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Herausgegeben von Christian Wentzlaff-Eggebert und Martín Traine

La voz del pueblo en el espacio cultural europeo: El pueblo y su identidad

editado por Christian Wentzlaff-Eggebert

Universidad de Colonia

Centro de Estudios sobre España, Portugal y América Latina

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Contribuciones de Christian Wentzlaff-Eggebert, Alfredo Crespo Borrallo, Barbara Hagg-Huglo, Cándido Martín, Antonio Martínez González, Mario Garvín, Gloria Chicote, Antonio Frías Delgado, Antonio Tordera, David Porcel Bueno, Sofía Barrón, Javier Lluch-Prats, R. Sergio Balches Arenas, Marina Bianchi, Enrico Lodi, Gonzalo Aguila, Ewa Stala, Daniela Marcheschi y Facundo Tomás.

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BARBARA HAGGH-HUGLO: THE PARTICIPATION OF TOWNSPEOPLE MAKING MUSIC IN PUBLIC EVENTS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Abstract:

Músicos, retóricos y ballesteros, todos contratados por la ciudad de Bruselas, actuaban, cantaban, y tocaban instrumentos durante la representación del "Ommegang" en el siglo XV en la plaza mayor. Algunos de ellos también de otras procesiones. En Brujas, instrumentistas y cantores tomaban parte en la representación de escenas bíblicas en las esquinas de las calles, que eran parte de la entrada de Felipe III, el Bueno, duque de Borgoña, en la ciudad al rededor de 1440. Aquellos miembros del clero que sabían música cantaban canto llano en todas estas tres funciones, y músicos independientes probablemente también participaban, aún cuando los documentos no los mencionan ni describen su condición. A excepción de los inválidos, que marchaban en una procesión propia, la gente del "pueblo comun" era tan sólo expectadora en estos actos, que se planificaban con anticipación. La evidencia que nos queda indica que las voces de "el pueblo comun" quedaban escondidas en estos actos, destinados a promover la unidad cívica.

In the late Middle Ages, and especially in months when the weather was favorable, townspeople went into the streets to observe or participate in a wide range of public events outdoors: fairs and markets, archery contests, processions, dramatic presentations in the town square, and so-called Joyous Entries (*Blijde Inkomsten*), the meticulously planned ceremonial entries into towns by the rulers of the region. Many of these events included instrumental musicians or townspeople singing. At question in this essay is whether such 'public' musicians or singers were amateurs or professionals, and if they represented their town in their activities, their particular professional class, or if they were, as we would say today, 'ordinary' people. As shall be demonstrated with three examples, a procession with a play in Brussels, other town processions in Brussels, and a Joyous Entry in Bruges, the musical participation of townspeople was rarely spontaneous and often carefully choreographed, even if they were amateur musicians, and in most cases, public events involved musicians paid by the town and representing it. Ordinary townspeople were present at these events, but we have no evidence that their voices were heard.

On the 20th of February 1448, the magistrates of Brussels published an ordinance on the town's *Ommegang* (meaning 'walk around', that is,

‘procession’), which had been held yearly on the Sunday before Pentecost since the fourteenth century, and still takes place today. Among other changes, the 1448 ordinance introduced a play that would be staged outdoors on the Grote Markt at 2 PM in the afternoon and whose subject was to be one of the Seven Joys of the Virgin Mary. This legislation resulted in a seven-year cycle of plays, which took place without known interruption from 1448 until 1556. There had been earlier processions with plays in other towns of the Low Countries,¹ and at least one later Joyous Entry in Brussels, that of Mary of Burgundy, on the 4th of June 1477, would include a procession and a play, so the introduced change was not a novelty. Many such events lack documentation, but from the Brussels *Ommegang*, archival documents and two play manuscripts, which provide details about the actors, musicians, and audience, survived.²

