



Fall 2017

16th Century Antiphon

Abigail K. Major '19, Gettysburg College

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Major, Abigail K., "16th Century Antiphon" (2017). *Wonders of Nature and Artifice*. 13.
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16th Century Antiphon

Abstract

The Renaissance era, which spanned from the 14th century until the 16th century, served as a transitional period. Considered to be a period of rebirth, the Renaissance commenced a revival in culture, literature, and the arts throughout Europe. The 16th century antiphon not only signifies that music was indeed an important aspect during the Renaissance, but is also tangible evidence that choral music, and more specifically Gregorian chant, were prominent forms of musical expression.

Keywords

antiphon, music, choral music, Gregorian chant, religious music

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

Produced as part of a collaboration between Kay Etheridge's course FYS-188: Exploration of the Marvelous: Art and Science in the Renaissance, and Felicia Else's course ARTH 284: Wonders of Nature and Artifice: The Renaissance Quest for Knowledge.

Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/16th-century-antiphon/>

Sample of Antiphon melody included.

16th Century Antiphon

By Abigail Katherine Major



Front of Antiphon, ink on vellum, 16th century, 14.5 x 19.75 in., on loan from Bruce R. Stefany, class of 1971 & Betsy Stefany. Photo by Sydney Gush



Back of Antiphon, ink on vellum, 16th century, 14.5 x 19.75 in., on loan from Bruce R. Stefany, class of 1971 & Betsy Stefany. Photo by Sydney Gush

The Renaissance era, which spanned from the 14th century until the 16th century, served as a transitional period. Considered to be a period of rebirth, the Renaissance commenced a revival in culture, literature, and the arts throughout Europe. The 16th century antiphon not only signifies that music was indeed an important aspect during the Renaissance, but is also tangible evidence that choral music, and more specifically Gregorian chant, were prominent forms of musical expression.

What is an Antiphon?



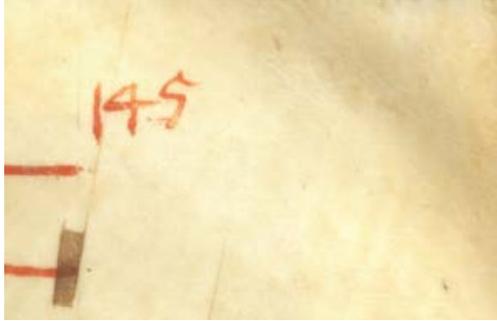
An example of how an antiphony would have been used. Jan van Eyck's excerpt of The Ghent Altarpiece showing the Singing Angels. By carulmare [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

An antiphon is a piece of religious text set to music, usually in the form of Gregorian chant. Ideally, the piece would be comprised of short sentences and phrases which would typically be derived from a psalm, or another piece of religious text. An antiphon could be included in a larger piece of work called an antiphoner: “one of the three liturgical books used for the Divine Office”.¹ The antiphoner would include a large collection of various antiphons, and would be of considerable size in order for all the choir members to be able to easily read the notes.² When performed during Roman Catholic services, the compositions would be sung by the choir and require a short response by the congregation (also known as a call and response). While the lyrics may have been derived from different passages and the melodies were unique, these pieces were similar in purpose: to exalt and glorify God.

What About This 16th Century Antiphon?

[See the melody to the score here.](#)

The antiphon is comprised of vellum, also known as parchment typically made from the skin of a calf. Black and red tones of ink are present on the page: the five lines that create the musical staff are red, while black ink is used for the notation on the staff and the text. The use of these two different colors offers a clear distinction between the lines and musical notes.



The top right corner of the front leaf of the antiphon. A number (145) is seen, suggesting that it was once part of a larger work. Ink on vellum, 16th century, on loan from Bruce R. Stefany '71 & Betsy Stefany. Photo by Sydney Gush, Special Collections Gettysburg College.

The red numbering in the top right corner on the front of the antiphon could be a page number, which would suggest that this antiphon was indeed a part of a much larger antiphonary. The size of the antiphon would strengthen this claim (14.5 x 19.75 in.), since antiphonaries would have been of considerable size in order for the chorus members to be able to see the musical notation and text.³

While it is certain that the antiphon is from the 16th century, the area of origin is unknown. Examining various antiphons from different areas suggests that this particular antiphon is of Spanish origin. While it is overall uncommon that the five-lined staff would have been used in the 16th century, the Spanish used the five-line staff much more frequently than neighboring nations during the 1500s.⁴ Comparing and contrasting against other fellow antiphons from the same general time period assist in supporting this claim that the antiphon is of Spanish origin.



