable for their consistency. Considering an example from early in the \textit{Light}, the nine choirs sing different lines:

\begin{itemize}
\item We praise you, Lord, that you sought us in your humility.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have kept us in your mercy.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have glorified us in your humility.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have provided for us in your generosity.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have arranged us in rank in your wisdom.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have shielded us with your might.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have sanctified us with your nobility.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have instructed us in your intimacy.
\item We praise you, Lord, that you have elevated us in your love.\footnote{135}
\end{itemize}

\footnote{133} Though it was probably unintended, the last portion of this passage calls to mind the (apocryphal) story of Pope Gregory the Great receiving chants from the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. In this instance, however, Gregory was able to record both the words and the melodies.\footnote{134} For more details see \textit{The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite}, John Parker, trans., (London: James Parker, 1897).\footnote{135} \textit{Light} 1:6, 45. “Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast gesuchet mir diner demütikeit: / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast behalten mit diner barmherzekeit. / Wir loben dich herre das du
In terms of musical meaning, there is little from this example alone. It is important, though, that although the first choir begins by describing God’s humility, the last (and presumably greatest) sentiment is that of love. It is also noteworthy that, with some elaboration, Mechthild relies on the same general message decades later, in the last book of her *Light*:

The first choir sings: “We praise you, Lord, because of your glorious law from which have come forth all here present whose likenesses appear on your crown.”
The second choir: “We praise you, Lord, with the faith of Abraham and with the fervent longing and prophecies of all the prophets.”
The third choir: “We praise you, Lord, with all the wisdom and piety of all your apostles.”
The fourth choir: “We praise you, Lord, with the blood and the constancy of all your martyrs.”
The fifth choir: “We praise you, Lord, for the holy prayer and Christian teaching of all the baptists and confessors.”
The sixth choir: “We praise you, Lord, with the steadfastness of the penitence of your widows.”
The seventh choir: “We praise you, Lord, with all the chastity of all virgins.”
The eighth choir: “We praise you, Lord, with the fruit of your mother and virgin.”
The ninth choir: “We praise you, Lord, for your holy death and your glorious life after your death, and for your great outpouring of every gift and every goodness with which, Lord, you have raised us up and admirably ranked us. We praise you, Lord, with your fiery love in which you have made us one.”

uns hast geheret mit diner smahheit. / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast gefueret mit diner miltekeit. / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast geordent mit diner wisheit. / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast beschirmet mit diner gewalt. / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast gehelget mit diner edelkeit. / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast gewisset mit diner heimlichkeit. / Wir loben dich herre das du uns hast gehoehet mit diner minne” (8). In a later book (3:1) Mechthild returns to the choirs, naming the predominant virtue of each level (e.g., in the first choir it is bliss; in the second, meekness; in the third, charm; etc.; and in the last it is a burning love).

Even more than the previous example, here the order of sung praise begins at the moment of creation, and once again ends with God’s love. Mechthild’s reason for breaking the general chronological order of events around the sixth choir is uncertain, although her emphasis on women of the church (particularly virgins – see the “song of virgins” discussed above) provides a counterbalance to the power of the aforementioned patriarchy and suggests the importance she ascribes to women of the Church. As for a deeper meaning, this excerpt comes in the middle of a passage describing God’s coronation of Christ after the Last Judgment Day. The focus of the preceding few pages is Christ’s crown (e.g., it has three arches, which represent the patriarchs, the prophets, and Holy Christianity; the faces of all people who are destined to be saved are emblazoned on one of these three arches, depending on their stations, etc.). In a sense, this song is offered up to an object, the crown, unlike Gertrude’s songs about the Sacred Heart or even Mechthild’s personal dialogues with God. Of course, it is ultimately God who is praised in all instances, but the variety of paths to praising him is appropriately diverse.

**Musical Instrument Imagery**

Although the majority of musical references in Mechthild’s work relate to singing, musical instruments play an appreciable role. By far Mechthild’s interest lies in string music, and particularly multi-stringed instruments like harps and lyres (once again readers are reminded of Mechthild of Hackeborn’s use of the instruments found in the psalms). Alternately, some commentators have noted that the act of playing stringed instruments requires proper proportion and harmony (both in the measurement of the strings and in oneself), that the way strings are

---

137 In the entire *Light* there is only one example of the use of percussion. Relating a vision which simultaneously serves as an allegory for Christianity, Mechthild begins with a stone (signifying Christ): “Upon the stone there stood the most beautiful of virgins that was ever seen [...] She carries in her right hand a chalice filled with red wine, which she drinks alone in untold bliss. The angels never get a taste of it. The wine is the blood of the eternal Son, which fills her spirit so full that she gives us many a sweet teaching. In her left hand she wields a fiery sword that is full of golden cymbals hanging from it that sound so sweet that everyone must approach her who strives towards the Holy Trinity. I asked the virgin why it was that she carried the sword in her left hand and the chalice in her right hand. She said: ‘I am supposed to threaten because on the last day of each human being God shall strike his blow. I am also supposed to give away his blood with my right hand, just as Christ is turned to his Father in glory.” (*Light* 4:3, 144-5). This admixture of enticing sweetness (cymbals) and threat (sword) serves as a reminder that although God is loving, he will also serve as a judge of souls.
stretched between two polar opposites represents the hermetic wedding of soul to spirit, and that to create the strings in the first place requires an animal sacrifice (symbolic of a human sacrificing her life to serve God). Before drawing any conclusions, it is first necessary to consider the ways in which Mechthild uses stringed instruments. It is noteworthy that, despite her limited instrumentarium, Mechthild’s instrumental references appear in a variety of contexts, and range from simple comparisons to deep, philosophical considerations of the structure of the universe. Beginning with the surface-level usages, Mechthild occasionally describes instruments as sources of pleasing sounds; such is the case when God, applauding Mechthild’s fervent desire to praise him, says,

Oh, dear dove,
Your voice is string music to my ears.
Your words are spices for my mouth.
Your longings are the lavishness of my gift.

The same idea returns a couple of books later, again with God celebrating with delight the goodness of the loving soul:

You are a light to my eyes;
You are a lyre to my ears;
You are a voice for my words;
You are a projection of my piety;
You are an honor to my wisdom;
You are a life living in me;
You are a praise in my being.

In both instances, strings are represented as a beautiful (and positive) source of music. Interestingly, in the first example this string music is emphasized as particularly sensual (akin to the taste of aromatic spices), while even in the second God refers to the lyre as pleasing his ears. Given Mechthild’s aversion to the physical body, it is curious that she would choose to dwell

---

139 *Light* 1:2, 41. “Eya, du liebú tube, din stimme ist ein seistspil minen oren; dine wort sint wutzen minem munde, dine gerunge sint die miltekeit miner gabe” (5).
141 The context of the first passage is fascinating: God has raised Mechthild’s soul up into heaven, so that “just the tiniest bit of her life force remains with the body as in a sweet sleep” (an appropriate comparison might be to the experience of astral travel). After enjoying heaven,
on corporeal aspects of music. Of course, this might be an example of a spiritual use (or appropriation) of music, contrasting with the frivolous minstrel consigned to hell.

While a human has many musical aspects (from the voice, which sings in praise, to the soul, which pleases in its goodness), the divinity also possesses a musical nature. For instance, Mechthild describes how,

> When my Lord comes, I take leave of myself;  
> For he brings me so many sweet strains with his strings  
> That it stops all impulses of my flesh.  
> And his strings are so full of all sweetness  
> With them he relieves me of all interior suffering.  

In this instance God appears in the dual role of musician and spiritual physician. This therapeutic, almost magical, medicine for the soul is so strong that once again Mechthild’s soul is separated from her body; music is used to overcome physical desires and constraints. Furthermore, the music is capable of placing Mechthild in harmony with herself. It is curious that while Mechthild describes God (presumably) playing on an instrument, there is no mention of his voice; neither does the passage identify the origin of the instrument upon which God plays.

