

## FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT

# Music in the collegiate church of Our Lady in Antwerp (c.1370 - c.1530): a European hub?

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## REPORT INFO

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## ABSTRACT

*The collegiate church of Our Lady in Antwerp played an important role in the development of polyphonic music in the Low Countries and Europe during the long 15th century, with first-rank composers such as Johannes Ockeghem, Johannes Pulloys, Jacobus Barbireau and Jacobus Obrecht as central figures. However, this period has received very little attention, perhaps because it stood in the shadow of the enormous economic and cultural sixteenth-century boom. The fact that much of the earliest source material was lost, among other things due to religious wars and the French Revolution, did not facilitate the research. This is particularly unfortunate because the fundament for the flourishing musical life was laid precisely in this earlier period (cf. the papal singer's bull of 1410). By conducting research both in breadth (interdisciplinary) and depth (extensive documentation from the archives, supplemented by that from the secondary literature and by comparative research in other countries), we nevertheless succeeded in creating a better picture of the mechanisms that lay at the basis of this success. Thus, we learned more about when and how music was performed, how it was perceived by both performers and listeners, how environmental sounds were dealt with, how it fitted in with the religious experience, etc. Contacts with the papal chapels of Rome and Avignon, exchanges with courts in Northern Italy, Spain, France, England, Germany, Hungary rich foundations for musical performances, were an ideal breeding ground for the musical flowering. In other words: contextualising music proved to be essential for a better understanding of the functioning and unprecedented success of the local musical life.*

## 1- Introduction

Research in art history, including music history, focuses more and more on the circumstances in which art was created, how it was presented and how it was experienced. Translated to musicology and church music, this means: research into music in its context (functionality, spatial reality), into the documented performance practice and into the experience that this multi-layered music elicits from various parties involved. These are, respectively, the composer, the historical and contemporary performers, the believer of the past and the music lover of the present. Central to this is an intensive multi-sensory approach. In other words, a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' avant-la-lettre was created at the time. In this research, the collegiate church (later, in 1559 cathedral) of Our Lady in Antwerp served as a case study against the background of a broader European framework.

Until now, research on music in the collegiate church of Our Lady in Antwerp has mainly focused on the 'golden' sixteenth century, but not on the fifteenth when the base was laid. Yet it was precisely then that composers of international renown were employed such as Johannes Ockeghem, Jacobus Barbireau, and Jacobus Obrecht. Antwerp's close ties with the chapels of both the Burgundian-Habsburg court and the pope, its position of favour with the Habsburg monarchs, bustling commercial contacts throughout Europe, and donations to the church from wealthy citizens wanting to ensure their salvation made the city one of northern Europe's most important economic and cultural capitals, famous among many things for its music life.

The primary intention of this study was to arrive at a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying this rich music scene, and to place music in its urban, socio-cultural, and European context. This contextualization, along with an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to the subject, provides a new framework for the blossoming of this extraordinary musical and liturgical culture. This research also improves our understanding of how the many Renaissance compositions were performed and perceived at Our Lady's Church. It contributes

to better historical reconstructions in an acoustical and visual environment. An extra dimension is the attention paid to the experience of religion in general and music in particular.

The main result will be presented in a book (Brepols, Turnhout, 2024) on musical life in Antwerp's main church from the point of view of a musicologist and an art historian. The background is the European music history. The public relevance will be addressed through several concerts in which the new scholarly insights on performance practice will be used, complemented by several pedagogical projects at Antwerp Conservatoire that will make use of these insights.

## 2- Experimental details

In order to conduct the research efficiently, we first undertook a four-year preliminary study (2016-2020) in Antwerp, thanks to the financial support of the Royal Conservatoire. This research, which was mainly archival in orientation, convincingly showed that the many existing gaps could be filled. This was done by systematically examining archival and literary sources, in combination with a critical (re)examination of secondary literature. The latter consisted mainly the unpublished handwritten notes by city archivist and musicographer Léon de Burbure (14 vols.) and the twenty-volume magnum opus by canon Floris Prims. The latter, however, hardly mentioned any sources. Thanks to thorough research of the archives of Antwerp Cathedral, many lacunas could be filled in, references could be found and new insights could emerge by studying the original sources. In addition, this research project also brought us to a better understanding of the Antwerp case within a European music historical framework. We refer here to the research done on the networking of musicians as well as to the comparative research into liturgical customs, especially in the south of the Netherlands, northern and central France and the region of Cologne - Aix-la-Chapelle in Germany. The fact that many singers were in contact with colleagues at Italian and German courts, the papal chapel and large court cultures in France, Spain and England contributed to the

