

MUSIC AND THE PASSION [Part I]

This article is an historical overview on how the theme of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Jesus Christ has been treated in vocal music throughout the ages. It is divided chronologically into two parts. The first part covers music from Middle ages until the end of the Renaissance; and the second part treats vocal music from the early Baroque period until today.

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PART I From Medieval ages until the end of Renaissance.

In the middle ages there were specially two types of religious drama. The first one is what is traditionally called the liturgical drama, where music is integral. The whole text of the play is sung and the language is latin. There is no such thing as spoken religious drama in latin at this period, it was always sung, (except for the 10th century plays of the nun Hroswith of Gardenstein). The second type of religious drama is the vernacular drama, where the main action is spoken vernacular with songs, instrumental music, *plainchant* and polyphony.

I. Liturgical drama

Scholars use the term liturgical drama to describe sung religious dialogues, ceremonies and plays in latin. The term was first used by Clement (1847-51) and has remained to this day.

The most imaginative and impressive form of drama in early middle ages remains the liturgy itself. Honorius of Autum, in *Gemma animae* (c1100) described the Mass as a drama analogous to ancient tragedy (trans Hardison: *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*, Baltimore, 1965).

‘ our tragic author [i.e. the celebrant] represents by his gestures in the theatre of the Church before the Christian people the struggle of Christ...By the extension of his hands he represents the extension of Christ on the Cross. By the chant of the preface he expresses the cry of Christ on the Cross’

Specially impressive were the Holy Week ceremonies; the blessing of palms followed by a procession to a place symbolizing Mount Olives, to singing *Gloria laus*. Sometimes, specially in Germany a figure representing Christ riding on a ass (*the Palmesel*) was brought into the church. Two ceremonies were particularly dramatic: the ‘Deposition crucis’ commemorating the burial of Christ and the ‘Elevation crucis’ (celebrating the resurrection). Sometimes combined to these two ceremonies and sometimes with the return of Palm Sunday procession to the church would be the Harrowing of Hell, in which Christ descends to hell, calls to open the gates (*Tollite portas*) and releases the souls of the patriarchs. At the abbey of Barking, in Essex, in the 14 century these souls were represented by the members of the convent who were imprisoned in the chapel of St Mary Magdalen.

1. *Planctus*, Blessed Virgin Mary Laments

Some historians have seen the whole medieval drama embryonically in the scene where Mary sorrows at the foot of the Cross. In German drama the *Marienklage* is of central importance (see below). The initial *Planctus*, developed as sung dialogues between Mary and the apostle St John, and very often by the three Marys as they approach the tomb.

The 14 century *Planctus Mariae* from Cividale del Friuli, a fully rubricated text with music throws light on the acting aspect of the period. Over each line of text and music

is written a direction to the singer, such as: 'Here shall she point to Christ with open palms', 'Here with head bowed she shall throw herself at the feet of Jesus'.

The famous poem *Stabat Mater dolorosa*, considered to be of 13th century Franciscan origin follows this tradition of a lament of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the Cross. It came to be used as a sequence at Mass and as an Office hymn in the late 15th century, with the plainchant melody assigned to its sequence. Several composers set it to music as a votive antiphon such as the English composers John Browne, William Cornish, Richard Davy and Robert Hunt. The first three settings being in the Eton choirbook. The composers Palestrina and Lassus have set the text to be sung by eight parts, in double choir.

2. *Quem meritis* dialogues

The simplest forms of dramatic ceremony or play are the dialogue tropes of the introit of the Mass. The most important and common are the *Quem Meritis* dialogues of Easter and Christmas. At Easter the dialogue is between 'Christicole' (worshippers of Christ) and 'celicole' (dwellers in heaven). In many texts the former are identified with the three Marys visiting the tomb of Christ and the latter with angels at the tomb. The earliest surviving version of *Quem queritis* is found at the St Martial trope from the St Martial Abbey at Limoges. Nearly 20 manuscripts of the period contain the most examples of this form, and show the 'école Aquitaine' was one of the main dramatic centres of the period. Several *Quem Meritis* are also found at the Winchester Abbey trope, which was also one of the main centers at the time, the third most important centre being St Gallen in Switzerland.