Later passages in the *Light* gradually illuminate the questions raised by the above example. For instance, in book 3 Mechthild describes a vision wherein she overheard a conversation among the three members of the Trinity at the beginning of creation. At first, Mechthild explains, there was nothing but the Godhead:

> Then the Holy Spirit in his superabundance played for the Father, striking upon (schluog vf) the Holy Trinity, and said to him: “Lord, dear Father I shall give you out of yourself generous advice. We no longer wish to go on thus, not bearing fruit. We shall have a created kingdom and you shall form the angels in my image so they are one spirit with me. For, dear Father, that alone is true joy, that in great love and infinite happiness one gather them in your sight.”

Mechthild protests that she must go back to her body, where, she believes, she is unable to praise God fully (and instead must spend her energy fighting against the desires of the flesh). The revulsion Mechthild shows to the body is almost Gnostic.

---

142 *Light* 2:2, 70. In the original German it is book 2, chapter 3: “Swenne min herre kunt, so kum ich von mir selben, / Wan er bringet mir so mangen suessen seitenklang, / Sas mir benimet allen mines fleisches wank, / Und sin seitenspil ist so vol aller suessekeit, / Damit er mir benimet alles herzeleit” (27).

The passage goes on to describe the Father’s response, the creation of the angels, the fall of Lucifer, the creation and fall of Adam, the Son’s willingness to redeem mankind, and the Incarnation. Ignoring the fascinating (but for purposes of this thesis, extraneous) theological implications regarding the discussion among the various members of the Trinity, what is most important is that the Godhead is conceived of as a large instrument, and that there is an inherently musical element to communication among the various members. Imagine, for instance, a psaltery. All the strings are intimately related: a sound produced by striking one string is amplified and reflected by the sounding-board so that it fills the entire instrument and causes sympathetic vibrations. In the same way the act of striking begins a long dialogue wherein the various members of the Trinity discuss the future of the universe. Furthermore, once again we have music associated with the emotion of love. In this case, it is overwhelming love for all elements of creation, even those not yet formed (later in the passage Christ notes that he wishes to make man in his image, and will love man forever despite great tragedy in the future).

The image of the macrocosmic God as an instrument has its microcosmic correspondence in the form of the human soul. At numerous points in her Light Mechthild describes (with phraseology reminiscent of the psalms) the beneficent effect of God’s presence:

When my enemies pursue me,  
I flee to your arms  
Where I can complain about my suffering  
While you incline yourself to me.  
You well know how you can set in motion  
The strings of my soul.  
Ah, begin at once  
That you may be ever blessed.  

In this instance the string music serves as the comforting product of a protective and almost maternal God; the relationship here is as between a parent and child. We also have the image of
God allowing Mechthild’s soul to serve as a source of music, where at first it was disturbed by worldly events. Since the implication is that the strings of Mechthild’s soul were silent during her suffering, music is linked to a (spiritually) pleasurable state.

Given the number of references to stringed instruments and God acting in the role of a musician, it would be surprising if Mechthild did not mention examples of tuning in her *Light*. This element of music is introduced immediately following the above quotation, when God responds to Mechthild’s plea:

- You well know I must hold back my might
  - And hide my splendor
  - To let you remain in earthly misery
  - Until all my sweetness rises up
  - To the heights of eternal glory,
  - And my strings shall sound sweetly for you
  - In tune with the true value of your patient love.
- Still, before I begin,
- I want to tune my heavenly strings in your soul,
- So that you might persevere even longer.
- For well-born brides and noble knights
- Must undergo a long and intensive preparation at great cost.\(^{146}\)

It has been shown earlier that God’s strings (in one manifestation or another) stretch throughout the universe. Here there are two settings where the strings sound: in Heaven, and on Earth (i.e., through an individual’s soul). The heavenly noise is by far the more glorious, but God is also able to relieve some of the suffering Mechthild faces on Earth by giving her a foretaste. Additionally, this passage more than any of the others reveals the intimacy of the relationship between Mechthild the mystic and her God. Once again, it is made clear that for the music to sound, the instruments must be tuned to the standard of love. In a sense, Mechthild’s use of references to string instruments are analogous to Gertrude’s to the Sacred Heart: both involve the joining (but not the loss of individual identity) of God and the visionary nun into one greater whole.

A final example, which conveniently serves to unify a number of elements already discussed in this section, is a vision wherein Mechthild observes the harmony of creation:

The Godhead rings,
Humanity sings,
The Holy Spirit plays the lyre of the heavens
So that all strings resound
That are strung in love.  

Rich in musical significance, this passage is one among all those discussed so far, where Mechthild’s universe most closely resembles the Platonic harmony of the spheres. As an uneducated laywoman it is uncertain whether, or to what extent, Mechthild was acquainted with Boethius or the ancient philosophers (though she might have learned the idea from others, including the nuns of Helfta). Nevertheless, Platonic image may be helpful to understand what Mechthild means by “harp of the heavens.” At the very least, this phrase implies a unified vision of the universe, just as the multiple parts of a harp (strings, pegs, and pieces of wood) are joined to create a single entity. While Plato’s universe is constructed out of mathematical ratios, Mechthild again returns to love as the force that undergirds all of creation. The brief poem also recapitulates the inherent musicality of both God (who, sounding like a bell, flows into all souls) and humans (who sing songs of praise). Finally, in this example (and all the ones previous), Mechthild never refers to the “strings of the body;” when discussing the physical it is the voice, rather than an instrument, which produces music.

Music in Visions

Though they have been alluded to in passing frequently in the previous sections, the final portion of this chapter will consider a couple of extended examples regarding music in Mechthild’s visions. Unlike the other Helfta mystics, the preponderance of Mechthild’s visions come at unspecified times of the day (rather than during the Mass or the Office). However, this does not mean that she was uninfluenced by the religious services: in addition to composing lists of prayers that might be said at each of the canonical hours, Mechthild occasionally describes

148 See Light 1:30 and 7:18. The only reference outside of this vision to the music of the Mass comes at a point where Mechthild describes the tribulation accompanying the Apocalypse and
the heavenly celebration of the Mass. An example of this comes when, prevented from attending Mass due to an illness, she prayed to God, and he responded by bringing her to a heavenly Mass. She had a vision of a beautiful church, various saints, and St. John the Baptist, who was the celebrant. She also saw three groups of souls in increasingly beautiful states of dress, denoting those who converted on their deathbeds, those who led virtuous lives, and those who were virgins, respectively:

The poor girl [Mechthild] was wretchedly clothed and was physically ill. She was not able to remain in any of the three groups. So she went and stood in front of the choir and looked in to where our dear Lady was standing on the highest level. St. Catherine, Cecilia, bishops, martyrs, angels, and a large number of virgins were there. The poor thing looked at the imposing throng and then looked at herself. Did she dare stay there in her wretched condition? Suddenly she was wearing a deep red mantle woven out of love in proportion to the ardor of her faculties for God and all good things. The mantle was decorated with gold and also with a song that went: “I would willingly die of love.” She saw that she was a noble maiden and wore on her head a garland of splendid gold. On it was inscribed another song that went:

His eyes into my eyes,
His heart into my heart,
His soul into my soul
Untiringly enclosed.

And her countenance resembled that of the angels. “Alas, foul puddle that I am, what is happening to me? Unfortunately I am not nearly as blessed as I saw myself there.”

the Antichrist: “The good separate from the evil and risk their bodies and all that they have. The Antichrist’s messengers arrive there and, first of all, stab the holy preacher with an iron pole because of his Christian faith. God’s dear friend must hang there writing in front of the children of God. Thus do they carry the holy man impaled between them for all the world to see. The evil ones laugh, the good weep. And he sings with the voice of the Holy Spirit: ‘Credo in deum,’ and he consoles and calls out: ‘Follow me, ye holy children of God!’” All who then follow him are captured, have their eyes bound, are struck with scourges, [and ultimately martyred]” (Light 4:27, 173-74). “So gat es an die not, so scheident sich die guoten vs den boesen, und verwegent sich des libes und alles des dc si hant. So komment des endecristes boten dar und durstechent allererste den heligen predier dur sine cristane lere mit einer isenstangen; da muos der gottestrüt an hangen und winden zuo den armen gotteskinden. So tragent si in denne zuschient in gespisset, den heligen man für alle die welt gemeine; die guoten weinent. So singet er mit des heligen geistes stimme: Credo in deum, und troestet und rueffet: Volgent mir, helige gotteskindere. Alle, die im denne volgent die werdent gevangen, und ir ogen verbunden, und werdent mit geiselen geschlagen [...]” (124-25).

