



Celestial Visions from Medieval Britain

All pieces have been composed anonymously

Prologue

Ante thronum regentis omnia

Light of the Universe

Mater dei, lumen rei—Miro genere

Edi beo þu

Mellis stila, maris stella

Duce creature

Worldly Joy Lasts No Time

Worlde's blis ne last no throwe

Frigiscente karitatis

Estampie 'Mult s'asprime li termines'

Mult s'asprime li termines

Felix sanctorum chorus

True Flower, Pure Root

El tens d'iver

Ductia 'El tens d'iver'

Veri floris sub figura

Foweles in þe frith

Mirie it is, while sumer i last

From Heart to Spirit

Oblatum canticum

The Boston Camerata

Anne Azéma, Artistic Director

Camila Parias, voice

Deborah Rentz-Moore, voice,

Allison Monroe, vielle, psalterium, voice

Mara Winter, transverse flutes, double-flute, bagpipes, direction

Duration: One Hour Without Intermission

Program Notes

Today's concert program traverses the rich tapestry of clerical songs preserved in British sources from the 12th to early-14th centuries. These melodies offer a profound glimpse into the vibrant musical landscape of the High Medieval British Isles, and some songs may be even older in their origin than the manuscripts in which they are preserved. Reflecting the cultural mosaic of medieval Britain, these songs embrace a trilingual heritage, with texts written in Latin, English, and Anglo-Norman French.

While their devotional themes hint at a ritualistic purpose, the context of their preservation suggests a significance beyond the confines of liturgical settings. Some exist as solitary entries within manuscripts, fascinatingly distant from traditional liturgical sources, yet their concordant transmissions across actual liturgical manuscripts blurs strict functional boundaries. Perhaps treasured for their lyrical and melodic beauty, they may have found an occasional purpose in enhancing liturgical ceremonies or decorating peripheral religious celebrations.

In regards to their aesthetic tendencies, these trilingual compositions offer a stylistic palette that could be meaningfully compared with contemporaneous courtly and clerical music traditions burgeoning across the European Continent. These pieces not only enrich our understanding of medieval song culture but also underscore the dynamic interplay between imported Continental influences and the evolution of insular musical expressions.

1. The Earth Is Like A Book Written By The Finger of God

"For the whole sensible world is like a kind of book written by the finger of God—that is, created by divine power—and each particular creature is somewhat like a figure, not invented by human decision, but instituted by the divine will to manifest the invisible things of God's wisdom." — Hugh of St. Victor, *De Tribus Diebus* (12th c.)

The poetry and music preserved in High-Medieval British sources invokes a certain, vivid communion with an apex of flesh-and-blood soul searching that inspired much of the artwork of the time. Such sensuous allegories weave like a thread through the body of surviving clerical song poetry from the 12th-14th centuries in the British Isles. Transmitted by ink on parchment from a once-living creature, the ancient, yet tactile drama of humankind drifts to the senses via word and sound in a tense negotiation with the forces of divine wisdom. This concert