[The Annunciation to the Shepherds and Mary Magdalene at the Tomb of Christ antiphon](#), ink on vellum. Believed to have originated from the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Photo by Sotheby's.

In [The Annunciation to the Shepherds and Mary Magdalene at the Tomb of Christ antiphon](#), which is to be believed from either Italy or Spain during the second quarter of the sixteenth century, five red staff lines are used along with accompanying black text and notation.⁵ The general format is similar between the two antiphons, although heavy illustration is placed in the top left corner of [Tomb of Christ](#) antiphon.

The [Spanish Chant Manuscript Leaves at University of Northern Iowa](#) offers another chance at comparison. The similarities are uncanny: five red staff lines are present on both antiphons, notation and text are overwhelmingly in black ink, and both pieces lack extensive (if any) decoration. The lack of illustration and illumination is yet another feature that invokes the claim of Spanish origin. Spanish manuscripts were “usually quite plain, and lacked the elements that would serve to distinguish more elaborate manuscripts...serving the practical needs of the liturgy in cathedrals and monasteries.”⁶

Indeed, the Spanish manuscripts seem to be rather simplistic in style when compared to Gregorian chants from Italy.



[Leaf from a Gradual](#), ink on vellum. Originally from 16th century Spain, this leaf shares many similarities with the 16th century antiphon examined in this blog post. Photo by University of Northern Iowa.

For example, the [Leaf from a Franciscan Antiphoner](#) contains colorful decorations on the left side of the page, and the letter at the beginning of each line is beautifully embellished.⁷

To restate, the use of five staff lines along with the simplistic design that is featured on the antiphon suggests that this 16th century antiphon is originally from Spain. While the complete story of the antiphon up until present day is unclear, it is not uncommon that antiphons would be sliced from antiphoners and sold individually.⁸

Looking at the antiphon closely, there seems to be a possibility that this antiphon may be unfinished. The light lines that frame the entire score is one clue. It almost seems as if these light linear sketches were drawn to be a “frame” – serving as a guide for where to write the musical notation and text. In addition to the lines that seem to frequent the vellum, the ‘C’ on the back page is of particular interest.



A close up of the back of Antiphon. What originally looks like an ‘A’ turns out to be an unfinished ‘C’. Ink on vellum, 16th century, on loan from Bruce R. Stefany '71 & Betsy Stefany. Photo by Sydney Gush, Special Collections Gettysburg College.

While at first glance it may resemble an ‘A’, it is more probable that it is actually a ‘C’ since the word “cum” is a commonly used word in Latin meaning “with” – unlike “aum” which does not exist. The letter looks quite empty due to the abundance of space on its left that has been included in its shape. The notion that the antiphon may be incomplete can be further argued when comparing it to [The Annunciation to the Shepherds and Mary Magdalene at the Tomb of Christ antiphon](#). As established before, the [Tomb of Christ](#) antiphon is rather simple in style – a similarity shared between the two antiphons.

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A close up of [The Annunciation to the Shepherds and Mary Magdalene at the Tomb of Christ antiphon](#), ink on vellum. This image shows the extravagantly illustrated letter “D”. Photo by Sotheby’s.

However, the ‘D’ that is at the top of the page is gorgeously and extravagantly decorated.⁹ If the [Tomb of Christ](#), while rather barren in regards of decoration, can still feature a beautifully complex and detailed illustration, it is plausible that the 16th century antiphon currently located in Special Collections & College Archives could have also been destined for such a decoration. If one is able to draw upon the power of their own mind, and imagine the [Tomb of Christ](#) prior to the lavishly decorated ‘D’, one can assume that the undecorated ‘D’ would have looked just as barren and lonesome as the ‘C’ does in the 16th century antiphon.

What about the notation?

The piece begins in the key of C, as indicated by the C clef that is placed at the very beginning of the measure. The key of C seems to be constant until the ninth line, where the clef symbol seems to have altered. Although the new clef signage seems to resemble that of an F clef, this idea should be embraced with a degree of caution. While it is possible that the music could change keys, it would be an awkward transition in regards to the way music theory works and functions.¹⁰



The first line on the front of the Antiphon. The two shortened squares before the first note signifies the key of ‘C’, while the half square at the end of the line is a custos. Ink on vellum, 16th century, on loan from Bruce R. Stefany ’71 & Betsy Stefany. Photo by Sydney Gush, Special Collections Gettysburg College.