149 Light 2:4, 73-75. “Die arme dirne was übel gekleidet, und was krank am live, und bi den drin scharen mohte si niena blihen. Do gieng si für den kor stan und sach hinin, wa unser liebü frowe stuont in der hoehsten stat, und sant Katharina, Cecilia, bischowe, martere, engele und megde
Mechthild’s vision fits into a general pattern explored above with the later mystics: the richness of heaven, the soul’s unworthiness, the intercession of saints/holy figures, etc. The passage continues with a description of the liturgy: Mechthild’s confession, her offering of her self-will to Christ, and the Communion. It is noteworthy that Mechthild gives the Introit of the Mass: *Gaudeamus omnes in domino*, and the gospel: the *Liber generationis*. The former is a chant initially sung as the introit for the Feast of St. Agatha, but it appears in modified form for many feast days of the Virgin Mary (e.g., the Assumption, Our Lady of Good Counsel, etc.), All Saints’ Day, and for other saints. Mechthild does not specify the particular feast, so it is difficult to know which Introit is the relevant one. Meanwhile, the latter is the genealogical first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and is read on the day of Mary’s Nativity (and as an alternate reading for Christmas Day). Given these details, a reasonable supposition is that the Introit is meant to relate to one of the Marian feast days. These specific references indicate the centrality of the Virgin Mary to this passage; indeed it is interesting that Mechthild, who often sings to God in private, here uses Mary as an intermediary. (In this she foreshadows the practice of the later Helfta mystics.) As for the two songs, the main feature for this discussion is the extent to which they reinforce Mechthild’s desire for union with the divine (a theme found in an altered form in the discussion of God tuning his strings in her soul). Whereas at other times Mechthild uses the imagery of a musician singing or playing an instrument, here there is a sense of God entering into her being.

At times Mechthild’s visions are especially charming. This is the case when she laments to God that the two things she desires most, leading a faithful, spiritual life and having a holy end to it as soon as possible, have not yet been accomplished. God responds by granting her a vision of a frail, insignificant little animal, which represents humanity. What follows is a complete bestiary of a spiritual person, of which I have extract the more musical elements:

---

harte vil. Do dirre arme mensche dise grosse herschaft gesach, do sach si och sich selven eb si bliiben getoerste vor in snoedekeit. Do hatte si vmbe einen roten brunen mantel, der was gemachet von der minne und nach der brunekeit der sinne, nach Gotte und nach allen guoten dingen. Der mantel was gezieret mit golde und och mit einem liebe; das sang alsust: Ich sturbe gerne von minnen. Si sach sich och einer edeln junefrowen glich und trug vf irem hobet ein schapel von golde herlich, daran was geleit aber ein liet, de sang alsust: Sin ogen in min ogen, sin herze in min herze / Sin sele in min sele / Vmbevangen und unverdrossen. / Und ir antlút sach sich selben den engeln glich. / O we, ich unselig phuol, wie is mir nu geschehen. / Joch bin ich leider so selig nit, / Als ich mich da han gesehen” (31-32).
Then I saw how this animal was brought forth on an island in the sea out of the slime that had separated from the sea between the hot sun and the water in such a way that the sun was the animal’s father, the sea its mother, and the slime its matter. [...] This animal does not eat. Rather, it has a large tail that is full of honey. This it sucks on every day. It also has a golden beard that rings so delightfully when it is sucking that its sweet voice and cheerful sound echo playfully in its heart; and its body is nourished by drinking the sweet honey. This tail is the death of holy people, which they cheerfully and prudently keep before their eyes in their good works and constant practice of virtue, and they joyfully practice faithfulness in patient waiting. The golden beard is God’s noble love that chimes through the loving heart into the noble soul. Fortunate is he to have become a human being who ever really experiences this! [...] This animal has big ears. They are exposed to the heavens, and it listens for the song of birds. It flees vicious animals and fears the snakes of the earth. This, indeed, is also what the loving soul does. It constantly flees evil company and detests false wisdom, and its ears are wide open to hear God’s wisdom. [...] The animal has a soft mouth and a pure tongue [...] The large part of our mouth is the unrestrained praise that we should offer to God in the company of all creatures in all our actions and in all things at all times. The lower part of our mouth is all too ready to speak about the sinful earth. [...] This animal is swift of foot and has no voice. It is quiet by nature. The soul in rapture has this same nature: at the height of love she is both swift and at rest. The golden beard of the animal returns to the theme of musical instruments, only here God’s love enters into the soul by passing through the heart, rather than by any playing on the strings of the soul. (Elsewhere in her book Mechthild refers to the heart as the seat of the soul.) It is 

---

curious that Mechthild does not say that the sounds of the chimes pass through the ears; her words imply that God’s music is more rarefied than physical sound. Considering that soon after she describes the large ears of the creature and the song of birds, it seems as though Mechthild recognizes two “musics,” the emotion of love felt by the soul, and the (lesser) knowledge of God’s commandments/laws/orders of the church understood by the body and mind. The other curious element of this passage is Mechthild’s insistence that the majority of the mouth is designed for praise, and yet the creature has no voice. This might contribute to a similar argument that praise is not meant to be spoken (i.e., should be on a higher plane), or, more likely, serves as an admonition for the soul to demonstrate meekness and calmness.

**Conclusions**

Though this chapter has considered only a portion of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s writings pertaining to music, it is possible to identify the main features running through her *Light*. Among these is the centrality of singing songs of praise to God (either directly, or indirectly by praising the saints). Humans, angels, and the rest of creation all participate in this universal choir. Mechthild herself often composes her own songs of praise, rather than relying on established chants. Furthermore, communication at the higher, spiritual level is usually conducted via musical means: Mechthild has poetic, sung dialogues with God, the various members of the Trinity communicate as if they were playing a lyre, etc. On a related note, while singing has primacy in Mechthild’s world, the image of God playing the strings of the soul is a recurring image. Finally, Mechthild recognizes that music may serve either a spiritual or a corporeal function; in line with her anti-physical bias, she praises the first while rejecting the second as the work of the devil. Nevertheless, Mechthild recognizes that ultimately all music comes from God.
CHAPTER 5
MUSIC AND THE BROADER MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

While the preceding chapters have considered each mystic more or less by herself, this final chapter will describe some of the characteristics common to all three women, as well as important moments where their experiences differ. Following this will be a consideration of some of the more pertinent scholarship concerning the larger theological and sociological aspects of thirteenth-century mysticism. The purpose for including this information here is to demonstrate how a specifically musical analysis may be used to provide evidence for or against some of the more prominent modern theories on medieval female mysticism.

Similarities and Differences

The first element to consider is the Helfta mystics’ use of music vis-à-vis each other. The similarities among the three mystics are extensive. Foremost of these is the centrality of love in each of their experiences: divine love for all of creation, an individual’s love for God, love humans express for other humans, etc. Love undergirds all of the uses of music in the three mystics’ writings, as demonstrated in these next two examples. First, a direct outgrowth of this uncontainable love is the frequent picture of the mystic (in this case Gertrude) singing songs of praise to God:

May my heart and soul with all my fleshly being and all the powers and sense of my body and spirit, together with the whole of creation, give praise and thanks to you, sweetest Lord, most faithful Lover of man’s salvation, which could not have succeeded in hiding from your love the fact that over and over again I was not afraid to approach the most excellent banquet of your sacred body and blood without due preparation, had not the ineffable abyss of your generosity toward me, the most worthless and useless of your instruments, deigned to grant me, in addition to all your other gifts, the following.  