3. *Visitatio sepulchri* (visitation of the tomb)

In its enlarged form the Easter Dialogue is called *Visitatio Sepulchri*. From the 10th to 16th century they are placed, not at Introit but after the third responsory of the Matins of Easter, *Sum transisset sabbatum*. We can distinguish three degrees of dramatic elaboration: one in which the dialogue is conducted by Mary and the angel; a second in which are added the apostles Peter and John, and a third which provides a role for the risen Christ'. Regarding scenery the sepulchre could be a temporary wood or canvas structure or especially in England a permanent erection in stone. The sepulchre proper might be a chest or coffer placed within the larger structure (the monument). Sometimes the altar could also represent the sepulchre.

4. *Ludus Paschalis*: Resurrection Plays

Liturgical plays celebrating resurrection in more elaborate forms are known. The musicologist Young assembled four of them under the title *Ludus Paschalis*. They are from Klosterneuburg, Tours, Origny Ste-benoite, and Fleury. The one from Tours, unfortunately incomplete includes scenes between Pilates and the Roman soldiers, between Mary and 2 merchants, the appearance of Christ to the disciples, and the incident of doubting Thomas. Seven further plays celebrate the journey to Emmaus, the *Peregrinus* plays.

5. *Passion Plays*

The most complex of all liturgical plays related to Easter are Passion Plays. The only two surviving examples of complete Passion Plays in Latin from medieval era are found in the *Carmina Burana* manuscript, from the Benediktbeuren. The *Carmina Burana* written in 1230, contain works from the 11th, 12th century and some from 13th century and were found at the Benedictine Abbey Benediktbeuren in Bavaria. One of the Passion Plays is from Sulmona and one from Monte Sticca. They are almost entirely in Latin and set to music throughout. The most interesting is the longer one. The structure includes pre-existent material from the liturgy such as hymns, sung recitation of the gospels, antiphons and responsories, mostly used as choral introductions to separate scenes, as well as including identifiable melodies from elsewhere such as two 12th century Latin Planctus - the Laments *Planctus ante nescia e Flete, fideles anime*. There are several CDs recordings available of this Passion.

6. *Passion Gospels*

In Liturgy, the Passion texts from the Gospels are recited as Gospels lessons during Mass throughout Holy Week. The earliest account of the use of the Passion in a religious ceremony is that of the Pilgrim Egeria who visited Jerusalem in the 4th century and described the services held there in Holy Week.

The Passion texts were originally chanted by a single singer (*daikon*) and there is no reliable evidence that they were sung by more than one until the 13th century. Manuscripts survive from as early as the 9th century in which pitch, tempo and volume are indicated by the so called *litterae significative* (significant letters).

The earliest definite distribution of the Parts of the Passion among several people can be found in the *Gros livre* of the Dominicans dating from 1254. By the 15th century polyphony was introduced into two different ways : the responsorial passion and the through composed passion. In Lutheran-Protestant Germany there are both Latin and German versions of both types.

Responsorial Passion

In the responsorial Passion the narrative sections of the evangelist are sung monophonically while the words of Christ and the turba could be set polyphonically. Anonymous settings from England have survived from mid 15th century, and the earliest surviving example by a known composer comes also from England, the (partly preserved) four-voice *St Mathew Passion* by Richard Davy. This is the most common and many notable composers of this genre were Lassus, Victoria, Guerrero, Byrd.

Through-composed Passion

The second one is through-composed Passion (sometimes referred as motet passion) the complete text including the narration is set in continuous choral polyphony. Three types are distinguished according to the text:

1) those setting the complete text according to one evangelist;

2) the so called *summa passionis* made up of sections taken from all four gospels including all 7 words on the cross, an exordium and a conclusion;

3) and a shortened version of the text from one gospel found only in Germany.