The prologues of the two plays include prayers for the dukes of Burgundy and Brabant and their families, who attended some performances, and also for the townspeople from all walks of life: clergy and laypeople, rich and poor. By the mid fifteenth century, these townspeople in Brussels were educated if not literate, and had at least a rudimentary understanding of music. Public education had existed for boys and girls in the town since 1320, when Duke John III of Brabant ratified an ordinance with provisions for increasing the number of schools to match population growth and stating that boys and girls were to be taught grammar, music, and morals, but that girls could not be instructed in Latin. The Marian plays of Brussels were in Dutch though, so accessible to all.³

The two play manuscripts suggest that music was mostly peripheral, for the only interruptions to the dialogue are in the play of the First Joy, which has seven instructions for “*sanc of spel*” (singing or playing) during interludes, which are nearly all associated either with hell, angels, or acts of God. For example, singing or playing follows the Cherubim’s speech, and at the scene where Mary is conceived by Joachim and Anna, the play manuscript says “singing and playing of some length” (“*sanc et spel opt lanxte*”). The Brussels’ town accounts record payments to the town’s wind band “for playing during the ‘pauses’ of the *Ommegang* plays” on the platform serving as the stage, which had been built at the town’s expense and from the spire of the town hall. These musical interludes are absent in the play of the seventh Joy in which, however, the music was concentrated in the acting out of Mary’s Assumption.⁴

¹ Lebègue. Paris. 1956. Cf. Brown. Cambridge. 1963 ; Van Dijk and Ramakers. Amsterdam. 2001; and Zijlstra. Amsterdam. 2001.

² Haggh. Paris. 2000. 36-37; De Ridder. Bruxelles. 2009. 144-46.

³ Haggh. Paris. 2000. 39.

⁴ Haggh. Paris. 2000. 40.

Whether or not the plays included vocal music is debatable: the scripts of the two plays include several *rondeaux* interspersed throughout, and the first play includes a *virelai* after the prologue. The texts in these song forms are clearly set off from the surrounding text. Such song forms exist in manuscripts of poetry and music from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, but are known only to have been recited in some contexts.⁵ In Brussels, members of the crossbowmen's guild performed the Marian plays, and they are not known to have been musicians.⁶

Different music, not during interludes, was heard during the play of the seventh Joy at the moment of Mary's Assumption. To represent it, a lift raises the Virgin Mary, angels, and musicians to heaven. When Mary arrives in Heaven, following the instructions in the manuscript, "the angels in the tower should also sing and play the organ" ("*dinglen in den trone selen oec singen ende orglen*").⁷ Later in the play, Peter recalls to Thomas the events of Mary's Assumption, saying "We have heard such great fruits of melodious concords that no person ever heard." ("*Wi hebben soo groten vruecht gehoort van sange ende melodiosen acoorde dat noyt mensce tsgelijcs en boorde.*") This Assumption scene also included the singing of monophonic chant: after the apostles Peter, John, and Paul discuss who should carry the bier with Mary's corpse, all raise it up and sing, "Exit de Egypto. Alleluia," which is psalm 113, normally sung to the unusual reciting tone that recites on two different pitches known as the *tonus peregrinus*.⁸

On the day of the *Ommegang*, the entertainments continued into the evening, and in 1497/8, other plays were performed, including one of the Three Wise Men. This play was the responsibility of the rhetoric guild 'The Lily', which had two mottos, one of which was 'Rhetorica musica.' The membership of this rhetoric guild included two men responsible for leading the singers of the main church in Brussels, the collegiate church of St. Goedele, and two organists.

The *Ommegang* itself was organized and directed by the leader of the archer's guild, but the church whose Dedication anniversary this procession celebrated, the Zavelkerk (Notre Dame du Sablon) paid the expenses, assisted by a subsidy from the town of Brussels. The chapters of crossbowmen, the aldermen, magistrates, lineageurs (patricians), guilds, clergy, and mendicant orders all took part, escorted by the archers' guild. Many participating were armed and in costume. It was also common for prominent individuals from outside Brussels, such as abbots of regional

⁵ Haggh. Paris. 2000. 40-44; Coigneau. 1991-92. 40; cf. Coigneau. Leuven. 2003.

⁶ Haggh. Paris. 2000. 44.

⁷ Cf. the angels in the Van Eyck painting of the "Adoration of the Lamb."