Secondly, the power of love can be seen in the desire for each mystic to form as close a union with God as possible. Music is often a facilitator of this individual connection. Here one may turn to one of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s dialogues discussed earlier:

“Alas, my dear Lover, I am hoarse in the throat of my chastity,

151 Herald 2:20, 121; Doyère, vol. 2, 308. For the original text of this example (and subsequent examples cited in the conclusion), the reader is directed to the first appearance of the quote in a previous chapter.
But the sugar of your sweet kindness
Has let my voice resound, so that I can now sing thus:
Lord, your blood and mine are one, untainted.
Your love and mine are one, inseparable [...]]152

There are additional similarities in the writings of the three Helfta mystics: as has been demonstrated frequently above, music (and in particular liturgical chant) often serves as the initial impetus for visionary experiences. While singing is the most prominent and valued example of music, instruments, particularly string instruments, also appear, either for aesthetic or symbolic reasons. In the case of singing, sometimes extra emphasis is placed on the words of a chant. For instance, when Gertrude makes the effort to repeat some prayers at Matins (even though she is ill) for the benefit of a sister who joined her, later in the day she has a vision:

During Mass it seemed to her that she saw her soul very marvelously adorned with precious jewels and shining with a wonderful brightness. Divinely instructed, she understood that she had merited this adornment because she had humbly and charitably recited again with the younger nun that part of Matins which she had recited before, and that the shining ornaments were equal in number to the words she had thus repeated.153

However, this is not to mean that music and words were dissociated, and Gertrude also makes reference to the power melody had over her:

One feast-day, when she was prevented from singing by a bad headache, she asked the Lord why he so often let this happen to her on a feast-day. She received this reply: “Lest perchance you are carried away by the pleasure of singing the sacred melody and become less receptive of grace.”154

Instrumental music is as equally moving as singing. However, it appears more in the roles of denoting beauty or representing the love God and the mystics have for each other. Thus God says to Mechthild of Magdeburg:

“You are a light to my eyes;
You are a lyre to my ears;

152 Light 2:25, 95; Morel, 53.
You are a voice for my words”  

And she says of Him:

When my Lord comes, I take leave of myself;  
For he brings me so many sweet strains with his strings  
That it stops all impulses of my flesh.  
And his strings are so full of all sweetness  
With them he relieves me of all interior suffering.  

Music even links together all levels of creation: not only do the choirs of angels and deceased saints in heaven sing praises to God, as demonstrated above in numerous visions, the Mass serves as a unifying element for the denizens of heaven and earth.

Another similarity among the Helfta mystics is the interest in the concept of the Sacred Heart of Christ; both Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn refer directly to it, while Mechthild of Magdeburg uses related imagery. It is unsurprising, given the emphasis the nuns placed on bridal imagery and union with the divine, that the veneration of the Sacred Heart was especially popular at St. Mary’s. As Winkworth notes, the interest in the Sacred Heart stems from an understanding that it is the site of the union of Christ’s divinity and humanity; likewise, it is a means of unifying God and humankind. These relationships may be seen in a number of examples. For instance, in one of Mechthild of Hackeborn’s visions,

She saw a harp of many strings come out from the divine heart. The harp was our Lord Jesus; the harp strings were all of the chosen souls who are all one in God through love. Then the high cantor of all cantors, our Lord Jesus, struck the harp, and with a pleasing sound all of the angels intoned this song in sweet tones: *Regem regum etc.*

Mechthild of Hackeborn also describes how the union of these various levels of the cosmos is effected through the harmony of the Sacred Heart:

“The Godhead rings,  
Humanity sings,

---

155 Light 3:2, 107-108; Morel, 62.  
156 Light 2:2, 70; Morel, 27.  
157 Winkworth, 34-35. The heart has played an important role in a number of other philosophies and esoteric systems from ancient times through to the present day; one of the most famous is the case of the seventeenth-century magus Robert Fludd, who placed the heart at the middle of his cosmic monochord diagrams. Here, too, the heart was seen as the site of the balance of opposites, the site where the influences of the divine and the mundane were present in equal proportion.

158 Booke 2:2, 334; Liber 2:2, 139.
The Holy Spirit plays the harp of the heavens
So that all strings resound
That are strung in love.”

Finally, it should be noted that the Sacred Heart also appears at some of the most intimate moments between the mystic and God. Gertrude describes one conversation between herself and the divinity where God said:

“Just as you stretch out your hand when you want to take hold of something and, when you have taken it, you draw it back towards you; so, languishing for love of you (Song 2:5), when you are distracted by exterior things, I stretch out my heart to you to draw you to myself; and, again, when, your inmost thoughts harmonizing [consentiendo] with mine, you recollect yourself, and again attend to me, then I draw back my heart again, and you with it, into myself, and from it I offer you the pleasure of all its many virtues.”

In all of these cases the Sacred Heart serves as a source of love binding creation together.

In addition to these similarities, many of which are admittedly very general, Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn share some deeper connections, one might say of an “intellectual” nature, not found in the work of Mechthild of Magdeburg. This is unsurprising for a number of reasons: the two were of the same generation, spent almost all of their lives behind the convent’s walls, had access to the same books/teachers/advisors, had the same experiences, and were close friends who comforted and encouraged each other. With regard to their discussions of music, first of all, both Gertrude and Mechthild are fond of layering meaning in their texts through the citation of a number of chants and Biblical verses. These citations work in two ways. The first is by creating a web of correspondences where the citations enhance the meaning of the mystic’s message. The earlier discussion of Mechthild’s experience during the tract Vinea facta est is one example, where Mechthild takes verses from Isaiah and uses them as background context for her own vision:

159 Light 2:3, 71; Morel, 28.
160 Herald 3:26, 190. “Quemadmodum tu volens apprehendere aliquam rem, extendis manum tuam, et tum apprehenso quod volevas, retrahis eam ad te; sic ego amore languens post te, cum tu ad extiora converteris, ego Cor meum ad attrahendum te mihi extendo; et iterum, cum tu mihi consentiendo in intimis ad intendendum mihi te recolligis, ego denuo Cor meum tecum in me retrahendo, ex ipso praebeo tibi omnigenarum virtutum oblectamentum” (vol. 3, 122).
And when they sang the tract *Vinea facta est*, this maiden, with great love in her soul, spoke to our Lord thus: “Oh Lord, if it would please you I would that I might offer my heart to you as a chosen vine after your heart and your will for all time.” Our Lord said to her again: “All that you desire I may perform.” And then she saw a spiritual [gostelye] vision our Lord within her heart, walking about as in an entirely beautiful vineyard; around the border was a multitude of angels standing together as thickly as a stone wall.

A similar example from Gertrude’s text, where the nun references Biblical imagery in order to enhance her own dialogue with God, is as follows:

> You, the splendor and crown of celestial glory (cf. Wisd. 18:14; 1 Thess. 2:19,20), seemed to be descending, softly and gently, from the royal throne of your majesty; and through this condescension there flows across the heavens such a flood of sweetness that all the saints, bowing down in gladness, quench their thirst with joy (cf. Is. 12:3) at the torrents of pleasure (Ps. 35:9), waters sweet as nectar, breaking into melodious songs of praise of the divine glory. Meantime, I heard you say: ‘Consider how harmoniously these desirable praises strike the ears of my majesty, reaching the most intimate recesses of my loving heart, causing it to melt.’

The other way in which the two nuns use citations is through the contemplative process of *lectio divina*. After considering the surface meaning of a text, they will meditate on individual words or phrases, and (usually with the help of divine inspiration) uncover deeper meanings. Gertrude describes this sort of meditation:

> During the Mass *Veni et ostende* [Saturday of the third week of Advent] the Lord appeared, all mellifluous, as it were, with the sweetness of divine grace, breathing forth his divine and life-giving breath as he descended from his high throne of imperial glory as though to flood more plenteously those who were desirous of his divine grace, for the sweet feast of his Nativity. […]

In [the Matins of the Second Sunday of] Advent, at the responsory *Ecce veniet Dominus protector noster, sanctus Israel*, she understood that if someone applies himself with all his heart to desire that his whole life will be governed, in prosperity and adversity, according to the most laudable will of God, then by such thoughts, with God’s grace, he would be giving as much honor to God as one would give to an emperor in placing the imperial crown on his head. […]

On the Feast of Several Martyrs, while they were singing the antiphon ‘The glorious blood...,’ [*Viri sancti gloriosum*] she realized that although blood is in itself an unpleasant thing, it is praised in Scripture because it is shed for Christ; similarly, the neglect of religious duties, for motives of obedience or fraternal charity, pleases God so much that it too might well be termed glorious.

