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CHAPTER 1

‘Sowndys and melodiis’: Perceptions of Sound and Music in Late Medieval England

Lisa Colton

The perception of noise and music by individuals, and the meanings that they attributed to sounds heard and imagined, are revealed in various texts from the later Middle Ages. Many writers incorporated references to ‘heavenly’ or ‘hellish’ sounds into their religious writings, often as a metaphor for the divine or as representative of more earthly, morally corrupting delights. In spite of moves by the Cistercians and other religious groups to regulate plainchant, and to eradicate unauthorized or ‘lascivious’ melodies, new musical styles developed within the Christian church that explored ever more ambitious textures, rhythms, harmonies and performance practices.¹ Outside of regular, institutional worship, the piety of individuals was also informed by sound in ways that have attracted less attention, especially when such authors did not also compose music.

This chapter will draw on texts by English mystics and religious commentators whose writings were considered unorthodox in order to examine how sound was understood by writers living on the fringes of official religious doctrine. Focusing on ideas generated by writers whose spiritual practices were criticized as heretical allows the exploration of sound as it was perceived away from the ‘mainstream’, approved practices of the Church. Examples will include the spiritual song of Richard Rolle (d. 1349), sounds experienced by Margery Kempe (c.1373–after 1438) and the description of performance found in the reforming tracts of John Wycliffe (d. 1384) and his contemporaries. The devotional texts of these individuals were informed by the teachings of the Christian church, but were, paradoxically, also positioned against the prevailing

¹ See Chrysogonus Waddell, ‘The Origin and Early Evolution of the Cistercian Antiphony: Reflections on Two Cistercian Chant Reforms’, in M. Basil Pennington (ed.), *The Cistercian Spirit: A Symposium in Memory of Thomas Merton* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970), pp. 190–223 and Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 112–13.

discourse of their age. Many authors drew freely on ideas or even textual phrases from much older theological writings, but employed them within their own distinctive style of writing.² In order to explore especially personal perceptions of musical sound, by people who were less insistent that we should all experience music in an approved fashion, the examples avoid texts such as treatises on plainchant, harmony or the modes. My question is not ‘what did music sound like’, but ‘how did *these* writers perceive sound, and what did it mean to them?’³ The selected writers were not trying to tell their audiences about sound: they were using musical references to explore wider questions of the nature of faith, God or prayer. The link between hearing and the other senses, and between the parts of the body that sensed sound, smell, taste and the visual, will recur in these examples, and for that reason this chapter will start with texts that concern song as a corporeal experience.

Music in the Spiritual Body

Musical sound was a fundamental part of everyday life in the Middle Ages; it was neither restricted to particular times of the day, nor to the architectural confines of particular buildings. The boundaries between sacred and secular forms of song were also fluid, and song was therefore worthy of careful scrutiny by theologians, who feared its morally corrupting properties. In a notable example, the Franciscan Bishop of Kilkenny, Richard Ledrede, compiled the Red Book of Ossory (c.1320) for the vicars choral at St Canice’s Cathedral, appropriating vernacular songs for various liturgical feast days by the substitution of spiritual words.⁴ For Ledrede, the

² On ancient and early medieval texts that relate music and its experience to the body, see Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*, pp. 27–83.

³ For a discussion of how the notated music of the period might have been realized in performance, including a detailed examination of possibilities for ornamentation and improvisation, see Timothy J. McGee, *The Sound of Medieval Song: Ornamentation and Vocal Style According to the Treatises* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

⁴ Edmund Colledge (ed.), *The Latin Poems of Richard Ledrede, C.F.M., Bishop of Ossory, 1317–1360* (Toronto: Pontif. Inst. of Mediaeval Studies, 1974).

songs could fulfil a sacred purpose if their original lyrics were erased and replaced by devotional content, fit for filling the mouths of his clerics. In a specific reference to the physical experience of singing secular poetry, Ledrede claimed that his new texts had a role in moralizing clerics from within their own bodies, ‘lest the throats and mouths [of the brethren] sanctified by God should be defiled by theatrical and worldly songs’.⁵ This practice of *contrafactum* (in which melodies were furnished with replacement texts) created alternative forms of song for new purposes, and was a common way of creating music, sometimes changing meaning subtly and sometimes offering a more wholesale change in a different language and with a subject switched from courtly love to admiration of the Virgin Mary, for example. The sacred and the secular were rarely successfully separated from one another; furthermore, some musicians seem to have delighted in the use of religious and decidedly secular texts and melodies in combination.⁶

