

Music for a late Anglo-Saxon Benedictine Abbey: The Winchester Troper

The British Academy has published a facsimile of the Winchester Troper, an eleventh-century manuscript held by Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Professor Susan Rankin discusses its origins and explains why it has an iconic status in the history of English music.

... when this reliquary had been completed in a sufficiently pleasing fashion, the renowned bishop and reverend father Æthelwold enclosed a part of the saint's body within it, and he announced to the king that everything the king had commissioned was completed. Having heard these words, the king rejoices with gladdened heart, and orders the finished reliquary to be presented to him. When he has inspected it he becomes happier still, and he quickly dedicates it with all his heart to God and to St Swithun; and immediately he dispatched those thegns whom by chance he had with him, ordering them to go at once with swift pace – and with the entire retinue besides – into the service of the holy father, even adding, moreover that each person from Winchester, of whatever age and sex – whether slave or nobly born, whosoever dwelled in that town – was to proceed barefoot over the three miles, and was to go to meet the holy patron with reverence, so that every tongue might magnify God in unison and the ethereal radiance would shine everywhere through the chanting, and St Swithun would be translated to the city with glorious acclaim . . .

(*Narratio metrica de S. Swithuno*, Wulfstan of Winchester)¹

This description of two processions advancing to meet each other – the one carrying a resplendent reliquary fashioned from silver, ruby gems and gold, the other composed of the entire populace of Winchester, proceeding barefoot – encapsulates the relation of a patron saint to the community who worship at his shrine. Radiant in his holiness, the saint demanded reverent respect: behaving penitently, the community could ask that the saint intercede with God on their behalf. It would scarcely be possible to imagine such a meeting of the inhabitants of heaven and earth without musical expressions of praise. Music could unite the throng and give voice to the feelings of all – articulate and inarticulate.

The power of music underlies an enormous investment made by the medieval church in its performance, teaching and regulation. For the worshipping community music could enhance expressions of praise with beauty:

<i>Laude pulchra</i>	With beautiful praise
<i>Vox omnis dulcisona</i>	Let every voice sweet-sounding
<i>Cantica melliflua</i>	Sing mellifluous song
<i>Regi regum iubilet per secla.</i>	To the King of kings for ever.

(CCCC 473, fol. 133r)

The sounds of music could be glorious in their colours and volume:

Candida contio melos concrepa Tinnula cantibus iunges organa.
Germanum resulent castra liquida sonora simphonia
Artificis plectro perita sillabarum stringere pneumata.

O splendid assembly sound so you join the tinkling notes
 the melodies in song

Let the bright squadrons sound out 'Germanus' in resounding
 harmony,

(squadrons) expert in strumming the breaths of the syllables
 with a master's plectrum.

(CCCC 473, fol. 112v)

Music could help to elucidate the words, and to shape their meaning:

Clarissimis uocibus inclita cane turma sacra melodimata

Uoci mens bene consona sonent uerbis pneumata concordia.

With clear voices, O famous throng, sing the sacred melodies;

let the mind in consonance with the voice, the melodies in
 consonance with the words, sound in concord.

(CCCC 473, fol. 95r)

And, of course, in music, many could express joy together.

Over and above these ways of shaping music sung in communal ritual, the church fathers were deeply aware of the influence music might have on individual belief. In the words of St Augustine, music had the power to 'move the soul', and 'with a warmer devotion', could 'kindle [the soul] to piety'. Since 'through the delights of the ear the weaker mind may rise up towards the devotion of worship', the opportunity to hear the Word of God delivered in music held a central place in all forms of ecclesiastical ritual in the Middle Ages.

The date of the reliquary procession advancing towards Winchester was 8 October 971:² the king was Edgar; the saint Swithun. The saint's remains had been exhumed from a sepulchre outside the west door of the Old Minster by Bishop Æthelwold (Figure 1) on 15 July 971. From



Figure 1:
 Bishop
 Æthelwold in
 Winchester
 Cathedral.
 (British
 Library Add.
 MS 49598)

this day on, the ‘miraculous efficacy’ of Swithun’s relics was established: lives of the saint composed in the decades immediately after the exhumation recount many and varied miracles, above all, the healing of the sick and the casting out of demons.

The sense of closeness to a saint, the ability to make an individual plea directly to that saint, was enormously enhanced by the presence of relics and of access to them for pilgrims, the sick, the needy. The significance in Winchester of Swithun’s care for the community on earth, and then in heaven, was marked by the composition of a great deal of special poetry and music for his feasts. In chants composed to celebrate his feast days (death on earth and birth into heaven on 2 July, and the translation of his relics on 15 July), the monks of the Old Minster at Winchester sang of the saint’s qualities, marked out by God before birth, worthy to live among the saints and angels in heaven (Figure 2). With these praises they linked petitions for the saint’s protection, and for his unceasing intercession with God (‘incessanter pro nobis supplica Deum’). A third element in their chants for St Swithun’s Day was his ability to heal the sick – given considerable emphasis through musical elaboration: in the chant ‘Laudemus dominum’ (‘Let us praise the Lord in the glorious achievements of the blessed bishop Swithun: the sick come to his tomb and are cured’), the

last words ‘et sanantur’ are extended to take almost as long to sing as the rest of the chant. Whether or not the sick could hear and understand such tributes was immaterial: it was the monks’ responsibility not only to care for the shrine materially, but also to maintain spiritual contact with the saint, on behalf of those among whom they lived.