---

162 *Herald* 2:19, 120; Doyère, vol. 2, 304.
163 *Herald* 3:30, 192-193. “Inter Missam *Veni et ostende* apparuit Dominus quasi totus melleus dulcedine diviniae gratiae, vivificum atque divinum de se dans spiramentum, dimittensque se de sublimi solio imperialis gloriae suae quasi ad infundendum copiosius cuilibet desiderani divinae
Mechthild relates many similar situations:

One time she was called by holy grace to our Lord, that is to say to holy contemplation of heavenly things. She saw that Love went all about the consistory (which was a place of judgement where God sat in majesty) in the likeness of a beautiful maiden, singing the verse *Gyrum celi circuivi sola* [Eccl. 24:8] or “I alone have gone around the circle of heaven.” By these words she understood how only Love had brought under her power the might of the divine majesty; and that Love had made knowable the inscrutable wisdom of God; and that Love held out all the blessed goodness of God; and that Love utterly overcame the sternness of divine righteousness, transforming it into tranquility and gentleness. And so Love bowed down the Lord of majesty to the exile of our wretched need.\(^{164}\)

Additionally, both Gertrude and Mechthild use their experiences of the entire Divine Office in their writing, be it through chant citations, quotes of psalms, descriptions of their experiences in Matins/Vespers/etc., or references to this highly structured daily regimen:

---

\(^{164}\)“Also in a tyme wene sche was callede be grace fulle holilye to owre lorde Ihesu, that es to saye to hoolye contemplacioun of hevenlye thynges, to here semynge sche sawe that loove wente alle abowte the consistorye, whiche was a place offe iugemente where the maieste of God was sette, in the lykenesse of a fulle fayre maydene syngynge this veerse: *Gyrum celi circuivi sola.* That es to saye: I allone haffe goo abowte the ceerkille of hevene, in whiche wordes sche hadde knowynge howe oonlye luffe hadde brought vnder to here the myght of the devyne maieste, ande that luffe hadde mayde symple the inscrutable wysdoome of God, ande that luffe hellede owte alle the blessede goodesesse off God, and that luffe vterlye overcome the rygoure of the devyne ryghtwysnes ande torneide itt into esynesse ande softenesse. Ande soo luffe bowedowne the lorde of maieste to the exile of oure myscheuouse neede” *Booke* 2:35, 390-391. “Amor vero in specie virginis pulcherrimae consistorium circuibat decantans: *Gyrum celi circuivi sola* (Eccl. 24:8). In quibus verbis agnovit qualiter solus amor divinae majestatis omnipotentiam sibi subegit, ejusque inscrutabilem sapientiam quasi infatuavit, et dulcissimam bonitatem ejus totam effudit, et illum divinae justitiae rigorem omnino devincens et in mansuetudinem convertens, ad nostrae miseriae exilium Dominum majestatis inclinavit” (*Liber* 2:35, 180-181).
When through infirmity she was unable to take part in the choral Office, she often went to the Choir to hear the Hours, so that at least thus she might exercise her body in the service of God.\textsuperscript{165}

Indeed, Mechthild in particular (and Gertrude, in her \textit{Spiritual Exercises}) is explicit about describing appropriate sets of chants and prayers to say as part of one’s devotional practices.

This maiden, by God’s divine communication [inspyracion] had this showing of devotion in saying the hours of the day, and said thus: “Whoever will devoutly say the hours as ordained by the holy Church should say them with these three observances. First, in the beginning of the hours until he comes to the psalms, a man should worship the deepness of Christ’s meekness with praising in his heart [...] Therefore out of reverence of that meekness a man should incline or bow his heart before the psalms, and among the psalms he should worship the high wisdom of God, which was gladly conversant with men and educated man with wholesome words and teachings.”\textsuperscript{166}

Thus, both nuns take on the roles of teachers or spiritual guides to their readers, positions they also filled in life.

Unlike Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn, Mechthild of Magdeburg spent most of her life living in the world as a beguine (rather than being cloistered), suffered more threatening personal attacks, and recorded her visions later in life. When compared to the musical aspects of the later mystics, a number of elements of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s book stand out. Most obvious is the way it incorporates the practices and styles of Courtly Love, particularly in the dialogues between the Soul and Lady Love or the Soul and God:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Herald} 3:59, 224; Doyère, vol. 3, 242.
\textsuperscript{166} “Also this maydene, be Goddys inspyracion, hadd this schewynge of devocion of sayenge of the owris of the daye ande sayde thus: ‘Whoso wille saye deuoutlye the owrys ordeynede be holye cherche, he schalle besye hym to saye thame with thees thre obseruaunces. Ferste, in the begynnynge of the owrys tylle he come to the psalmys, a manne schulde with praesynges in his herte worscheppe the deppenesse of Crystes mekenesse [...] Therefore atte reuerence of that mekenes ande lawlynesse a man schulde enclyne or bowe his herte before the psalmes, ande emonge the psalmes a man schulde worscheppe the hye wysdome of God whiche so gladlye was conuersaunt with mene, ande be that same holye wysdome walde enfourme manne with heylfulle wordys ande techynges” (Booke 3:29, 471-472). “Si quis etiam Horas conicas devote cantare voluerit, his tribus intendere studeat. Ab exordio Horarum usque ad psalmos laudans extollat abyssum humilitatis, quo illa excellentissima divinitatis majestas a summo coelorum se inclinans, in vallem miseriae nostrae humili se deject. [...] Inter psalmos vero, extollat inscrutabilem Dei sapientiam, quae tam dignanter cum hominibus conversata, per semetipsam dignata est hominem salutaribus instruere vervis et monitis, gratias agens ei, dum inclinat, pro omni doctrina et verbis mellifluis, quae unquam de Corde et ore ejus dulcissimo profuxerunt” (Liber 3:30, 234-35).
\end{flushright}
Then the bride of all delights goes to the Fairest of lovers in the secret chamber of the invisible Godhead. There she finds the bed and the abode of love prepared by God in a manner beyond what is human. Our Lord speaks:

“Stay, Lady Soul.”
“What do you bid me, Lord?”
“Take off your clothes.”
“Lord, what will happen to me then?”
“Lady Soul, you are so utterly formed to my nature That not the slightest thing can be between you and me. Never was an angel so glorious That to him was granted for one hour What is given to you for eternity. And so you must cast off from you Both fear and shame and all external virtues. Rather, those alone that you carry within yourself Shall you foster forever. These are your noble longing And your boundless desire. These I shall fulfill forever With my limitless lavishness.”

As this dialogue suggests, and as has been demonstrated in detail above, Mechthild also frequently composes her own songs to fit occasions as needed, rather than referencing Biblical verses or chants from the Mass or Office. Furthermore, Mechthild’s conception of the music of heaven is different from the nuns in that important communication, both between the soul and God and among the members of the Trinity itself, is almost always achieved through singing and music, rather than simple speech:

Then the Holy Spirit in his superabundance played for the father, striking upon the Holy Trinity, and said to him: “Lord, dear Father I shall give you out of yourself generous advice. We no longer wish to go on thus, not bearing fruit. We shall have a created kingdom and you shall form the angels in my image so they are one spirit with me.”

At times, Mechthild’s writing is also more picturesque: not only does she make it clear that each creature in creation has a unique song to sing (an idea developed to a lesser extent in Mechthild

167 (Light 1:44, 61-62). Mechthild continues: “‘Lord, now I am a naked soul / And you in yourself are a well-adorned God. / Our shared lot is eternal life / Without death.’ / Then a blessed stillness / That both desire comes over them. / He surrenders himself to her, / And she surrenders herself to him. / What happens to her then – she knows – / And that is fine with me. / But this cannot last long. / When two lovers meet secretly, / They must often part from one another inseparably.”