An example of such practices in England can be seen in the motet *Herodis in pretorio / Herodis in atrio / Hey hure lure* in a mid-to-late fourteenth-century collection of sacred vocal music from Durham Cathedral (Durham Cathedral Library, MS C. I.20, f. 1^v), in which two upper texts in Latin, relating to Herod and the murder of the Holy Innocents, are placed above a tenor whose French lyrics, though problematic to translate, seem to carry a potentially salacious meaning: ‘Hey, you hairy, strapping fellow, hanging out. Place me downwards, line me up [with you]’.⁷ Frank Harrison has suggested that the fact that the tenor lyrics are written in red ink

⁵ Cited in John Stevens and Dennis Libby, ‘Carol’, *Grove Music Online*, in *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.grove.com> (accessed 7 April 2010).

⁶ On the interplay of sacred and secular references in medieval vocal music, with particular reference to motets, see Sylvia Huot, *Allegorical Play in the Old French Motet* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) and Lisa Colton, ‘The Articulation of Virginity in the Medieval *Chanson de nonne*’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 133/2 (November, 2008): 159–88. On late medieval English examples see John Caldwell, ‘Relations Between Liturgical and Vernacular Music in Medieval England’, in Susan Rankin and David Hiley (eds), *Music in the Medieval English Liturgy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 285–93.

⁷ Translation by Peter M. Lefferts in Frank Ll. Harrison (ed.), *Motets of English Provenance, Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century* vol. 15 (Monaco: L’Oiseau-Lyre, 1980), pp. 197–8. Lefferts gives the final line of the tenor (‘Mettez moi iuse, accoler moy’) as ‘Stitch my gizzard, give me a hung!’ but I would read ‘Place me downwards, line me up [with you]’, based on the Anglo-Norman

(rather than black or brown) might indicate that they were ‘not for use when the motet was performed in choir’, but the visual effect is to draw attention to the lyrics, and the scribe could more easily have covered his source by leaving the tenor tune un-texted.⁸ A modern commentator can only begin to speculate on the complex implications of sacred/profane references in this motet, not least because its performance took place in the homosocial musical culture of Durham Cathedral Priory.⁹

But how was music imagined or experienced in relation to the medieval body and its senses? Sources of evidence that have been relatively neglected by musicologists (though they are well known to scholars of medieval literature and theology) are the writings of the English mystical tradition and texts written by critics of the established church in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The English mystics of the later Middle Ages were not, on the one hand, a ‘school’ as such, in that they did not follow a common theology, or base their writings explicitly on one another’s in a coherent or consistent manner. On the other hand, they can be seen to have shared common concerns with the experience of God in relation to their bodies and to the world around them, and they also reflect, in diverse ways, an awareness of previous and contemporary mystical writings from England and continental Europe. Some mystical writers were associated with monastic communities, or were trained within the Church. Walter Hilton (1340–96), for example, was the head of the Augustinian Priory at Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire. Others, like Margery Kempe, were lay people, hermits or anchorites, who sought authentication of their deeply personal experiences within the wider Christian church. In this way, all such writers were both part of their communities (broadly defined) and positioned in opposition to aspects of theological doctrine or to the expectations of society for religious thinkers. In the

words ‘juse’ (down, downward) and a version of the modern French verb ‘accoler’ (to place side by side) (see <http://www.anglo-norman.net>).

⁸ Harrison, *Motets of English Provenance*, p. 164.

⁹ For an examination of the relationship between homosocial musical cultures and homoeroticism, see Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*, pp. 87–187, especially pp. 87–8.

writings of the English mystics, it is possible to explore both prevailing understandings of faith and human experience and, perhaps more usefully in this study, intensely personal reactions to, and reflections on, sound and the spiritual body.