An outstanding example of a *summa Passion* is by Jacop Handl (1578, printed in 1586) set for two chorus of contrasting registers. The turba section are in eight parts, the words of the evangelists in 4 to 8 parts; the vox Christi is sung by a deeper chorus and the individual parts by a higher one.

II. The Vernacular liturgical drama

There are a numbers of plays to which vernacular liturgical drama is appropriate. The great majority of performances took place outdoors by the daylight, the presentation of time and place was non-naturalistic; scenery was usually a few houses, and properties were of a emblematic character, the costume was generally more naturalistic than in liturgical latin plays but contemporary and not historical.

1. England

Link to medieval Mystery plays at Passion Trust website.

2. Italy

The Italian *sacre rappresentazioni* of the Passion were distinguished from other nations by and early tendency to spectacular visual effects and a strong influence of a tradition of popular religious song, the *Lauda*. The laude received powerful impetus from the religious revival of 13th century. Several *Laude* were about the lamenting of Mary and a famous early *Lauda* on the Passion is *Donna del Paradiso* by Jacopo da Todi. It opens with John telling ‘the Lady of Paradise’ that her son Jesus has been taking prisoner, and of Juda’s betrayal.

Sacre rappresentazioni were magnificent productions organized by the confraternities. With the exception of the *La Passione di Gesu* from Revello in Piedmont, they did not take the comprehensive, cyclic form of the English mystery plays and the French *mystères*. The music included both secular and sacred songs, in both monophony and polyphony with great emphasis on spectacle and dance. There is quite an unusual use of music during scenes of the Passion and Crucifixion. In *La Passione e Resurrezione del Colosei* (Rome c.1489) a ‘chorus of shepherds’ and a second ‘chorus of kings’ sing songs of lament and dire prophecy as Christ is brought by the Pharisees to Herod. They sing again while Christ is put on the Cross. At the death of Christ, and the rending of the veil of the temple, the angels come to the cross and sing sentences from the Easter Preface and from the *Via crucis* (Way of the Cross).

3. France

The 14th and 15th century saw the growth of massive plays cycles in France, as in other European cities. The earliest is *La Passion du Palatinus* (14th century; Frank, ed.: *La Passion du Palatinus, mystère du XIVe siècle*, Paris, 1922) which opens with the entry in Jerusalem.

The music of the Passion Plays includes a variety of elements, as we can see in the Passion plays of Greban and that of Jean Michel. The principal music is plainchant, and hymns are frequent. Liturgical chants include the *Stabat Mater* (like in Jean Michel’s *Passion*, based on the Greban *Passion*). There is evidence of polyphonic singing and some hymns were sung in *fauxbourdon* style. For example with Trinitarian symbolism the utterances of God in both the Greban and Michel Passions

plays are also for three voices. In both plays art songs are often interpolated, as songs within plays. In the shepherd scene (Greban *Passion* Day 1) four shepherds singing in dialogue perform a string of *rondeaux*. A last type of vernacular song is the *Planctus* (Lament). The Autum *Passion* twice signifies ‘La complain the Notre Dame’ (The Lament of Our lady’ and the early *Passion* du Palatinus also has various laments: from the repentant Mary Magdalen, the Virgin at the Cross, and for the Three Marys visiting Christ’s tomb.

Instrumental music enlived the plays from the earliest onwards. The Montferrand *Passion* in 1477 evidently had a total performing ensemble of ‘two organsist, seven trumpets, and four unspecified ménétriers to which should be added two more trompetes de la tour’ (H.M. Brown: *Music in the French Secular Theater, 1400–1550* (Cambridge, MA, 1963) [music exx. in vol.ii])

Music was often used to imitate naturalistic effects on stage, to further stage-business and to act as a symbol. Music interludes often marked end of scenes and covered the movement of actors. For example in the director’s book for the Mons *Passion* of 1501 says: ‘S’il est trop long, silet’, ‘If God takes too long (i.e. from one position to another), play a *silète*’. (G. Cohen, ed.: *Le livre de conduite du régisseur et le compte des dépenses pour le Mystère de la Passion, joué à Mons en 1501* (Paris and Strasbourg, 1925).

