

Villard de Honnecourt and his Carnet: an introduction

by Mark Wiggins

With the *Carnet of Villard de Honnecourt*, which he describes as the “Métier, memories and travels of a thirteenth-century cathedral builder”, for Glossa Björn Schmelzer is setting out – in the company of Graindelavoix – on a journey across medieval Europe. Three different starting points, in three complementary volumes, successively explore religious, social and political discourses in music from the thirteenth century.

Biographical information about the key figure in this trilogy of recordings, Villard de Honnecourt, is meagre, at best. We only know him from a small “carnet” or portfolio, drawings dating from the second quarter of the thirteenth century (of floor plans, building elements, mechanical tools, interiors and maps of churches, towers, statues of saints, rose windows, flagstone floors, as well as animals, insects and geometrical figures), today kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Considered today less as a professional architect and more as an interested amateur, a clerk connected to a lodge, an artist in glass or just a draughtsman, Villard (probably born in the Picardian village of Honnecourt) travelled through Europe keeping this personal, “professional” logbook or sketchbook.

The approach taken by Björn Schmelzer and Graindelavoix for these new recordings is not to start with this question of the identity of Villard, rather to commence with considering his activities and practices, and the climate and functioning of his operations. A recent hypothesis describes Villard as being an advisor to the bishop of Cambrai and responsible for the trade in relics. This could explain why Villard had been in Hungary, something referred to by him twice in his carnets. Not only would he be the designer of the sepulchre monument of Queen Gertrude of Meran at Pilis abbey, he probably also arranged the transfer of the heart of Elizabeth of Hungary to Cambrai Cathedral, which was also financed by Elizabeth. Other places visited by Villard – or places which inspired him for his drawings – include Vaucelles Abbey, the Cathedrals of Meaux, Chartres, Laon, Reims and Lausanne.

Musical directions: Cambrai and “cathedralism”

The life of Villard is veiled in secrets, but the connection between this artist/draughtsman and certain musical repertoires appears to come from two different directions (helping to create a musical pendant of his working methods and thoughts).

Firstly, there is the musical repertory which appeared in and around Cambrai at the time of Villard de Honnecourt, particularly the rhymed Office or *historia* of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, written around 1230 by Gérard de Saint-Quentin and Pierre de Cambrai (and afterwards disseminated all over Europe).

A second direction derives from an effort to rehabilitate and revisit the concept of “cathedralism”. As described in a 1993 essay by Christopher Page, this refers to a vast tradition of art historians writing from the end of the 19th century through to the end of the 20th century, who believed in a certain

kind of medieval mentality and thinking which found its most clear expression in the architecture of a cathedral.

In general terms, cathedralism – as described by these scholars from Emile Mâle to Erwin Panofsky – consisted of the reductionist “prejudice” that a cathedral was built with a type of intentional plan in order to express the essential thinking of medieval man, from neo-platonic light-mystics to big total philosophical constructions as the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas.

What needs to be revisited – in the opinion of Björn Schmelzer – is the comparison of operative practices in the realm of Gothic architecture and design, the way practical knowledge was remembered and transmitted and how it circulated and its connection with musical practices. Some important musicologists, from Ernest H Sanders to Nino Pirrotta, took this prejudice in some classical studies for granted and based a complete musicological analysis of the crucial medieval repertoires on ideas that were not so much distilled from the musical works as such but were a sort of application of these notions of art history to the medieval musical repertoire.

Björn Schmelzer argues that, no doubt, Christopher Page was right in deconstructing these reductionist prejudices but he also “threw the baby out with the bathwater”. This becomes clear when we leave the representational level of Gothic art as a sort of *art royal* and dive into the operative aspects of it as a science *mineur*.

Of course, it is quite reductionist to compare the image of Gothic art with the image of scholasticism. What has to be revisited is the comparison of operative practices in the realm of Gothic architecture and design, the way practical knowledge was remembered and transmitted and how it circulated and its connection with musical practices. Recent studies by Mary Carruthers and Anna Maria Busse Berger reveal a total new perspective on the operative practice and knowledge.

What is being looked for here is more a molecular analysis of Gothic art as a practice and less a comparison between representational or symbolical works of art. Medieval artists in a broader sense were active in a same context and shared a common subconscious savoir-faire, each in their own particular domain.

A trilogy of recordings

Graindelavoix has divided up its approach into three different areas, three different musical programmes and three recordings, which set out to define the practice and movements of Villard de Honnecourt: *Ossuaires*, *Motets* and *Confréries*, all focusing on and mapping a different sort of body: the body of a saint, the poetic body and the social body.

The first recording, *Ossuaires*, is concerned with how territories are defined, and how they connected with each other by limbs and organs of saints: how networks appear – religious, social, economical – which together all form one big body of a saint, a monstrous body, of which the disseminated parts

became partial objects which are venerated and worshipped (relic, fetish, *ex-voto*), but also stolen (*furta sacra*) and moved (*translatio*).

Motets covers how chants for the office are populated by tropes and interpolations which receive a proper poetical status and become “motets” (little words); how the monstrous, chopped up body of the saint is further dissolved and decomposed in favour of sung networks, polyphonic and intertextual. Starting point are the motets delivered in the margin of the last page of a Cambrai manuscript. The programme is about the invention of a new kind of polyphony; polyphony as a poetical genre, which evokes an ambiguous intertextual performance and listening experience. It is primarily about syllabic placed texts with often short, pointed phrases which are combined and confronted, and which generate an interesting, kaleidoscopic experience.

Confréries relates to how bodies and gestures start to function as groups and move together, how movements come into organization and absorb new meanings, how communities appear with a distinct inner logic and morality... Again the thirteenth-century network of Villard de Honnecourt comes into focus, on the border of feudal and rising urban structures, to investigate the social body (the confraternity as “faire-corps”). Graindelavoix performs repertoires of brotherhoods and socio-religious movements of Cambrai: the limited œuvre of devotional trouvère songs by Jaques de Cambrai, a contemporary and co-citizen of Villard de Honnecourt, gets a central place. These songs are a reinterpretation and recuperation in an urban devotional context of the tradition of the grand *chant courtois*.

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