Richard Rolle: Spiritual Song

The mystical experiences of Richard Rolle were inextricably linked with his sensory perception, the *canor*, *fervor* and *dulcor* – melody, warmth, sweetness – that were frequently described in his various writings, notably in his most famous work the *Incendium amoris*, or ‘Fire of Love’, which still survives in over 40 copies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As Nicholas Watson has noted, Rolle’s sensory experiences were usually described in a ranked order, from sight of heaven through touch (*fervor*), smell or taste (*dulcor*) to sound and song (*canor*).¹⁰ Rolle experienced *fervor* and *dulcor* in his chapel nine months before his receipt of the gift of *canor*, spiritual song, a time lapse that related his musical inspiration to the pregnant female body. His gift of song was described as a reflection of the music of heaven, in Rolle’s typically alliterative style, and was evidently a deeply physical experience:

While I was sitting in the same chapel and saying the night-psalms before supper as best I could, I heard as it were a ringing of psalmody, or rather of singing, above me. And when I was stretched out in prayer and with all my desire towards heavenly things, I do not know how but I soon felt a symphony of song within myself and caught up from heaven the most delicious harmony, which remained with me in my mind. For my thought was forthwith changed into a tuneful song; and I had as it were melodies in my meditation, and I also gave out the same song in my prayers and psalmody.¹¹

¹⁰ Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 66.

¹¹ ‘Dum enim in eadem capella sederem, et in nocte ante cenam psalmos prout potui decantarem, quasi tinnitum psallencium uel pocius canencium supra me ascoltaui. Cumque celestibus eciam orando toto desiderio intenderem, nescio quomodo mox in me concentum canorum sensi, et delectabilissimam armoniam celicus excepi, mecum manentem in mente. Nam cogitacio mea continuo in carmen canorum commutabatur, et quasi odas habui meditando, et eciam oracionibus ipsis et psalmodia eundem sonum edidi.’ Richard Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*, ch. 15; cited in Margaret Deansley (ed.), *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of*

Rolle's writings reveal that he avoided communal singing and listening to the organ in church (*Incendium Amoris*, ch. 33). He also advocated a manner of singing that seems similar to meditative practices found in many religions:

[The lover of the Godhead] will be sweet and godly and full of song ... Then it is that there happens to such a lover what I have never found in any learned writing or have heard expounded, namely that this song will spring to his lips, and he will sing his prayers in a spiritual symphony of celestial sweetness. It will make him slow of speech ... and what once occupied him not more than an hour he will now find difficult to complete in half a day. And while this is happening he will sit alone, mixing as little as possible with those who sing psalms, and deliberately not singing with the rest. (*Incendium Amoris*, ch. 32)¹²

Spiritual song, Rolle says, 'is not an affair of those outward cadences which are used in church and elsewhere; nor does it blend much with those audible sounds that are made by the human voice and heard by physical ears; but among angel melodies it has its own acceptable harmony' (*Incendium Amoris*, ch. 33).¹³ It is traditional in the literature to understand Rolle's descriptions of spiritual song as internalized – and essentially silent – forms of music, as a form of sound that had 'no physical expression'.¹⁴ To do so neglects the crossover between spiritual song and the descriptive terms Rolle used to explain it, rooted as they were in his knowledge and experience of the liturgy; for example, we are told in the *Incendium Amoris* that on the eve of Assumption day, one year, Rolle attended church to pray, and that the next day he sang at Matins and gave a sermon at Mass. The *Incendium Amoris* makes it clear that the true lover of God will not be able to stand hearing psalmody unless his own inner song is attuned to it (*Incendium Amoris*, ch. 33). Rolle's accommodation as an anchorite by the Cistercian nuns of Hampole brought him into

Hampole (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1915). A critical edition of the Latin text can also be found at <http://www.ccel.org/r/rolle/incendium/incendium.htm>. Trans. Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, pp. 69–70.