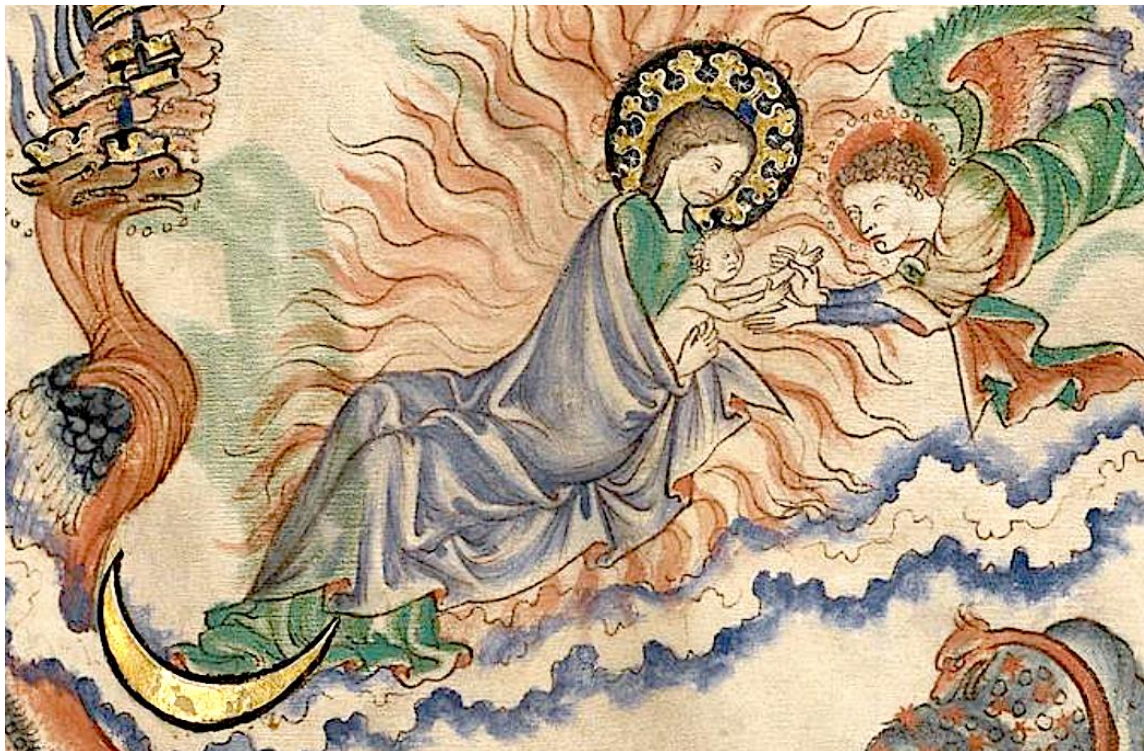
program collects the emotional minutiae which animate the experience of living, in both dissonance and harmony with the supernatural.

On the larger scale of Medieval British cosmology, the *primum mobile* represented the outermost, fastest moving sphere in the geocentric model of the universe. The spheres beyond the *primum mobile* were known as the 'unmoving movers', named originally by Aristotle: the firmament, the cosmic dimensions which were fixed, and the heavenly bodies which caused the rotation of the planetary spheres within them. On the other hand, nested inside of the *primum mobile* were the planetary spheres, those which moved cyclically, and related to the material, human realm.

The piece, '**Ante thronum regentis omnia**' illustrates this harmonious, sparkling celestial kingdom, resounding with the polyphony of heaven. Using the imagery of the doubtful St. Thomas, who placed his finger in the wound of Christ after the resurrection, the poetry of 'Ante thronum' depicts the intersection of human flesh with the incomprehensibility of God, and the resulting celebration of the transcendent glory of Christ. Saint Thomas, the doubter, represents a confluence of elements that hint at the possibility that transformation was not simply spiritual, but spiritual *and* physical at the same time.

2. Light of the Universe

The second section of the program ponders the foundational exchange between divinity and humanity in Medieval Christian theology: Mary, the subject of incarnation in human form, becomes embroidered with metaphor, facilitating relatability and deeper comprehension of divine forms. The allegory of the human mother who gave birth to the son of God forms the primary link between the celestial field outside of the *primum mobile*, and the imperfection of humanity on Earth: the divine enters the human body, and simultaneously the human body incarnates in divine forms.