⁸ Haggh. Paris. 2000. 44-45; Erbacher. Münsterschwarzach. 1971.

monasteries, to be invited to come and participate. The procession went from the Zavelkerk to the town hall on the Grote Markt where prominent visitors had gathered and where the play would later be performed. In 1456, the *Ommegang* was even moved to the Monday after Pentecost to await the arrival of the dauphin, later King Louis XI of France, who, fleeing his father, had come to seek refuge at the Burgundian court. The chant sung during the *Ommegang* was, however, sung by the clergy and in Latin.⁹

Music also accompanied the archery contest held after the procession had returned to the Zavelkerk. Obviously this was an event at which the crowds gathered, because often sovereigns took part in the contest. In 1500, singers from the Zavelkerk were paid for singing *discant* (polyphonic music) during this contest.¹⁰

What do we know about these musicians? Although any vocal music sung during the play would have been sung by amateur musicians, such as the crossbowmen (of individuals they could have hired we have no documentation – freelancing was common, but left few traces behind), and the music of the *Ommegang* and archery contest was sung by the clergy, who had the best musical training of any singers in Brussels, all of the other events taking place outdoors at town expense involved individuals hired by the town, such as the rhetoric guilds, and the professional performers of instrumental music. In the late Middle Ages, instrumental music was classified as ‘loud’ or ‘soft’, effectively the equivalent of ‘outdoor’ or ‘indoor’ music; the town wind bands performed ‘loud’ music.

We know a great deal about these instrumental musicians paid by the town of Brussels: members were hired for life, and these positions were often passed down to sons, but often payment was meagre – the accounts instead insist on the livery provided, which was, of course, decorated with the civic insignia. The two categories of musicians hired by the town were the tower waits or *wachteren*, who were shawm or sackbut players, and the wind band (*alta capella*, *gesellen*, *stadpipers*, *spelllieden*).¹¹ The number of waits was small and variable and depended on the number of posts to guard (they stood atop church spires and the town hall); the *alta capella* was

⁹ On the Ommegang procession, see Haggh. 1988. 434-42, and Haggh. Paris. 46-47. Some processions did include vernacular songs. Michel Huglo’s catalogue of processional manuscripts in Europe and North America includes an index of chants. Well-known Latin antiphons and responsories are a majority, but texts in the vernacular also appear, most in German. See Huglo. München. 1999, 2004.

¹⁰ Haggh. Paris. 2000. 46-47; cf. Haggh. Bruxelles. 2001, and Haggh. Cambridge. 2001.

¹¹ Haggh. 1988. 210-20; Brown. Newark. 1989; Peters. Cambridge. 2001; Peters. Cambridge. 2012; Polk. Utrecht. 2005; Polk. 1968; Polk. Hillsdale, NY. 2005.

normally comprised of four players playing a sackbut (*trompette*) and three shawms (players called *pipers* or *pypers*) with a fifth joining them who did not officially belong until there was a vacancy.¹² Sometimes other musicians are documented as well, such as lutenists, bagpipers, or players of the tympanum or of nakers, the latter small drums, but these were freelance musicians. The waits and members of the wind band had to swear an oath to remain in Brussels and not accept other employment. Only in 1574 were these musicians organized into a confraternity – at that time only citizens of Brussels and confraternity members were allowed to make music in Brussels.

Only the musicians paid by the town were exempt from taxes imposed by the confraternity on its musicians, perhaps because, at least in the fifteenth century, they were poorly paid. That is evident from the story of Janne Coriche, who had served the dukes of Burgundy as a trumpeter. Upon retirement, his pension was not enough to be able to provide for his large family, and so his wife had to beg in the streets to feed their children, who were also forced to steal bread secretly at night. Burdened with age and illness, Janne was obliged to serve as a member of the town wind band, something he should never have done, for the pay was minimal, and Coriche soon died from his efforts. Thanks to the intervention of the court, Coriche's wife at least continued to receive his insufficient pension.¹³

The rhetoric guilds and the crossbowmen were hired for the *Ommegang* by the town, even though they had their altars in the local churches. Thus, there is no evidence that 'ordinary' townspeople participated in any music-making during the *Ommegang*. At the same time, it is clear that this event was one that ordinary townspeople attended, witness the prologue of the First Joy, and one that promoted civic identity.