¹² Trans. Clifton Wolters (ed.), *Rolle: The Fire of Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 146.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁴ The citation is from Wolters, *The Fire of Love*, p. 27, but the interpretation is typical.

contact with the monastic liturgy, personal piety and musical practices of enclosed women, including anchoress Margaret Kirkby.¹⁵

From writings such as the *Incendium amoris*, it is evident that Rolle found the bodily experience of song more powerful and meaningful than any textual elements conveyed in the liturgy; in a sense, this was a reversal of standard ideals in which the music was expected to enhance the text. In addition, his alliterative style – in English and in Latin – was an important example of a prevailing manner of writing in later Medieval England, especially in the midlands and the north, one that arguably foregrounded the sonic properties of words over their semantic meanings.¹⁶ This style can be seen (and heard) in Rolle's work, including glosses and commentaries on devotional texts, such as his *Super Psalmum Vicesimum*, the *Super Canticum Cantorum* and his *English Psalter*, as well as prose and poetry that was informed by religious themes and experiences.

An anonymous contemporary of Rolle, working in a similar tradition, produced an alliterative poem on the penitential psalm *Miserere mei, Deus* (Psalm 50 (51)), and gives a useful viewpoint of the relationship between the body and that which it perceives through sound in private devotions. This writer described his hearing as 'my ears within', a phrase which playfully elided the unseen, hidden physiological 'ear' with the aural (and therefore not visually perceptible) experience of sound.

Auditui meo dabis [gaudium et leticiam et exultabunt ossa humilitata]

To myn herynge myn eris within,

Lorde, sere solace sall þu sende,

With ioy and blysse þat neuer sall blyn,

¹⁵ On liturgical practices in nunneries, see Ann Bagnall-Yardley, *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁶ On alliterative verse by Rolle and his contemporaries, see Susanna Greer Fein, 'Haeue Mercy of Me (Psalm 51): An Unedited Alliterative Poem from the London Thornton Manuscript', *Modern Philology*, 86/3 (1989): 223–41, at p. 224.

And laste in welthe withowtten ende.¹⁷

Margery Kempe and Walter Hilton: Sounds of Good and Evil

The Boke of Margery Kempe is unique in its portrayal, in a literary style usually reserved for hagiography, of a lay female English mystic, Margery Kempe.¹⁸ Kempe's story paints a particularly colourful image of her world through its inclusion of her pilgrimages to Italy, the Holy Land and Santiago de Compostela, her efforts to live a chaste life in middle age (despite having born 14 children) and her notorious 'cryings' that overwhelmed her on many occasions.¹⁹ Margery's senses were a fundamental part of her identity as a woman and as a visionary. The *Boke of Margery Kempe*, which appears to have been written down by a priest in the late 1430s, reveals details of Margery's life and attitudes in frequently startling frankness. It is often described as an 'autobiography', though the term is anachronistic and misleading: Margery's book is properly understood under its own terminology, a 'treatise', which 'teaches its readers strategies for managing the emotional, and ultimately spiritual, damage brought on by feelings of uncertainty, unworthiness and despair'.²⁰

The outpourings of tears and crying that characterized Margery's mystical experiences, her 'plentyvows teerys of contricyon day be day' (Preface: 42–3) have formed the focus of a great many scholarly discussions, but the music and sounds that feature at key points in her book have

¹⁷ Translation of the Latin line of the Psalm: 'To my hearing thou shalt give joy and gladness: and the bones that have been humbled shall rejoice.' Poem cited from Greer Fein, 'Have Mercy of Me', where the full poem is edited on pp. 236–41, and this is verse IX, lines 97–100.

¹⁸ Katherine Lewis notes the rarity of 'Middle English hagiography relating to the cult of "real" saints who actually lived in later medieval England', and that the majority of these accounts deal with 'high-status men' or with famous clerics and monks; see Katherine Lewis, 'History, Historiography and Re-writing the Past', in Sarah Salih (ed.), *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 122–40, at p. 124.

¹⁹ Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World* (London: Longman, 2002).