The Winchester Troper

These compositions by Winchester monks in honour of Swithun form part of a large repertory of new liturgical compositions collected in a small (but thick) book made in the early eleventh century at the Old Minster: many of these pieces survive uniquely in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 473. Three kinds of new composition have been recorded here. A repertory of tropes for the whole liturgical year consisted of newly-composed phrases which could be inserted into the older Gregorian chants: these extended, elaborated and elucidated the standard church chants. For the mass Introit on Swithun’s feast, for example (Figure 3), instead of beginning ‘The Lord established a covenant of peace with him’, the Winchester monks sang ‘Behold the day, venerable through the accomplishments of our great patron saint, who accordingly was a joyous splendour among the people: The Lord



Figure 2: Organa for office chants in honour of St Swithun. Approximately full size (CCCC 473 fols 187v–188r)

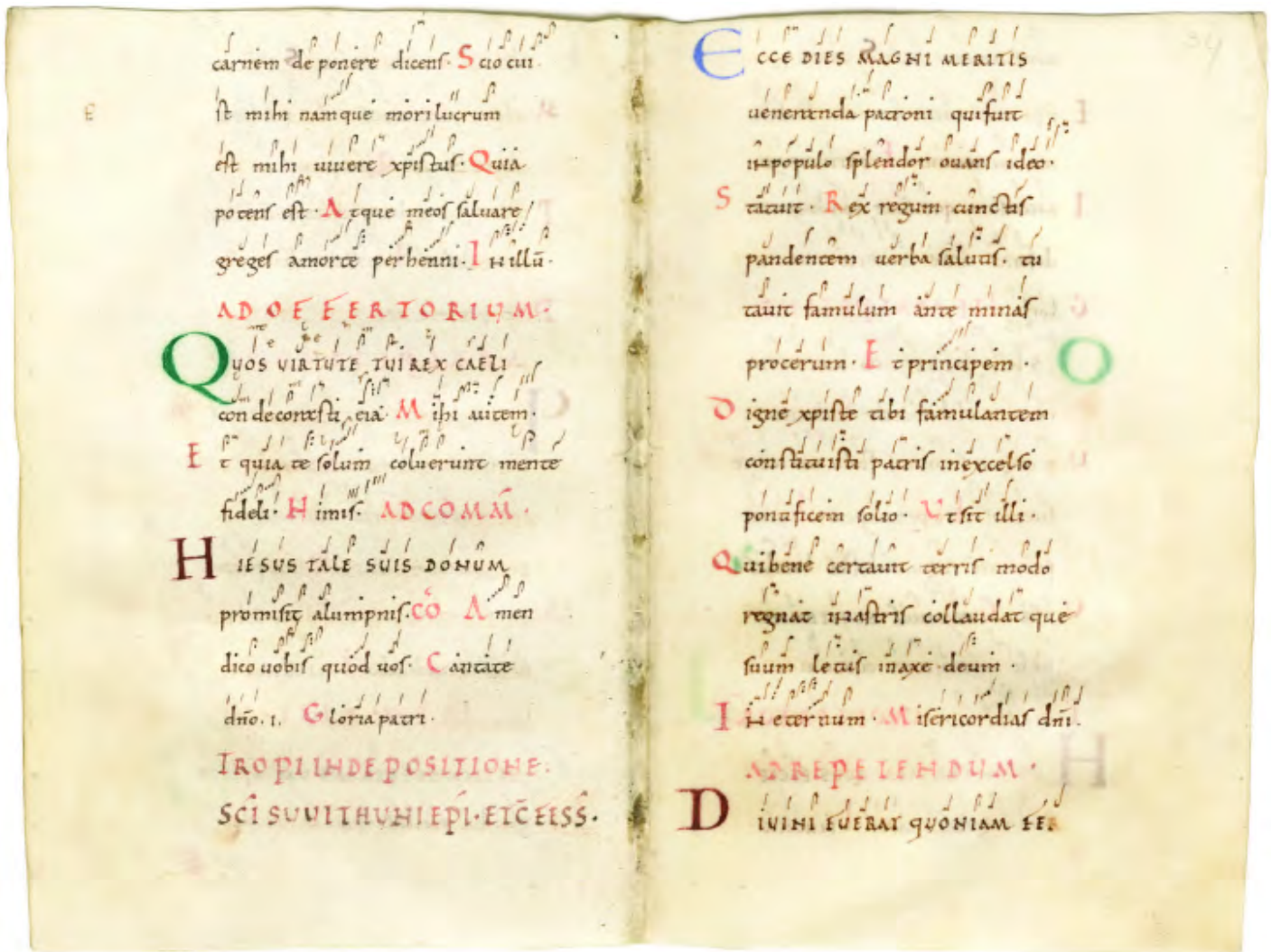


Figure 3: Tropes for the mass Introit on a feast of St Swithun. Approximately full size (CCCC 473 fols 38v–39r)