168 Light 3:9, 114; Morel, 68.
of Hackeborn’s visions), she describes synaesthetic experiences where sound, sight, and touch all blend together. Some example of this may be seen in her vision of the “animal” of man:

This animal does not eat. Rather, it has a large tail that is full of honey. This it sucks on every day. It also has a golden beard that rings so delightfully when it is sucking that its sweet voice and cheerful sound echo playfully in its heart; and its body is nourished by drinking the sweet honey. This tail is the death of holy people, which they cheerfully and prudently keep before their eyes in their good works and constant practice of virtue, and they joyfully practice faithfulness in patient waiting. The golden beard is God’s noble love that chimes through the loving heart into the noble soul. Fortunate is he to have become a human being who ever really experiences this!\(^{169}\)

Finally, as seen above in the Dante-esque example of the “bitterly poor minstrel” suffering in hell,\(^{170}\) Mechthild is the only one of the three to mention the sensual side of music in addition to the spiritual, emphasizing the dangers for those seeking a close union with God.

**Recent Trends in Scholarship**

In searching for reasons to explain the similarities and differences identified here it will be useful to consider other studies concerning the mysticism at Helfta, keeping in mind the ways in which music may inform the larger understanding of the topic. While a full summary of all the scholarly literature available is clearly not feasible, a few of the most pertinent examples deserve to be mentioned in brief. Most of the work done in the past few decades on the Helfta mystics (and female medieval mystics in general) lies in the field of feminist and gender studies. In particular, scholars have centered their work around three foci: visions, eroticism/sensuality, and interactions with the church hierarchy. As will be seen, despite this diversity, all of these foci are unified by the underlying question of authority.

The first focus, gender and visions, is a direct outgrowth of the longstanding medieval European tradition of misogyny.\(^{171}\) Frances Beer has made the argument that a number of medieval women, including Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich, exemplified a spirit of courageous independence, and that more specifically they were able to overcome this misogynistic spirit because they had complete confidence in the veracity of

\(^{169}\) Light 4:18, 161-162; Morel, 111-112.
\(^{170}\) Light 3:21, 129-130; Morel, 84.
\(^{171}\) For full details, including attitudes from the ancient Greek philosophers, Church fathers (especially St. Paul), and medieval authors, see: Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Suffolk, UK: St. Edmondsbury Press, 1992), 1-6.
their visions. At the same time, she observes that the number of important women role models in the New Testament scriptures, and the positive atmosphere of the communities in which these women lived, also played important roles.\footnote{Beer, 8-9.}

A further refinement of this idea appears in Mary Sudyam’s “Bringing Heaven Down to Earth,” where she considers the idea of the gendered nature of sacred spaces in medieval Europe (for example, the altar in a church, only open as a spot of direct worship for male clergy, was a masculine space).\footnote{Sudyam, 91.} According to Sudyam, the beguines were able to solve this problem by constructing a “genderless space” of heaven on Earth through visions: female mystics would have revelations where Christ would vacate the traditionally male altar and enclose the women in a new space. By becoming conduits of heaven and transmitting the knowledge they gained so others could benefit, the women came to be considered holy, even by male contemporaries.\footnote{Sudyam, 93.}

It is clear that the portions of the nuns’ books discussed in previous chapters substantiate both of these authors’ arguments. Beginning with Beer’s two postulates, while each of the nuns adopts a reverent and humble attitude in her book, nowhere is there an element of doubt (e.g., a request for Christ to show a sign to make sure the vision or revelation is authentic). As Gertrude says,

> She humbly begged her to ask the Lord about the gifts mentioned above, not because she was in any doubt or wanted to be reassured, but because she wanted to arouse in herself a greater sense of gratitude and to be confirmed in faith […].\footnote{Herald 1:16, 83; Doyère, vol. 2, 206.}

Indeed, the nuns frequently adopt the voices of teachers educating their readers, and they were recognized as such in life by visitors to the convent. A connection here is that Mechthild of Hackeborn, who is the most explicit in her spiritual guidance, often relates these to chants and psalms: see the discussion of praying the Miserere above, where Mechthild intersperses the psalm verses with the anthem \textit{O beata et benedicta et gloriosa trinitas}:

> Our Lord taught her to say the first five verses for wicked men entrenched in sin who would not be turned to God, so that God would bring them to Him out of His divine pity and His loving death which he suffered for the love of men’s souls. She was taught to say the second five verses for them who are repentant so that they may have full forgiveness and never from that time forth turn again to sin[…].\footnote{Booke 1:8, 92-93; Liber 1:5, 15.}
When looking for strong female figures in the nuns’ writing, two important points emerge. First, there is the devotion to the Virgin Mary (particularly in the case of Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn), one of a number of strong women in the New Testament. Both Gertrude and Mechthild recognize her power as an intercessor before Christ, and she is always depicted in high state in their visions, ornamented with gems or musical instruments.

One Saturday at Mass, when *Salve sancta parens* [Introit of various Masses for the Virgin Mary] was sung, this maiden gave worship and salutation to Our Lady and prayed to her to receive her true [verre] holiness. Our Lady answered and said: ‘If you desire true holiness, hold yourself to my son, which is that holiness which you desire [...] Hold yourself to his holy innocent childhood, desiring and praying that all your transgressions and negligences might be made perfect by his innocent childhood. Hold yourself also to his fervent age of adolescence [...]’

Then, on the feast day of the Purification of Mary, while the procession was taking place in which you, our Savior and Redeemer, chose to be carried to the Temple with the sacrificial victims, while they were chanting the antiphon *Cum inducerent*, your virginal mother asked me to give you back to her, you the lovely little child of her womb. Her face wore a severe expression, as though she were not pleased with the way I was looking after you, the pride and joy of her immaculate virginity. And, remembering that it was because of the grace she found with you that she was given for the reconciliation of sinners and to be the hope of the hopeless, I exclaimed in these words: “O Mother of Love, was it not for this that the Source of Mercy was given you as your son, so that through you all the needy might obtain grace, and that you might cover with your copious charity the multitude of our sins and defects (cf.1 Pet. 4:8).” At this her face assumed an expression of serene benignity.

---

177 Apon a Satterdaye atte masse while *Salve sancta parens* was sungene, this maydene gaffe worschepe ande salutacioun to oure ladye and prayede here to gette here verre holynesse. Oure ladye aunsuerde ande saide: ‘Ziffe thowe couette verre holynesse, halde the to my sone whiche es that holynesse whiche thowe desyres [...] Halde the to his holye innocente childehede, desyrynge ande prayenge that alle thyne trespasses ande neglygyncys mowe be performede be his innocente childehede. Halde the also to his feruente aage of adolcence [etc.]

Secondly, it is notable that in the nuns’ *Brautmystik* there is a level of familiarity between themselves and God. Gertrude in particular exemplifies this with her requests for elevating souls from purgatory:

> After this promise, whenever she was desirous of receiving the sacrament, she asked that the Lord would grant her as many souls from purgatory as there were particles into which the host broke in her mouth and, as she tried to divide it into as many pieces as she could, the Lord said to her: “That you may know that my mercies are over all my works (Ps. 144:9) and that there is no creature that can exhaust the abyss of my love, behold I am ready to grant you, through the merits of this life-giving sacrament, a much greater number than you would presume to ask me for.”

As to the welcoming atmosphere of Helfta, not only did Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude share a very close bond (and encourage each other to share revelations with the larger community), but Mechthild of Magdeburg’s flight to the sanctuary of St. Mary’s offers evidence enough of the protection to be found behind the convent’s walls.