²⁰ Rebecca Krug, 'Margery Kempe', in Larry Scanlon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 217–28, at p. 218.

received little attention.²¹ Margery's tears were, after all, not only plenteous but also 'boystows', loud and violent (for example, I, 3: 394; I, 17: 1268). The reaction from those around her was not only because of her physical abundance of tears, but also their disruptive sound, which was an irritation to many. On one occasion, 'sche cryed so lowde that it myth ben herd al abowte the chirche and owte of the chirche' (I, 57: 4687–8). Margery's tears were contextualized for her reader by examples from other holy figures who wept. Her scribe drew on texts such as Jacques de Vitry's *Vita Maria Oigniacensis*, in which Marie is forced to leave a church when her tears distract the priest from his duties, and Bridget's *Liber Revelationem Celestium* as part of the authorization of her spirituality.²²

Apart from the sound of her own crying, Margery's other religious experiences were often also steeped in sensory perception. Her first encounter with heavenly melody is found in Book I:

On a nygth, as this creatur [i.e. Margery] lay in hir bedde wyth hir husbond, sche herd a sownd of melodye so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradyse. And therwyth sche styrt owt of hir bedde and seyde:

'Alas, that evyr I dede synne, it is ful mery in hevyn!

Thys melody was so swete that it passyd alle the melodye that evyr myght be herd in this world wythowtyn ony comparyson, and caused this creatur, whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye / afterward, for to have ful plentyvows and habundawnt teerys of hy devocyon, wyth greet sobbyngys and syhyngys after the blysse of heven, not dredyng the schamys and the spytys of the wretchyd world. And evyr after this drawt, sche had in hir mende the myrth and the melodye that was in heven, so mech that sche coud not wyl restreyn hyrself fro the spekyng therof. For wher sche was in ony cumpanye, sche wold sey oftyntyme:

²¹ All citations from this text – which, following a short preface, is divided into two 'books' – are taken from Barry Windeatt (ed.), *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Longman: 2000), and will be identified by book and chapter, and by the corresponding line number in the modern edition (for example, I, 3: 42). The same system will be used for the writings of Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich.

²² For discussion of the influence of other writings on the Book of Margery Kempe see Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

'It is ful mery in hevyn!' (I, 3: 324–39)

It was as a result of this experience of heavenly melody that Margery withdrew from sexual relations with her husband, emphasizing her wish to live a chaste life. In one of Margery's moments of sorrow over her lack of virginity, Christ comforted her by saying: 'so schalt thu dawnsyn in hevyn wyth other holy maydens and virgynes' (I, 22: 1684–5). Significantly, texts from this period commonly associate the sweetness of songs of heaven with the chaste former living of those residing there. The anonymous early thirteenth-century text *Hali Meidhad*, for example, discussed the hierarchy of status between virginity, marriage and widowhood, and stated that it is virgins who have the sweetest song of these groups in heaven.²³ As such, references to Margery's hearing of sweet heavenly sounds reflected her intention and destiny to be counted as one of the virgins of heaven.

Margery's focus upon her senses reach a climax in the description of her mystical marriage to Jesus, in which she experiences touch, smell and sound:

sche felt many gret comfortys, bothe gostly [spiritual] comfortys and bodily comfortys. Sumtyme sche felt swet smellys wyth hir nose; it wer swettar, hir thowt, than evyr was ony swet erdly thing that sche smellyd befor ... Sumtyme sche herd wyth hir bodily erys sweche sowndys and melodiis that sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyde to hir in that tyme, less he spoke the lowder. The sowndys and melodiis had sche herd nyhand every day the terme of xxv yere whan this boke was wretyn, and specially whan sche was in devowt prayer, also many tymes whil sche was at Rome and in Ingland bothe. (I, 35: 2862–73)

How might Margery's perception of the sound of her tears and of her mystical sounds been influenced by those around her? We know that she consulted many religious thinkers of the period, including mystics such as Julian of Norwich and 'many worshepful clerkys, archebyssshopys, bysshoppys, doctowrs of dyvynyte and bachelers also' (Preface: 67–8), and that she was read many devotional texts, including writings by Walter Hilton – perhaps his *Scale of*

²³ This is found in the text *Hali Meidhad*, as discussed in Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Brown, *Medieval English Prose for Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. xviii.