circulation of the music and the manner of its performance. One of the most important ways for European courts and cathedrals to attract composers was by providing benefices to the - often clerical - singers. This not only ensured a decent income, but enabled those who wished to do so to return to their homeland after years of service.

The number of unknown singers that emerged added greatly to those already known to us and strengthened Antwerp's reputation for excellent singers and instrumentalists. Despite the loss of a great deal of archival material, we were able to add many new names to the list of musicians or to complete biographies, which of course is an interesting addition to the 'Prosopography of Singers' database of the CESR (Ricerca).

Undeniably, the research in the CESR library was essential to complete the data already found. This was made possible thanks to our stay in Tours (2020-2021), financially supported by Le Studium. Also, contacts with researchers of the CESR (e.g. the prosopographical database led by David Fiala) provided important additions in this field.

However, in view of the situation created by the Covid-19 outbreak, we were obliged to reorient our research. Planned work visits in Cambrai, Paris, Vienna, Florence and Rome turned out not to be possible. Therefore, in the CESR we not only focused on biographical data, but also concentrated more on comparative research into the performance practice of music in several European collegiate churches. Discussions with CESR researchers and participation in conferences in Saintes and Florence also proved to be particularly valuable in this context.

Finally, the focus was also broadened by placing more emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach. Researchers of the CESR such as Daniel Saulnier (music and liturgy) and fifteen external internationally renowned researchers were invited at the colloquium that I organised in September 2021 thanks to the support of Le Studium, Ricerca (CESR) and Illuminare (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven). Last but not

least, art historian Wendy Wauters (KU Leuven) should be mentioned, a colleague with whom I will finish the planned book by August 2024. Needless to say, this will enhance the interdisciplinary aspect.

### 3- Future

As mentioned above, despite the unforeseen Covid handicap and thanks to a partial but successful reorientation (cf. supra) the achieved results are very significant in several areas. They formed the basis for the determination of content and structure of the planned book on the music in the collegiate church of Our Lady in Antwerp. The book will therefore be a comprehensive representation of the research results.

Essential for the interdisciplinary approach applied in this book were, as stated above, the contacts with researchers of the CESR, worldwide contacts with fellow researchers and the colloquium that we organised. Those provided critical comments, in-depth analyses and well-founded hypotheses, essential for the quality of the planned book. Research results were also presented to specialists during participation in three colloquia (Tours, Saintes, Florence) and will be presented during two future colloquia in Padua (September 2022) and Antwerp (August 2023).

In essence, the book will focus on:

- 1) Music, liturgy and performance practice, seen through an interdisciplinary lens.
- 2) The role of the performers, with a large amount of new data that map the network available to musicians and their patrons much more clearly. This also includes the detection of certain stylistic influences via music analysis.
- 3) The perception of the religious experience in general and of the music in particular, among both performers and listeners.

In addition to the presentation of the results in the book, articles in leading journals and

contributions to colloquia, this research also has a social relevance because, in cooperation with professional partners (*Laus polyphoniae* festival), programmes for a wider audience will be presented in dialogue with top performers, compiled on the basis of the results of the research carried out. A recording of these concerts is also planned.

Finally, there is also an important artistic-educational component via the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, as a number of works by composers connected with the Antwerp main church will be rehearsed during workshops and presented in concert form in the Musical Instruments Museum in Antwerp (Vleeshuis - Sound of the City: autumn – winter 2022). My experience as a performing musician (Capilla Flamenca) will certainly be useful in this context.

#### 4- Conclusion

Thanks to the joint support of the University College Antwerp / Royal Conservatoire, the Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance, and the financial and logistic support of Le Studium, this research could be brought to a successful end. For the first time, a study of the music (c. 1370 – 1530) in the collegiate church of Our Lady in Antwerp in its broad historical context will be published.