As for Sudyam’s observations about the genderless space of heaven on Earth, the evidence is ambivalent. On the one hand, not only Mechthild of Magdeburg but all the mystics experience visions of heaven which they then subsequently relate to their communities. At times these visions are genderless, e.g., descriptions of the choirs of heaven singing praises to the Trinity. However, each of the mystics also describes heaven within the context of the Mass. True enough, most of these examples are from Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn (who experienced liturgical services much more frequently), but even Mechthild of Magdeburg draws correspondences between the terrestrial and celestial Mass. Key examples here include the heavenly Mass Mechthild of Hackeborn describes when the convent was placed under interdict (the Feast of the Assumption of Mary on August 15) and Mechthild of Magdeburg’s vision during the Mass of *Gaudeamus omnes in domino* (Feast of the Conception of Mary, celebrated

---

*Herald* 3:18, 183-184. “Post hoc vero promissum, cum ad sumptum Sacramentum desideraret, ut sibi Dominus de Purgatorio tot animas praestaret, in quot partibus hostia in ore ipsius divideretur, et inde conaretur illam in plures partes dividere, Dominus dixit ad eam: ‘Ut intelligas quoniam miserationes meae sunt super omnia opera mea et quia non sit qui abyssum pietatis meae possit exhaure, ecce praesto ut per pretium istius vivifici Sacramenti molto plus accipias quam orare praesumis’” (vol. 3, 102-104).
on April 26). In these instances, male figures always act in the capacity of priests, deacons, and readers; as Mechthild of Hackeborn describes:

After this our Lord dressed himself, and sang the Mass clothed in a red chasuble and a bishop’s trappings. Saint John the Baptist was appointed to read the Epistle [...] Saint John the Evangelist was appointed to read the Gospel [...] Saint John the Baptist and Saint Luke ministered to our Lord at the altar, and Saint John the Evangelist ministered to the Virgin Mary.  

While females – most obviously the Virgin Mary and the virgin martyrs – are accorded places of honor, the operation of the Mass remains the province of men.  

The second focus of recent research concerns the interplay between music and eroticism. Grace Jantzen, in *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, has noticed how the women mystics of the High Middle Ages were explicitly erotic – and unlike male mystics did not attempt to qualify this eroticism or call it allegory. However, one of the most thorough investigations of this eroticism is Bruce Holsinger’s “Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Literature and Culture.” Holsinger proceeds from the belief, laid out in his abstract, that “music was understood in medieval culture as a practice of the flesh, invested with the propensity to eroticize, torture, even resurrect the human body.” After a consideration of Classical and early Church sources, Holsinger considers the situation at Helfta in some detail; he notes that the nuns depended on (or thought they depended on) the liturgy for their survival. However, by

---

180 Booke 1:61, 251-252; Liber 1:27, 95.
181 One could argue that Christ, the high priest, is at times described in feminine or androgynous terms elsewhere in the mystics’ books. However, the majority of times he appears (whether in the context of the mass, spiritual advising, or moments of nuptial bliss), it is in a male context.
182 Grace, Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 133-34. Of course, the author notes that in addition to the sexual meaning, erotic examples still had a spiritual aspect.
184 Space precludes a detailed summary of Holsinger’s analyses, but I feel it illuminating to offer a few brief samples here: he considers the story of Pythagoras hearing numerical ratios in the blacksmiths’ hammers as inherently physical because the sage had to use his senses, i.e., the “testimony of his body” – and the smiths produced sound through physical means (8); the concept of the harmony of the spheres is a contestable ideology, which “sought to contain the visceral force of music through endlessly reiterated numerical abstraction” (9); and music’s inherently corporeal message is betrayed when the author of the *Ad organum faciendum* treatise compares a type of unnatural polyphony to a cadaver or when Guido of Arezzo boasts that his singing method will relieve music teachers from having to beat their pupils (16-17).
appropriating liturgical chants for their own purposes the nuns “‘poached’ on the liturgy, receiving it from above while simultaneously recruiting it into their idiosyncratic visionary lives and ingeniously adapting it to their own ends.” To Holsinger, the use of liturgical elements constitutes a transformation of the structure, practice, and meaning of the liturgy; the nuns took liturgical elements and used them both to get physically close to Christ and to subvert the traditional male ecclesiastical structure.

Holsinger’s argument has some merit, though not in the sense in which he intends it. As for music being embodied, there is an abundance of examples in the mystics’ works: the women, God, and at times the entire universe are all described in terms of instruments or musical concepts. However, the music is not erotic or subversive; the nuns are sure to explain that it is music’s sweetness (in a non-sexual sense) and balance that accurately depicts the divine.

And my strings shall play sweetly for you
In tune with the true value of your patient love.
Still, before I begin,
I want to tune my heavenly strings in your soul,
So that you might persevere even longer.

As for the nuns of Helfta “poaching” on the liturgy, it is an issue of degree. For instance, it is true that both Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn appropriate some liturgical chants as extended points for visions, at times altering the original meanings or contexts. Gertrude’s discussions of the Sunday of Esto mihi preserves the penitential pre-Lenten spirit:

You [Christ] gave me to understand that you were being tortured and persecuted in various ways and that this Introit was a direct appeal to me, and was a request for a home in my heart in which to rest.

Mechthild’s vision during the tract Vinea facta est of a long journey up a high hill, with wells to wash away the deadly sins, likewise recalls the Lenten journey:

Then he showed her an immensely tall and wide hill, stretching from the East into the West. This hill had seven tiers through which men must walk to reach the summit, and each tier had a well.

---

185 Holsinger, 222-23.
186 Light 5:18, 193-94; Morel, 143.
188 Booke 1:26, 142; Liber 1:13, 40.
In each case the nuns reinforce the lesson of the day. It is true that Mechthild goes on to describe the victory celebration of Trinity Sunday at the summit, unexpectedly transitioning from a penitential to joyous atmosphere. Rather than being an entirely original interpolation though, it is meant to reinforce another aspect of Christian dogma, God’s love for humanity. Also, when Mechthild intersperses chants within psalms and other prayers, as she does in the *Miserere*, it is not an attempt to transform the underlying meaning; rather it is more like the medieval practice of troping a chant. As for the Mass itself, it often appears in visions of heaven. For the most part these heavenly Masses are comparable to their terrestrial counterparts; while there might be a secondary message (e.g., God supporting the nuns against their episcopal oppressor), the dominant point made about these Masses is how similar they are in meaning and format to their earthly counterparts.

The final focus of recent research is the interplay between female mystics, a male church hierarchy, and the issue of power and authority. Caroline Bynum’s seminal work, *Jesus as Mother*, framed the discussion for most later authors. In seeking to understand why women (including the nuns of St. Mary’s as well as earlier individuals) were so involved in mysticism at this time and why their piety was expressed in the way it was, Bynum lays out five main points. First, she believes that the mystical union of the nuns with God (sometimes expressed in visions where they take on the roles of priests) enabled them to overcome thirteenth-century limitations and serve as counselors, mediators, and channels to the sacraments. Second, the nuns’ focus on Eucharistic piety and devotion to the Sacred Heart expressed the same need for direct contact with God and direct authorization to act as mediators. Third, the nuns’ spirituality ultimately supported, rather than undercut, the power of the clergy. Fourth, the serenity with which the nuns wrote and exercised their power was based on Christ’s authorization of their role, as well as a spirituality that saw him as both a just judge and experience of sweet comfort. Finally, the anxiety in the writings of women mystics living outside of convents (most notably Mechthild of Magdeburg) suggests that women who grew up in convents were less likely to be influenced by the stereotype of women as inferior.

---

190 For reasons why the nuns at Helfta were considered orthodox and strongly endorsed by the Dominican order, see Bynum (256).
In recent years, some of Bynum’s postulates have come under intense scrutiny. Jantzen takes the more aggressive position that female mystics, in addition to participating in the male-defined religious tradition and accepting some controls on their writings and bodies, also frequently pushed back against the same tradition.\(^{191}\) For example, mystics used their visions to claim special authority (see for instance her discussion of Hildegard), but at the same time the Helfta nuns’ emphasis on the power of the Eucharist (which could only be given by men) weakened their position in the church.\(^{192}\) Jantzen makes two other arguments: first, that female mystics did not use intellectualism/mental exercises/the study of religious texts as the point of departure for their faith (as did males); rather, they cared more about visionary experiences.\(^{193}\) Second, while the mystics of the era accepted the characterization of God as male, they often pushed back by ascribing to him feminine qualities.\(^{194}\) This point is most pronounced in Mechthild of Magdeburg’s dialogues between the Soul and Divine Love; the former is clearly feminine, while the latter, according to tradition, is also personified as a woman.

