

## Article

# Engaging with Religious History and Theological Concepts through Music Composition: *Ave generosa* and *The Song of Margery Kempe*

Brian Andrew Inglis

Department of Performing Arts, Middlesex University, London NW4 4BT, UK; b.inglis@mdx.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This article explores the intersections among music composition, religious history and spiritual texts, with their attendant concepts. It focuses on two works with medieval sources—the concert piece *Ave generosa* (1996) and the chamber opera *The Song of Margery Kempe* (2008)—which were featured in the online Gallery of the conferences in 2021 and 2022, respectively, of the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT). Through the lenses of semiotics and intertextuality, it explores the ways by which theological concepts and spiritual contexts can be evoked and ‘translated’ into musical sound, both instrumental and vocal. A sampling of the literature on medieval monasticism and St Hildegard of Bingen, whose corpus forms the source of *Ave generosa*, supports a musical exegesis of its ‘spiritual programme’. In the case of *The Song of Margery Kempe*, recent scholarship on the text frames examples of the multiplication of meanings provided by dramatisation and musical setting. Art in general and music composition in particular are presented as a commentary, or gloss, on both religious history and enduring spiritual themes, and a different way of thinking about religion and spirituality.

**Keywords:** religious history; spirituality; mysticism; theology; music composition; St Hildegard of Bingen; Margery Kempe



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## 1. Introduction

In this article, I introduce two musical compositions which have spiritual connotations: *Ave generosa* (1996) and *The Song of Margery Kempe* (2008). Both draw on spiritual texts from the European Middle Ages as sources of inspiration, and both were featured in the online Gallery space of the conferences in 2021 and 2022, respectively, of the British and Irish Association of Practical Theology (BIAPT). Like other modern compositions with spiritual themes or programmes, they aim to engage with audiences, including those who neither attend religious services nor read theological literature. Through artistic practice, they both (re)present historical spiritual situations, and discursively contemplate aspects of theology and religious history. And through creating these artworks (musical compositions), I enter into dialogue with the world of the Middle Ages and its spiritualities, creatively re-imagining them for modern audiences.

To explore these aspects and how they inform and are located in *Ave generosa*, I will present and examine the compositions’ source texts from the corpus of St Hildegard of Bingen, in the editions by Page (1983) and Silvas (1987), and sample literature on medieval studies generally and Hildegard specifically (including Leclercq 1982; Fassler 1998; King-Lenzmeier 2001). To frame the subsequent discussion of *The Song of Margery Kempe*, I will draw on aspects of Bale’s recent (2021) taxonomic reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* to illustrate how her material mysticism and representational strategies are presented and pointed in musico-dramatic adaptation.

## 2. Conceptual Background

In the following discussion of *Ave generosa*, I relate musical composition, as both a process and its outcome, to spiritual and theological concepts, that is, the connection of the sonic, the temporal, and the material—music, and the creation thereof—with ideas which are articulated and explored through written, literary, texts. These are not as far apart as they may first appear, especially in the case of literature from the European Middle Ages. In his study of medieval monastic culture, Jean Leclercq reminds us that in this context, engaging with literature of any kind was a sonic and a material, rather than a purely mental, activity: ‘in the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, they read usually, not as today, principally with the eyes, but with the lips, pronouncing what they saw, and with the ears, listening to the words pronounced, hearing what is called the “voices of the pages”. It is a real acoustical reading: *legere* means at the same time *audire*’. And as an expansion on this: ‘when *legere* and *lectio* are used without further explanation, they mean an activity which, like chant and writing, requires the participation of the whole body and the whole mind’. (Leclercq 1982, p. 15) A link has already been made here between reading (aloud) and music, through chant.

Related concepts from the Middle Ages are those of *ruminatio* and *meditari*. The former is described by Margot Fassler as ‘the “chewing on the cud” of text, which was a process central to monastic learning’. In the context of the liturgical songs of St Hildegard of Bingen, Fassler makes a connection with ‘the intoning of a text for meditation, either a psalm or some other reading from Scripture or the church fathers’. (Fassler 1998, p. 162) A further link has been made here, with meditation. And through the ‘heavily imagistic’ texts Hildegard provided for her original chant compositions, ‘the music provides the opportunity to think, both about the texts that are being intoned and about the words of the song itself’; the latter is ‘a vehicle for the text, offering time to connect one word or phrase to another and to build up a stockpile of interrelated images in the mind’ (Fassler 1998, p. 162). A chain of links runs from text and the (religious) ideas it articulates; its realisation through speech, ‘intonation’ and singing, and the meditation thereon.