It is important to note that the wind band of Brussels did not only play at the *Ommegang*, but also at most other outdoor processions in Brussels.¹⁴ Typically, these included singing by the clergy of one or more churches. The most musically elaborate procession of Brussels – that of Maria Mediatrix, which was held on the feast of the Assumption, included singing by members of all of the religious orders with houses in Brussels.¹⁵ A truly unusual procession including townspeople and the wind band was that held on the feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist by the small parish church in Molenbeek dedicated to that saint. In this procession, musicians

¹² Haggh. 1988. 210-20. Four town pipers performed until 1453 when there were five. In later years an individual playing a trompette and lutenists are mentioned.

¹³ Haggh. 1988. 215-16.

¹⁴ Haggh. 1988. 422-46.

¹⁵ Haggh. 1988. 430-33.

were followed by invalids from the nearby hospital of St. John the Baptist under the church's jurisdiction. The invalids were allowed to collect alms until the magistrates forbade it in 1527, following complaints by onlookers about seeing so many disfigured bodies.¹⁶

In the fifteenth century, townspeople did have a place making music in stationary representations of Biblical or hagiographical scenes. Elaborate *tableaux vivants* were part of the splendid Entry of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy into Bruges in 1440, during which 1300 town notables, not ordinary townspeople, came in procession to meet him outside the Holy Cross gate. At the end of the Peperstraat, a stage had the four prophets preaching and singing together, possibly in polyphony “unusually happily and melodiously” (“*uutnemende lustelick ende melodienselick*”); elsewhere in front of the almshouse of St. Obrecht, the story of Abraham and Isaac was represented. There, musicians played a harp very pleasantly, a lute and a dulcian (“*zeer playsantelick up een harpe, een lute ende een doulchanye*”). At the end of the Zegherstraat, a *tableau vivant* revealed Queen Esther and King Assueris surrounded by musicians playing “melodiously on an organ, harp, and lute” (“*melodienselick up een orgbele, harpe ende lute*”). At the fountain of the Dominican convent, Christ's Nativity was represented with angels coming from heaven with sweet prayers, playing an organ, harp, and lute. On a raised platform on top of the convent, choirboys sang “Gloria in excelsis.” A few steps further on, the Virgin Mary stood with St. Dominic and harpists, lutenists, and shawmists playing. Another tableau set up by the merchants of Bruges showed King David with his harp, singing about Bruges. On the corners of the Bogaard and Ridder streets, and the two following streets, the seven works of mercy were recreated, the last showing the almighty God surrounded by musicians playing organ, harp, and lute. Finally, at the Halle gate, there were not less than eighty trumpeters and clarions. As Reinhard Strohm explains, “The list of expenses of the city for all these ceremonies would fill a separate publication” and “several of [the organisers of later pageants] were members of music-loving confraternities.” Just like the Brussels *Ommegang*, this Entry was carefully prepared, with musicians paid by the town, and no evidence of ordinary townspeople singing.¹⁷

The public events described here were the principal gatherings of people from towns in open spaces. They took place throughout Europe, although their particular local configuration described above was typical of the Low

¹⁶ Haggh. 1988. 443.

¹⁷ Strohm. Oxford. 1985 and 1990. 80-83, and the sources he cites; Haggh. Paris. 2000. 47-48.

Countries.¹⁸ We have seen that ordinary townspeople, with the exception of the invalids from Molenbeek marching in procession, were recognized, as in the prologue to the First Joy, but bystanders. The organizers of these events, who financed them, determined their civic content. Although there is a substantial scholarly literature on such local customs, their evaluation in the ‘European’ context remains to be accomplished and could tell us more about the elusive participation of ordinary townspeople in the public events of their day.

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¹⁸ For comparison see Arnade. Ithaca. 1996; McGee. Turnhout. 2013; Polk. Cambridge. 1992.

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