Other authors have tended to support Bynum’s views; among these, Barbara Kline’s “Discourse of Heaven in Mechthild of Hackeborn’s Booke of Gostlye Grace” is the most pertinent. Kline argues that by being raised in a community of women, Mechthild was “not constrained by male views of the female as inferior.”\(^{195}\) Kline makes the additional claim that Mechthild’s position of authority at St. Mary’s (as the choir director) made her unselfconscious and led her to not necessarily associate authority with men.\(^{196}\) Going further than Bynum, Kline believes that Mechthild’s book of revelations is not an attempt by the author to seize authority

\(^{191}\) Jantzen, 158.
\(^{192}\) Jantzen, 168-71; 174.
\(^{193}\) Jantzen, 159. The author notes that much of the women’s emphasis on experience stemmed from the fact that they were on the whole less educated or less sure of their own intellectual achievement.
\(^{194}\) Jantzen, 290-291. The traditional view of the Christian Trinity, with two male figures (Father and Son) and one androgyne (the Holy Spirit), is notable for its lack of a feminine presence. Throughout history, different groups have come up with a number of systems to rectify this imbalance. For instance, the Gnostics introduced the worship of the goddess Divine Wisdom (Sophia), while others elevated the Virgin Mary to form the more classical trinity of Gods (father, mother, son) found in, among other places, the Egyptian mystery cult of Isis.
\(^{195}\) Kline, 83. The author specifies that in addition to Bynum, one of her main sources was Foucault’s view of discourse. Helfta became a place that provided power to make things possible, not power which dominates or excludes (86).
\(^{196}\) Kline, 85-86.
from the male figures of the Church, but rather something that transcends authority; throughout the *Booke* Mechthild’s primary focus is on what she does for the kingdom of heaven, and that she uses her body as the tool necessary to serve this greater end.\(^{197}\)

Considering the evidence presented in previous chapters, I believe that all of these scholars have excellent points but Kline’s position is the best-substantiated. Beginning with Bynum’s five main points, the first has already been covered in sufficient detail earlier. Many of the best musical examples reinforce the nuns’ connection to the Sacred Heart, ranging from descriptions of how their souls are in union with Christ to how they play the strings of each others’ hearts. It is often at these precise moments of intense closeness that the mystics either receive specific directions on prayer (which are then passed along to their readers) or use their positions to make requests of Christ. Thus Gertrude notes:

> The Lord said to her: “Praise me by the sweet sounding harmony of my heart, in the innocent integrity of her [the Virgin Mary] virginity in which she, a virgin, conceived me, bore me, and after my birth remained a virgin inviolate [...].” While she was doing this, she saw the Lord offering his divine heart to his virgin Mother, in the likeness of a golden cup, whence she might drink. And when she had drunk of the honey sweetness of this draught, she seemed sweetly and abundantly satisfied — inebriated, rather — and, penetrated to the marrow, she was seen to rejoice with exceeding gladness.\(^{198}\)

Third, the widespread use of liturgical chants is primarily an endorsement of the established Church. Not only do the mystics, particularly Mechthild of Hackeborn, use chants in their private devotions, all of the women use the music of the Mass and the Office as the basis for many of their visions. Mechthild even makes the point that she saw the soul of a religious man in hell because he thought he was wiser than his priest; she notes:

> Not even a perfectly righteous man possesses full spiritual knowledge. Therefore he must make himself subject to his priest in all meekness and consent to his priest’s will in all goodness.\(^{199}\)

However, it should also be noted that at times the women do alter the meaning of chants to emphasize love – this relates to Bynum’s fourth point. It is clear that the main theological concern for the mystics is the loving goodness of God.

---

\(^{197}\) Kline, 92.


\(^{199}\) “A perfytte religious mane or womane maye neyere be so wyse botte that he must make hymselfe sugette to his prelate in alle mekeness, ande consente to his prelatys wille in alle goodenesse” (*Booke* 4:6, 503).
Indeed, the women primarily refer to the human figure of Christ, rather than the more abstract or emotionally distant other members of the Trinity. The one exception is Mechthild of Magdeburg, who ascribes to the Father and the Holy Spirit the same superabundant loving nature generally ascribed to Christ (as, for instance, in her visions of dialogue among the Trinity). Bynum’s last point is the only one that does not have any correspondences in the musical writings of the three mystics; while Mechthild of Magdeburg clearly writes in a different style from the other Helfta mystics, there is very little in her *Light* that suggests a sense of anxiety. Indeed, Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn’s references to the interdict and threats of attack are a reminder that convents themselves were not entirely safe.

Regarding Jantzen’s book, the primacy of experience might be true for Mechthild of Magdeburg, but the case is much less clear with regard to the two nuns. While Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn do not directly refer to studying texts as a source of their visions, both demonstrate a very high degree of learning. Gertrude in particular, throughout her *Herald*, not only quotes a number of Old and New Testament passages but reworks them in new ways to substantiate her arguments: the first chapter of the *Herald* relates how

> Her love of learning now became desire for knowledge of God. Never tired of pondering over the pages of all the books of Holy Scripture that she was able to obtain or acquire, she filled the coffers of her heart to the brim with the sweetest and most useful sentences of Holy Scripture. And so she was always ready with godly and edifying words to help those who came to consult her and to refute errors with the testimony of Holy Scripture in such a way that no one could demolish her arguments.  

Moreover, at times both individuals describe contemplating liturgical chants as a means to gain a deeper understanding of God. This is not to say that visionary experience was unimportant, or that visions might not happen spontaneously. However, the nuns’ experiences were based on a foundation of intellectual work.

Jantzen’s argument that Eucharistic devotion weakened the position of the nuns has some textual support. Mechthild of Hackeborn’s vision of the person who disobeyed his priest

---

200 *Herald* 1:1, 53. “Unde exhinc de grammatica facta theologica omnes libros divinae paginae quoscumque habere vel acquirere potuit infastidibiliter ruminans, cophinum cordis sui crebro utilioribus et mellitis Scripturae sacrae eloquiius impletis usque ad summum replebat, ita ut semper praesto sibi esset sermo divinus et aedificatorius; unde quoslibet ad se venientes posset satis convenienter expedire atque cuilibet errori tam congruis sacrae Scripturae testimonii obviare, quod a nullo penitus posset confutari” (vol. 2, 120-122).

201 For instance, see *Herald* 3:17-18 for examples of Eucharistic piety.
suffering in hell suggests an acceptance of Church authority (though of course the nuns were also able to use their positions to preach). At least in the musical examples, the mystics describe God more in terms of a male lover (or independent of gender identity). However, both of these observations ignore the fact that the mystics were not actively attempting to overthrow the hierarchy of the church (even Mechthild of Magdeburg was more of a reformer than a revolutionary) or reinvent the structure of the Trinity. Throughout each of the mystics’ books, the central idea, complementary to the inherent loving goodness of God, is the need for all of creation to join together in singing songs of praise and thanksgiving to the divinity:

“You shall understand that when you say any psalm or prayer which any saints prayed when they were alive on earth, then all of those saints pray to me for you. Additionally, when you are in your devotions and speak with me, then all of the saints are joyful and worship and thank me.”

With the sweetly melodious harp of your divine heart, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, I sing to you, Lord God, adorable Father, songs of praise and thanksgiving on behalf of all creatures in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

Just as Kline argues that Mechthild of Hackeborn’s primary focus is on what she can do for the kingdom of God, ultimately this spirit can be found in the works of all of the mystics.

---

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christian Savage was born in Roslyn, New York and lived in the New York metropolitan area for most of his life. He attended Colgate University, where he studied with Dr. Frank Frey and Dr. Joscelyn Godwin, and graduated summa cum laude with degrees in biology and music. After spending a year tutoring high school students in biology, chemistry, and English, Christian moved to Tallahassee, Florida to pursue the master’s degree in Historical Musicology from Florida State University. Upon completion of this degree he will continue his studies at Florida State by entering the master’s program in Science Teaching. In his free time Christian enjoys reading alchemical and Kabbalistic texts, cooking Southeast Asian cuisine, and playing the French horn, recorder, and crumhorn.