
Ulrike Hascher-Burger’s doctoral research was an in-depth examination of a manuscript collection of hymns, dating from the late fifteenth century, emanating from the Brethren of the Common Life in the Netherlands. Her resulting dissertation was published in 2002 by E.J. Brill in the series Studies in the History of Christian Thought as *Gesungene Innigkeit. Studien zu einer Musikhandschrift der Devotio moderna (Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, ms. 16 H 34, olim B 113)* (reviewed in Dutch Review of Church History 84 (2004), 576–578). Up until this time very little attention had been paid to the significance of the role of music and singing in the spiritual exercises of the Brethren of the Common Life, and the document in question had not received the critical scrutiny it deserved. The dissertation was therefore ground-breaking, providing a new window through which spiritual formation within the Devotio Moderna can be seen in a different light. In this second book Hascher-Burger has brought the same meticulous and careful scholarship to another similar manuscript, demonstrating that the manuscript on which her earlier study was based was not an isolated case, establishing that sung devotions were fundamental rather than peripheral to Devotio Moderna spirituality.

There are three main sections to the study. The last section is a clear, monochrome facsimile of the complete document of the 26 songs, each with its own musical notation. The middle section comprises careful transcriptions of each of the songs, with critical textual apparatus and the respective melodies presented in modern notation. The first section is a detailed introduction to the manuscript, beginning with a full description of its physical characteristics, such as watermarks, binding, form and style of the handwriting, musical notation, decoration, and so forth. But most of the introduction is a discussion of the nature and content of the songs, their liturgical significance, and their role in spiritual formation within the communities of the Brethren of the Common Life. Here Hascher-Burger demonstrates that for the followers of the Devotio Moderna, music was fundamental for spirituality, that singing was an essential part of the penitential meditation that was taught to pupils of the Latin schools run by the Brethren of the Common Life—hence Hascher-Burger’s titles for her two studies: *Gesungene Innigkeit* [sung devotion], and *Singen für die Seligkeit* [singing for blessedness]. The songs were among the
first things taught in the schools of the Devotio Moderna, and were therefore foundational for the spirituality fostered by the Brethren. The unison tunes of the Zwolle manuscript, the focus of this second volume, are mostly contrafacta, that is, pre-existing melodies of various liturgical types, which are supplied with new Latin texts. Thus the new content expressed in the songs was conveyed by the familiarity of the music to which they were set, melodies including, Urbs beata Jerusalem, Pange lingua gloriosa, among others.

These manuscripts make it clear that for the Brethren of the Common Life there was a close connection between music and meaning, with music being the vehicle for the important foundational, penitential texts. The implications of this discovery are far-reaching. For example, it is well-known that much of Erasmus's spiritual and theological formation was due to the education he received from the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer. In his writings he is frequently extremely critical of polyphonic music, especially the liturgical music he heard in England. His criticisms were not so much against music per se but against the type of music in which the text is inaudible, being buried within the texture of the sound. These criticisms now take on new meaning. It is not surprising that Erasmus should criticize music that obscures the liturgical text if, as now seems certain, in the Latin school in Deventer he had learned the importance of the role of music to proclaim the liturgical text.

But there are further ramifications. By the end of the fifteenth century the influence of the Brethren of the Common Life had spread beyond the borders of the Netherlands deep into Germany. Early in 1497 the young Martin Luther was sent to Magdeburg, where he attended the Latin school and lived with the local community of the Brethren of the Common Life. The implication of the manuscripts edited by Hascher-Burger would seem to suggest that Luther too would have experienced this kind of sung meditation—“singing for blessedness.” A concern for music and the intensification of personal spirituality are characteristics clearly evident in the young Luther. But the devotional music of the Brethren of the Common Life may well have influenced Luther's compositional activities. As noted above, a distinctive feature of the songs edited by Hascher-Burger is that many of them are contrafacta, familiar melodies of the church—hymns, antiphons, sequences and responses—new texts set to familiar melodies. This is a principle that Luther followed, both in his expansions of pre-existing vernacular Leisen, as well as his later Latin responsoria. Luther supplied the melodies of the old religious folk hymns, the Leisen, such as Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist, and Wir glauben all an einen Gott, with either expanded or newly-written texts. Similarly, in Christliche Geseng Lateinisch und Deudsch zum Begrebnis. D. Martinus Luther (Wittenberg, 1542) Luther gave