established a covenant of peace with him'.³ Such ways of treating the older, inherited, Gregorian chant allowed musicians to design a liturgy to celebrate their own local situation, to express their own special praises, to respond to their own distinctive challenges. A second repertory of new compositions, the melodic sequences and text proses – which could be sung as pure melody, or as text and melody together – were made to follow the Alleluia at mass; although formally independent of the Gregorian Alleluia, these proses often echo the Alleluia chant through repetition of the end-rhyme 'a'. Finally, the book includes 174 polyphonic settings for a broad range of mass and office chants: this collection represents the most original feature of the book, since it records ways of singing which must have been familiar elsewhere, but which were seldom written down. Indeed, this repertory of two-part music has no match in surviving European manuscripts before the thirteenth century, rendering it very precious indeed. Study of the notations for these *organa* has now led to secure transcription of substantial passages, opening up to scrutiny a previously 'lost' repertory. Analysis of the *organa* has revealed a more sophisticated approach to musical composition than anticipated by historians, while their sound can be heard as both striking and engaging (Figure 4).

One music scribe notated the tropes, sequences, most of the proses, and wrote out text and music for the *organa*: he must be considered the guiding spirit behind the project, and probably at the time of making the book, cantor (musical director) for the abbey. The notational system available to him (first invented in the ninth century) consisted of a range of dots, dashes, squiggles and letters, used to show in writing



Figure 4: At the launch of the facsimile edition, held in April 2008 in the Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Jesse Billett and Matthew Ward sang polyphonic music from the Winchester Troper beside the manuscript itself in the glass case.

those ways in which specific melodic patterns were linked to specific words. Unlike modern Western musical notation, it was not the primary object of this notation to record precise details of a pitch pattern: that information would be learnt by one singer from another, and stored in their memories. The written signs (known as 'neumes') were then intended to help a singer recall melodic detail and ways of singing individual notes. But the more local and recent the composition, the fewer singers knew it, and the less deep its roots in the memory of the musical community. That was a particular issue in relation to repertoires such as those preserved in this little book. In reaction the music scribe used a series of techniques to clarify his notations, including a special sign to designate nearness to a semitone step, and letters to signal large intervallic jumps, or anything unexpected. Such techniques became, in the notation of the polyphonic *organa*, extremely refined. The book thus represents not only an important collection of Anglo-Saxon compositions, but also a significant record of musical palaeography, and an enormous resource for study of the use and understanding of musical notation in the early Middle Ages.

Notes

- 1 Edited and translated by Michael Lapidge: see his *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies 4.ii (Oxford, 2003), including accounts of Swithun's translation and miracles by Lantfred, Wulfstan and Ælfric.
- 2 The year might also have been 972, 3 or 4, but 971 is the most likely: see Lapidge, *The Cult*, 19.
- 3 'Ecce dies magni meritis ueneranda patroni / qui fuit in populo splendor ouans ideo. STATUIT EI DOMINUS TESTAMENTUM PACIS'

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The Winchester Troper: Facsimile edition and introduction, by Susan Rankin, was published in December 2007 as Volume 50 in the British Academy series *Early English Church Music*.

The aim of the *Early English Church Music* (EECM) series is to make available church music by English composers from the earliest times to the middle of the seventeenth century, in accordance with the highest scholarly standards. The present General Editor is Magnus Williamson.



December 2007 also saw the publication of Volume 49, Reinhard Strohm's edition of Mass settings from the Lucca choirbook – the sixth volume of *Fifteenth-Century Liturgical Music* in the series. EECM's commitment to the sixteenth-century repertory remains equally strong. Having published the complete church music of John Taverner, Robert White and Christopher Tye, EECM will soon bring to fruition its collected works of Robert Fayrfax, Nicholas Ludford and John Sheppard, as well as the most significant music collections of the mid sixteenth century, including the Gyffard partbooks and John Day's *Certain Notes* (1560/1565). And there will be further Anglican church music from the early seventeenth century (complementing EECM's editions of Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Tomkins).

Since its first volume in 1963, EECM has served the needs of both scholars and performers. Volumes 41 and 42 heralded a major change in EECM's editorial style, introducing a new large-scale format and an intensification of EECM's commitment to source-fidelity (in which as much as possible is retained of the original notation). This places EECM in the vanguard of current editorial practice: instantly recognisable, EECM volumes can be depended upon as accurate and comprehensive scholarly sources.

EECM's substantial back-catalogue is now fully available online in the form of downloadable PDF files of individual pieces (over 700 in all), via www.eecm.net