In the same Mons *Passion* we can see the symbolic effects of music in its requirement that the angels in paradise should sing in counterpoint. In opposition of heavenly music in the Greban *Passion*, the Hell is a place of thunder and tempests. After the fall of Lucifer they must make a great storm, and there is the use polyphonic singing in hell.

4. Germany

There are three main vernacular German plays related to Easter: The Easter play in which the central scene is the visit of the three Marys to the sepulchre; Easter Plays in which the complaint of Mary is extensively developed – the *Marienklagen*; and the *Passion Plays* (*Passionen*) treating the Holy Week more comprehensively.

4.1 *Marienklage* (Lament of Mary)

The lament of Mary is a unique form of the *Passion Play* in which music plays a prominent part. The *planctus* of the Virgin Mary was sung beneath the crucifix of many German and north Italian churches on Good Friday. Some 50 *Marienklage* survive in German manuscripts. Of particular interest is a *Marienklage* from Borderholm, in Lower Saxony. It is nealy 900 lines long, almost all entirely sung and has elaborate directions for performance. It shows how wide the musical material could be. There are liturgical chants, especially from Holy week such as the hym *Crux fidelis*, the antiphon *Anxiatus est* in the beginning and the responsory *Tenebrae facta sunt* at the end. There are as well as known melodies from the repertory of the *Minnesang* such as Neidhart von Reuenthal’s *May hat wunniglich entsprossen* and Walther von der Vogelweide’s *Kreuzahrerweise*.

Another interesting aspect of this Borderholm *Marienklage* is the preface:

Here begins the most devout complaint of the most Blessed Virgin Mary with the most pitiful and most devout music [*cum misericordissima et devotissima nota*]: the Blessed Virgin delivers this complaint most devoutly, with the assistance of four devout persons. It takes place on Good Friday before dinner, in the church in front of the choir on a slightly raised platform – or outside the church if the weather is good. This complaint is not a stage play [*ludus*] nor a sport [*ludibrium*] but indeed a complaint and a lamentation; it depicts the deep shared sorrow [*compassio*] of Mary, glorious Virgin. When it is done by good and sincere men ... it truly arouses the bystanders to genuine tears and compassion ... This complaint can easily be performed in two and a half hours. Everything that these five persons have to do shall be done without haste and without undue delay, in good modest fashion. The man who takes the part of Christ is a devout priest [*devotus sacerdos*]; Mary is a young man [*juvenis*]; John the Evangelist, a priest; Mary Magdalen and the mother of John, young men.” (Sticca (1984) translated by Berrigan, (1988), *Planctus Mariae in the dramatic tradition of the middle ages*)

4.2 Passion Plays

In German Passion Plays music was required for all productions. Music was mostly monophonic, but there is a few part-music in the form of rounds or canons and also polyphony. It combines different music traditions: old liturgical plainchant, together with newer pieces from the repertory of troupes and sequences; quasi-plainchant from the repertory of liturgical drama; the *planctus*; courtly and ‘clerical’ song, and popular song, religious and secular. There was also professional instrumental music about which little is known.

In the 14th century *St Gall Passion Play*, like most others German Passion plays has two textural strands: vernacular rhyming dialogue and sung latin chants, mostly liturgical in origin (Peter Macardle, *St Gall Passion Play*, Rudopi, 2007, p.24).

In this Passion play almost every entrance was preceded by a silette, angel song. Like in French Passion Plays the intention was to keep the audience quiet. A change from one acting-place to another causes disturbance and noise and the silette quells it.

In the *St Gall Passion* there is a sheer preponderance of music in the triumphant closing scenes (*Visitatio sepulchri, Hortolanio*), (Macardle p. 394).