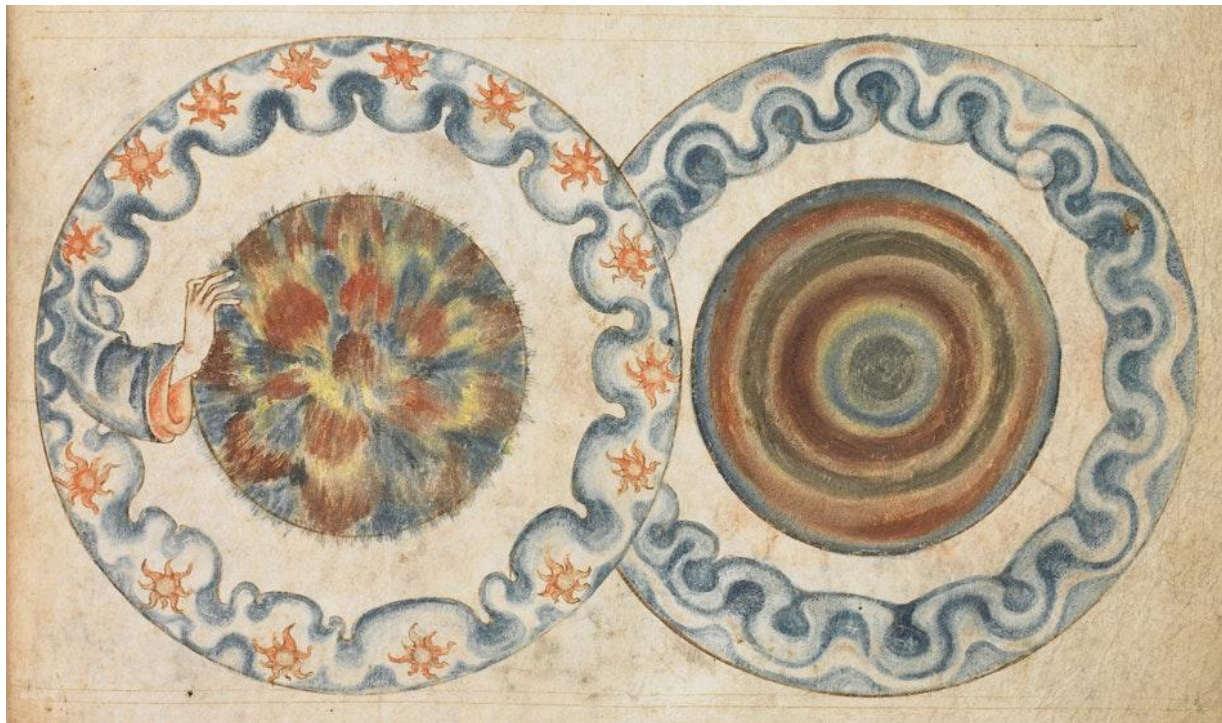


Amongst the corpus of para-liturgical and non-liturgical devotional songs preserved in British sources between 1150-1300, a portion of the music is presented in unique two-voice polyphonic

settings. Many of these songs celebrate the Virgin Mary as the light of the universe manifested within a human form. **'Mater dei'** and a following piece, **'Miro Genere'** are transcribed in the same manuscript dated to around the year 1200, and introduce us to some important traits of song making in Medieval Britain. Both songs use a repeating, double-versical structure, involving the two voices as equally-important actors through closely-worked counterpoint. 'Mater dei' travels even deeper inside a hypnotic, repetitive form that hints at a Medieval sequence, through its circular use of open and closed melodic endings following each line of text.

Aside from the musical and textual forms which lend a stylistic identity to the songs, the trilingual nature of British culture in the 12th and 13th centuries is reflected by poetry written in all three literary languages—English, Latin and French. The Marian devotional song, **'Edi beo þu'**, is written in Middle English, and **'Mellis stilla, maris stella'**, in Latin. The prismatic three-voice motet, **'Duce creature'**, is an Anglo-Norman French veneration of Mary, the woman who dressed herself in the sun. The text of the three-voiced motet has been layered as a contrafactum over another version of the piece which uses a Latin text, 'Ave gloriosa mater salvatoris'. Both Latin and Anglo-Norman versions are transmitted on the same folio in the British Library's Harley 978 manuscript. These three pieces personify the vivid, refined practice of Marian-allegory so frequently seen in medieval British poetry, evoking the Virgin Mother through a sweet and potent mixture of honey-water, star of the sea, and the very first rose; a healing tonic to be consumed through the ears of the faithful.

3. Worldly Joy Lasts No Time



Other songs promote a moral system meant to inspire a more pious terrestrial existence according to the values of God. Love, sorrow, betrayal, and wickedness all challenge the idealistic aspirations of the human spirit. The song of warning: **'Worldes blis ne last no throwe'**, is performed instrumentally on the Medieval bagpipes: an instrument which frequently



appeared in allegories of sin, filth and human corruption. The bagpipes were often depicted being played by pigs in 13th century illuminated manuscripts and church sculptures in the British Isles, perhaps to portray the cacophonous screaming sound the instrument was famous for, as well as the traditional use of a pig's bladder to provide the material to construct the pipe bag.

The groaning sounds of human vanity continue with the moralistic song, **'Frigiscente karitatis'**. Where 'Frigiscente karitatis' cautions listeners against the seductive danger of power and wealth, the following piece, **'Mult s'asprisme li termines'** laments the effects of corruption on those who remain pure-of-heart.

