Oral tradition of cantiones in Czech lands
and its imprint in late medieval manuscripts

Abstract

The sources extant in the Czech lands transmit a vast body of cantiones, i.e., Latin spiritual monophonic or polyphonic songs that provide a rich basis for research into their tradition and transmission during the late Middle Ages. Though they have been subject of scholarly study for a century and a half, much of the literature is limited by the approach employed, be it the philological method, which saw a cantio's extant sources a tool for deriving its archetype and in its variants merely errors to be emended (Mužík, Černý), or a nationalistic bias (Nejedlý). In the case of chant, scholars have suggested that the tradition of medieval music was strongly impacted by oral transmission (Treitler, Hucke) and hence should be looked at from a different perspective, one close to that of ethnomusicology (Jeffery). Though some recent papers reflect this approach (Gancarczyk), it has not yet been tested on a larger body of songs, nor its implications systematically outlined.

My study of several dozen songs recorded around 1410 in CZ-VB 42 that survived and thrived–as evidenced by a selection of sources–well into the following century demonstrates the diversity of the genre and the continuing dominance of monophonic pieces despite the advent of polyphony. Most importantly, it demonstrates that the tunes of the songs were routinely memorized. The second part of my thesis, a case study of *Cedit hiems eminus*, a cantio transmitted in several musical and textual settings, shows that it was only its polyphonic setting that was copied from source to source, though sometimes text and notation were derived from different models. The older, one- or two-voice versions of the song, however, appear to have been transmitted predominantly orally. In contrast to the philological approach, I propose that individual copies of such songs be interpreted as imprints of the underlying oral culture of late medieval cantiones from which we can draw meaningful inferences about them.