#### 5- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

The exchange of information and ideas that took place during my stay at the CESR in Tours will obviously lead to further collaboration. In the event that I am able to stay in Tours for a further period of 12 months in 2023, further research in archives and libraries in Austria, France and Italy, among other things, will be continued, as this has become impossible due to the Covid circumstances. In that case the prosopographical aspect will also gain in strength thanks to the collaboration with the authors of the CESR database *Prosopographie*

*des Chantres de la Renaissance*. Finally, an English translation of the book is planned and the basis will be laid for a comparative study of music in cathedrals and collegiate churches in the Low Countries and Northern France. After all, the parallels and mutual influences between these two regions were numerous in the context of the development of polyphonic Western European music between 1370 and 1600.

#### 6- Publications and activities in the framework of the fellowship

Besides a book, articles in musicological publications and input in the online prosopographic database, the results of the research were also presented at various colloquia:

1. Paper *Polyphony and Performance Practice in the Church of Our Lady in Antwerp in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century* at the conference *UPdag #2 – Performance Practise in Perspective*, University College Antwerp - Royal Conservatoire, 29 September 2020.
2. Paper *Music in the Collegiate, later Cathedral Church of Our Lady in Antwerp (c. 1370 – 1530): a Mirror of International Prosperity?*, at *Le Studium Thursday. Interdisciplinary monthly seminar*, Tours, 1 April 2021. [virtual meeting due to Covid circumstances]
3. Paper *Benefices for Singers in the Low Countries: Leuven and Antwerp as Case Studies in the Duchy of Brabant (c. 1370 - 1530)* at the *Colloque international “Le fait musical religieux: approches croisées Histoire-Musicologie”*, Saintes, Abbaye-aux-Dames 20-22 May 2021.
4. Chapter in a book: *De muziekbeoefening: ca. 1400 – 1797* [Music Performance: c. 1400-1797] in Gilbert Huybens, David Mellaerts, Brecht Dewilde (eds.), *De Sint-Pieterskerk te Leuven: Architectuur en patrimonium* [the Church of St. Peter in Leuven. Architecture and Patrimony], Leuven, Peeters, 2022, p. 226-243. This contribution contains in part the results of my comparative study on music in collegiate



churches in the Duchy of Brabant, to which Antwerp also belonged. Further results of this comparative study will be integrated in the book on music in the Antwerp collegiate church, which, as mentioned, will appear in 2024.

5. Organisation of and participation during the International Conference *Music and Lived Religion in the Collegiate Church of Our Lady in Antwerp (1370 - 1566). A Multidisciplinary Study in a European context*, Tours, CESR, 2-4 September 2021.

6. Paper *Angelic Hymns of Praise. Rood Lofts in Brabant, Flanders and Liège* at the conference *Aural Architectures of the Divine. Sacred Spaces, Sound and Rites in Transcultural Perspectives*, Florence, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Dipartimento di Storia, Archeologia, Geografia, Arte e Spettacolo (SAGAS). Concept: Klaus Pietschmann and Tobias C. Weißmann (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz), 24–26 February 2022

7. Paper *Experiencing and Interpreting the Soundscape of the Late Medieval Church of Our Lady in Antwerp*, at the conference *Experiencing the Sacred – The Role of the Senses in Medieval Liturgies and Rituals*, Padua, Università degli Studi di Padova University, 21-23 September 2022. [proposal accepted]

8. Preparation of the book *Music and Lived Religion in the Collegiate Church of Our Lady in Antwerp (1352-1566)*, (Epitôme musical series), Turnhout, Brepols, 2024.

excellent accommodation and the practical organisation of the colloquium.

My sincere thanks also go to the CESR (director: Prof. Benoist Pierre) and in particular the team of the Ricercar programme under the inspiring and stimulating leadership of Prof. Philippe Vendrix. I would like to sincerely thank the researchers there and the support staff: without them, this research would never have become what it is today and will become in the future. At the risk of being incomplete, I would like to mention Hyacinthe Belliot, Vincent Besson, Philippe Canguilhem, Camilla Cavicchi, David Fiala, Esperanza Garcia, Agostino Magro, Daniel Saulnier, Vasco Zara, Gaetan Naulleau, and many others).

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