'Felix sanctorum chorus' represents a challenging trope of rhetorical material preserved in Medieval British sources: early expressions of crusade-mentality and the determined attempts of the Church to assimilate the entire "circle of the earth" into the Christian cosmological system. There is an astounding violence, urgency and pride presupposed in the tone of 'Felix sanctorum', and, while difficult to witness, the piece shines a light on the roots of a mindset that still finds its place in prejudiced attitudes which help to proliferate misery and suffering in our culture today.

4. True Flower, Pure Root

Palpable, stimulating allegories also reveal the part which the natural world plays in representing divine forms incarnated in the earthly sphere. Hugh of St. Victor mused this on all things visible: "[...]For since their beauty consists in the visible forms of things...visible beauty is an image of invisible beauty." *In hierarchiam coelestem*, II (pl, 175, col. 949)

A cold, frosty meadow representing love lost is illustrated in **'El tens d'iver'**, situated amongst the monophonic love songs from the Northern French *trouvère* tradition preserved in British sources. Alongside the song itself, 'El tens d'iver' has been transformed into instrumental music in the style of a 13th century proto-*ductia*: a simple textless, rhythmic song form, which may have been danced to. **'Veri floris sub figura'** evokes the shining, mystical purity of an immortal rose, and celebrates the revelatory act of purification enacted by fiery forces. Exalted by the buzzing of the bird-like double-flute, **'Foweles in þe frith'** plays a



game of double-allegory, using common tropes of nature, blood and bone common to Middle-English love poetry as metaphor for Creation and fallen man's role in it. Finally, **'Mirie it is while sumer ilast'** returns to longing for summer's beauty, anticipating the chill of winter winds. Anonymously through-composed in its short, monophonic form, the text and music of 'Mirie it is' may constitute the first stanza of what was once a longer strophic form, whose subsequent stanzas have been lost. Here the original melody has been harmonized using a contrapuntal improvisation style inspired by other, notated polyphonic songs in 13th century British sources.



5. From Heart to Spirit

"Hope was restored to the world because the world was God's discourse to man." — Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (1989)

The program closes with the late-12th century hymn, **'Oblatum canticum'**, offering the audience a "song from the marrow of the heart to the kind spirit". The veil of the *primum mobile* has been dissolved: unification is finally reached between the moving and unmoving spheres of the cosmos, and between the flesh and the spirit.

Mara Winter
March 2024

Celestial Visions

Image sources

1. Doubting Thomas

Getty Museum, Ms. 101 (2008.3), fol. 89

ca. 1190–1200

Unknown artist/maker

2. The Woman Clothed in the Sun

Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig III 1 (83.MC.72), fol. 20

ca. 1255–1260

Unknown artist/maker

3. Signs of Judgement Day

The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol. 41

ca. 1330

Unknown artist/maker

4. Pilgrim badge of a boar playing the bagpipes

ca. 1375-1450

Unknown artist/maker

5. The Virgin and Child in a Red Rose

Getty Museum, Ms. 101 (2008.3), fol. 78v

ca. 1480–1490

Unknown artist/maker

6. Manuscript page of 'Mirie it is while sumer ilast'

GB-Ob Rawl G 22, f.1v

ca. 1300-1350

Anonymous

7. Representation of the Holy Trinity

Rothschild Canticles, Beinecke MS 404, fol. 40r

ca. 1300

Unknown artist/maker

Celestial Visions

Ms Sources

Ante thronum regentis omnia

Gb-Lbl Harley 978, f.13r

Mater dei, lumen rei—Miro genere

Gb-Llp 457, f.192r

Edi beo þu
Gb-Occc 59, f.113v

Mellis stila, maris stella
Gb-Ob Rawl. G 18, f.106v

Duce creature
Gb-Lbl Harley 978, ff.9v-10r

Worldes blis ne last no throwe
Gb-Lbl Arundel 248, ff.154r-155r

Frigiscente karitatis
Gb-Ob Bodley 79, f.56r-v

Mult s'asprime li termines
Gb-Ob Rawl. G22, ff.1r-v

Felix sanctorum
Gb-Lbl Harley 978, ff.10v-11r

El tens d'iver
Gb-Cpc 113, ff.35v-36r

Veri floris sub figura
Gb-Lbl Harley 524, f.63r

Foweles in þe frith
Gb-Ob Douce 139, f.5r

Mirie it is, while sumer i last
Gb-Ob Rawl. G22, f.1v

Oblatum canticum