Perfection – and the *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle mentioned above. The mystical experience of sweet smells in addition to hearing the voice of God is something that Julian of Norwich, who Margery met, expressed in her *Shewings*, extending the reference, sensually, to sight and taste: ‘we endlessly ben al had in God, hym verily seand and fulsumly feland, hym gostly heryng, and hym delectably smellyng and hym swetely swelowyng’ (ch. 43: 1540–42).²⁴ Such bodily experiences were considered potentially heretical, leading some commentators to warn against taking any unexpected ‘experience’ of God as authentic. Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, for example, was keen to note that certain feelings and sensory experiences might have evil rather than godly origins:

By this that I have seid myght thu sumwhat undirstonde that visiones or revelaciouns of ony maner spirite, bodili apperynge or in ymagynyng, slepand or wakand, or ellis ony othere feelinge in the bodili wittes maad as it were goosteli; either in sownyng of the eere, or saverynge in the mouth, or smellyng in the nose, or ellis ony felable heete as it were fier glowand and warmand the breest, or ony othere partie of the bodi, or onything that mai be feelyd bi bodili wit, though it be never so comfortable and lykande, aren not verili contemplacion; ne thei aren but symple and secundarie though thei be good, in regard of goostli vertues and in goosteli knowyng and loovyng of God. (I, 10: 200–207)²⁵

For Hilton, it was not that sound could not be a sign of the divine, but that it should not automatically be trusted to be so, and that heavenly sounds were worth nothing without loving Christ (I, 47: 1352–8). Furthermore, it seems that Hilton wished to distinguish between the significance of good and evil sounds because of the very power that sung prayer had in strengthening resolve against sin:

alle othere praieres, as the Pater Noster or the Ave Maria or ympnys or psalmes or other devoute seynges of Holi Chirche aren turnyd as it were into gostli mirthe and swete songe, bi the which thei [Christians] aren comfortid and strengthed agens alle synnes and mykil relevyd of bodili dishese. Of

²⁴ Georgia Ronan Crampton (ed.), *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994).

²⁵ Thomas H. Bestul (ed.), Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection, Book 1* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), also available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/CAMELOT/teams/hilfr1.htm>.

this degree speketh Seynt Poul thus: *Nolite inebriari vino sed impleamini spiritu sancto, loquentes vobismetipsis in ymptis et psalmis, et canticis spiritualibus, cantantes et psallentes in cordibus vestris domino* [Ephesians 5:18–19].

Be not drunken with wyn, but be ye fulfilled of the Holi Goost, seiande to youresilf in ymptis and psalmes and goostli songes, syngynge and phalmynge [psalming] in youre hertes to oure Lorde. (I, 7: 134–42)

The loss of aural perception was also significant to Margery Kempe. On one occasion she was tempted to adulterous lechery; she and the man went together to the service of Evensong, but she was unable to hear it, or to say her Pater noster (I, 4: 444). Then, while meditating on the suffering of Christ at the Passion, Margery heard ‘so hedows a melodye that sche mygth not ber it’, a sound that literally floored her, hoping that the hideous tune would desist (I, 17: 1242). An opposition of good and bad sounds was also used to emphasize the righteousness of Margery’s campaign to refrain from sex with her husband; during this time, Margery was listening to the celebration of Mass, ‘hering hir messe’, when ‘sche herd a gret noyse and a dredful’ (I, 9: 655–6), whereupon a piece of masonry and a wooden roof beam fell down from the church tower and struck her, but by a miracle she survived without injury. The heavenly sounds of the Mass against the drama of this episode signified by terrible sounds was a clever juxtaposition of aural perceptions in which Margery was vindicated by her miraculous escape. The sounds of Mass, and of the church and its services more generally, would have been comfortably familiar to all readers of Margery’s account. The impact of the moment was heightened by its occurrence within a setting more commonly experienced as – one imagines – gentle spoken delivery of daily liturgical custom through the architectural space, occasional ringing of bells, or the performance of simple plainchant, with its mixture of recitation and melody. Indeed, the drama would have been less effective within the narrative if placed against a more special sonic event, such as a polyphonic carol, a rhythmically complex motet, or a three-part setting of the Credo, such as existed in Margery’s day and which someone of her social status and experience of pilgrimage would have likely encountered.

