CHAPTER ELEVEN

RELIGIOUS SONG AND DEVOTIONAL CULTURE IN NORTHERN GERMANY

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The late medieval era exhibits a rich variety of relationships between music and devotion. These relationships range from singing songs during meditation, meditation occurring within sacred plays, and harp-playing as a spiritual metaphor for meditations on Christ; prayer books containing musical notation and pictures of angels making music (Illustration 9); musical meditation during the liturgy; and much more. The common denominator is the diverse presence of music within devotion, with sacred song being particularly closely linked to spiritual contemplation. The inclusion of sacred song in devotion ensured its integration into the liturgy on the one hand, and its presence in all aspects of daily life on the other, forming a bridge between Profanum and Sacrum.

When studying the precise forms of interaction between song and mysticism, we encounter a fundamental difficulty with classification. On the one hand, sources describe how women, in particular, sang or heard new, unknown songs while in a state of visionary ecstasy. Whether this refers to actual songs remains uncertain since it may simply allude to the “new song” as a biblical topos (Apoc 5:8–9, but also to Ps 33, 40, 144 → Bärsch), especially as such references occur within the context of heavenly visions. On the other hand, there is a corpus of mystical songs that contain no indication of a visionary origin. These are far more likely to have been composed and, to a certain extent, set to pre-existing tunes, for they are connected to a few famous names from the world of mysticism: the chants of the Benedictine abbess and prophetess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179),2 the strophic poems of the mystic Hadewijch of Brabant (13th century; → Fraeters), and six cantilenas that were ascribed

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1 Several examples of visionary singing are cited in Fuhrmann, *Herz und Stimme* (2004), 292–317.
for many years to the Dominican monk Johannes Tauler (approximately 1300–1361). Textually transmitted music cannot be directly linked to mystical experience; in order to describe the role played by music in religious experience in late-medieval northern Germany, we must turn to the devotional culture as expressed in songbooks, private prayer, and church service. Together with chants from the liturgy, the most important musical genre in the sphere of private piety was sacred song, with “song” understood as a lyrical composition that may be given a musical context through the addition of notation, melodic references, or notes in the source text. Augustine advocated alternating sacred song with spiritual contemplation during the manual labour required by monastic life. In monastic circles, spiritual songs could be performed outwardly or inwardly; biblical and mystical models exist for both methods. Voiced, audible performance was the model available to everyone, including lay people, whereas singing songs with the inner voice and hearing them with the inner ear require a state of mind akin to that demanded by mystical experience. The common factor in both modes of performance is the meditatio; sacred song had a fixed place in this form of private contemplation, cultivated primarily in monastic circles, but essential for any spiritual growth.

Song and Meditation in the Late Medieval Era: Devotio moderna

In the late Middle Ages, private devotion gained considerable importance not only in monastic, but also in semi-religious and even lay circles. Stemming from a more personalized view of religious life, this devotion emphasized individual emotion and spiritual fulfilment, and led monastic orders and the laity to develop the spiritual skills required to win eternal

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3 Ruh, “Tauler-Cantilenen”. See also Tauler VEL1565 in Dutch Songs Online (liederenbank.nl).
4 For terminological questions see the introduction and also Hamm, “Gott berühren,” 111–115.
5 Augustine, De opere monachorum, cap. XVII.20, ed. Zycha, CSEL 41, 564–565: “cantica uero diuina cantare etiam manibus operantes facile possunt et ipsum laborem tamquam diuino celemate consolari. […] quid ergo inpedit seruum dei manibus operantem in lege domini meditari et psallere domini altissimi?.” “As a matter of fact, persons who are engaged in manual labor can easily sing divine canticles and lighten the labor itself, at the divine call, as it were. […] What, therefore, hinders the servant of God from meditating on the law of God and from singing to the name of the Lord most high while he performs manual labor […]?” translated by Muldowney, in Augustine: The Work of Monks (2002), 363.