At the end of each line a custos appears in the form of what looks like a regular note split in half. The custos is not a note to be sung, but rather indicates the next note on the following line. The notes themselves are of all equal shape and shading, suggesting that all the notes are held at the same length. However, it should be kept in mind that the idea that notes could have different

values would have not have existed at this point in time.¹¹ With this said, there are certain instances in the antiphon where there is more than one note per a syllable. For example, four syllables comprise the Latin word “inducerent” but six musical notes accompany the word. This suggests that while musical note values may have not been formally established, composers of music were not afraid to (1) elongate the time spent on a particular part of a word through the use of repeating the same note, and (2) express movement and apply change of tone on one syllable of a word.

What about the lyrics?

All of the text that has been able to be identified is derived from the book of Luke in the Bible, thus again emphasizing the religious purpose and meaning this manuscript carries. One important physical feature in regards to the text is the use of diamond dots above a letter. Three diamond shapes above a letter signifies that an ‘m’ should be added prior to the next letter, while two diamond points above a letter meant an ‘n’ should be added.



An excerpt from the front of the Antiphon. Three sets of a pair of diamonds can be seen in this image, which signifies the addition of a “m” after the letter it appears above (eg. adreuelatione(m) gentiu(m), et gloria(m)). Ink on vellum, 16th century, on loan from Bruce R. Stefany '71 & Betsy Stefany. Photo by Sydney Gush, Special Collections Gettysburg College.

Most times, these additions occur at the end of the word, but occasionally these diamond groupings appear on a letter in the middle of a word. Furthermore, in two instances (both words being proper nouns), ‘s’s resembled ‘f’s. Finally, ‘u’s could at certain times be drawn with a flare for style, sometimes resembling what at first glance could look like miniature ‘b’s.

Translation

Latin:

English:

Lumen adre

A light for

uelatione(m) gentiu(m), et

revelation to the Gentiles, and

gloria(m) plebis tua,

for glory to your people

Israel. Sccul. am.

Israel.¹²

Otuleru(n)t pro-

and they offered

<i>eo Domino par tur</i>	a sacrifice to/for the Lord
<i>turu(m) aut duor pul</i>	a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons
<i>los cotu(m)baru(m). pr. Lau.</i>	according to the law of the Lord. ¹³
<i>ad une anma</i>	
<i>Cum indu-</i>	When the parents brought
<i>cerent pueru(m) Jesum</i>	the child Jesus ¹⁴

Commentary on the translation

The first phrase can not only be located in Luke 2:32, but can also be found in *Nunc dimittis*, a canticle that is sung during evening worship services.¹⁵ *Nunc dimittis*, also known as the *Song of Simeon*, is an account of the words Simeon spoke as he held baby Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem. This phrase is connected to the Feast of the Presentation of Christ, also known as Candlemas, which is celebrated on February 2nd.

This phrase is followed by “Scul. An.” The red lettering of the ‘s’ in “Scul.” suggest this is an abbreviated that would have been sung in response, again invoking the concept that this is a “call and response” choral piece. The text continues with the phrase about the sacrifice of the two turtledoves.¹⁶ This phrase is associated with the Feast of Purificatio Mariae, or the Purification of Mary, which – like Candlemas – also occurs on February 2nd. The combination of abbreviated Latin and red lettering that follows can once again indicate that a response is once again occurring. The last section of the text, telling its audience about how the parents brought Jesus into the temple, once again invokes the story of Candlemas and the Purification of Mary.¹⁷



The goal of a Cabinet of Curiosity was to acquire knowledge. By doing so, man was glorifying God and the numerous wonders that he had created. For man, learning all that he could about the world and the creations of God before dying was the purpose of life. Religious pieces were commonly displayed in these cabinets as a reminder to the viewer that God existed, had created all living and non-living things – ultimately humbling mankind and reminding humans of their relationship with the Creator – and that God was the inspiration for the creation of these Cabinets of Curiosity. In addition, the antiphon also demonstrates that Christianity was a prominent aspect in the daily lives of citizens.

How would this antiphon fit into a Cabinet of Curiosity?

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