Singers and Singing in Late Medieval England

Strange sounds – strange in terms of the infrequency of their incorporation into services outside of the highest status religious institutions – had begun to infiltrate worship across England more fully by the early fifteenth century. Aside from the regular performance of chant in the liturgy, choristers in the later Middle Ages were increasingly elaborating the basic elements of religious song with additional parts in harmony, often in virtuosic display of theoretical, rhythmic and vocal techniques. The fear of effeminizing pure, clerical identity through polyphonic singing was reflected in England as early as 1217, when a statute forbade Cistercians from performing three- and four-part singing in the abbeys of Dore and Tintern.²⁶ Later Cistercian statutes forbade singing too loudly (1258), the use of new songs (1302) and the practices of singing with syncopated rhythms and with hocketing (1320).²⁷

John Wycliffe and the Lollards also spoke out against the use of polyphonic song in worship, noting the increasingly familiar presence of a small group of trained singers performing vain songs at the expense of the common chanting from a choral community.²⁸ At the same time, they were well aware of the importance of the senses in proper devotion, as can be seen from Wycliffe's text *On the Five Outer Wits*:

It is necessary to know the five wits, the outer and the inner, and how to spend them in good use, and in the loving of God. The first is the sight of the eye; the second the hearing of the ear; the third the taste of the mouth; the fourth the smelling of the nose; the fifth the handling or touching of members. Keep so thy sight, that thou see nothing that is not permitted to be seen, or may harm thy soul. And keep thy hearing so that thou hear no evil speech, or thing that is neither honest nor profitable. And keep so thy taste, that thou swallow no more than is needed, or ministers to thy bodily sustenance.

²⁶ Mary Berry and Franklyn Gellnick, 'Cistercian Monks', *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grove.com> (accessed 9 April 2010).

²⁷ David H. Williams, *The Cistercians in the Early Middle Ages* (Trowbridge: Cromwell Press, 1998), p. 232.

²⁸ Bruce Holsinger, 'The Vision of Music in a Lollard Florilegium: *Cantus* in the *Rosarium Theologie* (Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 354/581)', *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, 8/2 (1999): 95–106.

And keep so thy smelling, that it make thee not to eat over much, neither delight not over much in smelling.²⁹

Not only what was listened to, as here, but also the manner of listening and performance were of concern to Wycliffe. The tract *On Feigned Contemplative Life*, once attributed to Wycliffe but likely by an unknown contemporary, draws on Augustine's warning, saying, 'As long as the song liketh me more than doth the sentence that is sung, so often I confess that I sin grievously', and objects to occasions:

When they are forty or fifty in a choir, three or four proud vicious fellows shall so play the most devout service, that no man shall hear the sentence, and all others shall be dumb, and look on as fools, while strumpets and thieves praise Sir Jack or Hobb, and William the proud clerk, saying, How small they play their notes, and that they serve well God and holy church, while they despise God to his face, and hinder other Christian men of their devotion.³⁰

But it was not only non-specialist singers who objected to display. In one piece by the French composer Mayshuet, preserved complete in the Old Hall Manuscript, the complex polyphonic genre of the motet was used to protest at the vanity of singers adding elaborate songs to the liturgy.³¹ In this motet, *Are post libamina / Nunc surgunt* (the texts are heard simultaneously in performance), the poet rails against various sensory pleasures, the enjoyment of which is linked to sinfulness:

Triplum text

²⁹ John Wycliffe, *On the Five Outer Wits*, in Robert Vaughan (ed.), *Tracts and Treatises of John de Wycliffe, D.D. with Selections and Translations from his Manuscripts and Latin Works* (London: Blackburn and Pardon, 1845), ch. 7, p. 117, translated into modern English by Lisa Colton.

³⁰ Anon, *Impedimenta Evangelizantum (Of Feigned Contemplative Life)*; translated and cited in Vaughan (ed.), *Tracts and Treatises of John de Wycliffe*, ch.16, pp. 49–52, at p. 51.

³¹ The sources of this motet are London, British Library, Additional 57950 (Old Hall Manuscript), fols 111^v–112^r (4/2) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Don. b. 32 (Triplum fragment only). Andrew Wathey has identified the composer with Matteo de Sancto Johanne, who was in England in 1369; 'The Peace of 1360–1369 and Anglo-French Musical Relations', *Early Music History*, 9 (1990): 129–74, at pp. 149–50.

At the altar after the oblation we will sing odes and songs with praise and good intentions. It is best of all that we praise with careful movement of voice, as reason orders: it may be accompanied by string instruments. This way of singing is worth more than ignorance, blind assumption and complicated vulgarity. Singers, the great number of whose skills fall short, seek vainglory. Sing willingly, not worthlessly, to the glory of God, so that in eternity you may be led into the kingdom of heaven. We should give forth sweet harmonies, highly lyrical, with joyful tone. Our sound should never be hastened or anticipated, but always restrained by listening with attention. The active, distinguished Frenchman composed this song on French melodies; but after he revised it with the Latin language, it more often became sweet to the English, replacing *Deo Gracias*.

Duplum text

Now there arise in the people mercenary men; they change the best gold into lead and sweetly fragrant flowers into distorted smells. These men are saying, nor am I deceived, ‘Most singers, when they see in the middle of a church some great person, seek their best song, most pleasing to themselves.’ Such singers multiply the short notes and they reflect upon the song not for the love of God, I believe, but of the great person. You hypocrites, you have never paid attention to the Holy Gospel, in which you have read the true word of God speaking about these matters; verily you are told – you have received your reward.³²

The composer of this motet appears to enjoy the irony of placing criticism of singers and their vanity within a five-part musical texture, a number of parts that did not become commonplace in England until the latter part of the fifteenth century. The effect of this motet is one of deliberate ‘aural hypocrisy’: what you hear is representative of what should not be heard.

Conclusions

The experience of musical sound was a highly personal affair, related not to the formal requirements of the Christian liturgy but to individual spiritual identity. To Margery Kempe, melody could range from the most ethereal tunes to those of pure, excruciating dissonance. Her metaphorical allusions to music placed sound within the body of the textual protagonist, but the

³² Edition in Andrew Hughes and Margaret Bent (eds), *The Old Hall Manuscript*, 3 vols in 4, *Corpus Mensuralis Musicae* 46 ([Rome]: American Institute of Musicology, Hänssler-Verlag, 1969–73), vol. 1/2, pp. 419–23 (edition), vol. 3, pp. 43–4 (texts).

reader experienced the imagined realities of heaven and hell through Margery's 'ears' and in combination with their own perception of sound. Rolle's spiritual song slowed down the temporal experience of liturgical chant to such an extent that the text of such melodies was almost eradicated, leaving behind lengthy inward melodies that formed his understanding of Christ.

The impression given here is quite different in some cases to that found in the writings of more central figures found within musicological discourse. When Augustine and other church scholars lamented singing, it was primarily for elements such as the lascivious qualities of the church modes and the dangerously livening effect of melodies that might incite dancing more than devotion. The Lollards seem also to have disapproved of the vanity of performance, and, in particular, clerks making a visual as well as aural spectacle of themselves. In an extension of this position, Rolle's spiritual song was critical of even the established texts of liturgical celebrations, preferring to focus on melodic properties as reflective of the Divine. Orifices such as the mouth, throat, nose and ears were all vulnerable to being defiled by the performance of inappropriate songs; however, the writers discussed here focused not on actual songs but on particular types of sonic experience. Sound rather than text was the issue. Within the church, Bishop Ledrede was happy to write sacred texts to fit the melodies of popular amorous songs, but by contrast, Rolle argued that 'it is the tune that makes the song, not the words that are chanted' (*Incendium Amoris*, ch. 32).³³ Music theorists and others who formed part of the mainstream of musical discussion in the Middle Ages sometimes referred to music as if distanced from the body that produced and perceived it; by comparison, for Rolle, Wycliffe, Hilton and Kempe, spiritual identity was a bodily experience rooted in sound and its multi-sensual perception.

³³ Trans. Wolters, *The Fire of Love*, p. 145.