On meditation (*meditari*), Leclercq explains: ‘*meditari* means, in a general way, to think, to reflect, as does *cogitare* or *considerare*; but more than these, it often implies an affinity with the practical or even moral order. It implies thinking of a thing with intent to do it; in other words, to prepare oneself for it, to prefigure it in the mind, to desire it, in a way, to do it in advance’ (Leclercq 1982, p. 16). We can draw parallels between this definition of a medieval monastic practice with creative practices in our own time, including musical composition, which combine mental processes such as thinking and imagining—a form of prefiguring in the mind—with practical outcomes, and sometimes contexts which go beyond the practical (the ‘moral order’). With music, furthermore, we have the ongoing legacy of its capacity to bear symbolic meanings. Fassler identifies this as one of the ways music interacted with text in the twelfth century, ‘because of its association with genre and style and also because of the power generated by particular famous melodies, which, charged with the sense of their texts and position in the liturgy, could be reused with new texts and offer symbolic meanings to new words through past associations.’ (Fassler 1998, p. 162). In other words, through semiotics (the process by which genre and style are encoded, as is the ‘sense of their texts and position in the liturgy’) and intertextuality (the multiplication of meaning when a new text is applied to an existing melody). Ivan Moody alludes to this in his recent examination of music as theology: ‘the semantic content of a given passage of music setting a text may be quite independent from the semantic content of the text, and the use of the techniques of contrafactum and centonisation in various repertoires of liturgical chant is proof of this; it would be very difficult to argue that the semantic content of a particular chant changes in and of itself when provided with a new text’ (Moody 2021, pp. 5–6).

In the following section, I give a poietic (intentional) interpretation and an account of the creative process in *Ave generosa*, whose main sources of inspiration are drawn from the life and work of St Hildegard. These sources include the music and text of one of her liturgical songs, and an episode from her contemporaneous *Vita* (1187—see

Silvas 1999, pp. 118–22). As this is an instrumental composition, rather than a direct text setting, its intentional meaning or programme is conveyed through semiotics, intertextuality (quotation), and hermeneutics. Through the following account and discussion, I aim:

(a) To demonstrate how the process of musical composition can be a form of discursive contemplation of spiritual situations and theological concepts, ranging from syntactical manipulations reminiscent of those from occult philosophy/mystical spirituality (for instance, the cabbala and the work of John Dee) and talismanic magic, to the concepts of transgression and redemption from Catholic Christian theology;

(b) To explicate how the work's exegetical hermeneutic, or spiritual programme, can be identified in the sounds and structures of the music.

In order to make the text as accessible as possible to readers of this journal, technical musical vocabulary is kept to a minimum, and explained where necessary. In this context, we might invoke a further medieval concept, that of *conversio*. Barbara Newman notes that: 'As Diehl observes, medieval religious poets were themselves engaged in a kind of "translation"—"a concentration on finding a way to render something already said into words a new audience will understand, an overall function of representing the original to the audience."' (Newman 1988, p. 65). The composition aims to translate, to represent, Hildegard's art and theological concepts to new and different audiences.

### 3. *Ave generosa*

*Ave generosa* is a piece of instrumental chamber music for flute, clarinet, harp, piano, and percussion, lasting around eight minutes. Commissioned by Rhian Samuel and premiered in 1996, the score was published in 2021 (see Inglis 2021). The work's constructive strategies include the quotation of musical elements, and a compositional technique inspired by the 'magic square' and 'Byzantine palindrome' methods deployed by Peter Maxwell Davies and John Tavener, respectively, in works which often have spiritual contexts or connotations.<sup>1</sup> In using one of Hildegard's chants as a source, the recognition of its implicit meaning (articulated via the associated text) is an intentional part of the affect. The new 'text' of the composition is informed by the intertexts provided by Hildegard's music, which is quoted both melodically and harmonically, in adapted and unadapted forms, to provide both local detail and structural underpinning. In terms of spiritual programme, *Ave generosa* is a homage to the power of redemption through female agency, as seen in Hildegard and (through Hildegard's own writing) the Virgin Mary. Catholic Christian concepts of transgression and redemption are manifested in the music by means of explicitly-coded semiotic (symbolic) references.

The piece's title, translatable as 'Hail, noble girl', comes from a hymn by Hildegard in praise of the Virgin Mary, which forms one of the two main sources for the work. The text of the hymn is presented in Table 1, in the translation by Christopher Page, whose edition was also the source for the hymn's music.

For Page, this is 'a testimony to Hildegard's devotion to the Virgin' (Page 1983, p. 20). Striking aspects of the text include images of purity (stanza 1's 'unpolluted', 'chastity'; the metaphor of the lily in stanza 3), metaphors of musical sound (the chiming of heavenly harmony in stanza 5; the resounding of music in stanza 7), and the consistently vivid celebration of Mary's role in the Incarnation (for instance, stanza 4's 'In the clasp of His fire He implanted in you' and 'Thus your womb held joy' in stanza 5). For Barbara Newman, this "'Symphony of Mary'" is a song of the elements, of the angels, of the Church' itself (Newman 1987, p. 180). It is 'a paean to the Bride of God', wherein 'It is Christ himself, the New Song, who unfolds in Mary' (Newman 1988, p. 275). Mary—a co-redemptrix with Christ in Hildegard's Catholic worldview—is a specific exemplar of redemption: 'Mary's function is to give the Word flesh, to make the Incarnation possible and so to redeem human beings . . . Mother and Son have the connotation of moving from the eternal Word with the Father to the incarnate Word through the Virgin Mother.' (King-Lenzmeier 2001, p. 93). In the context of the composition's spiritual programme, this hymn is the specific source

of the ‘redemption’ element, and it carries this meaning into the music through musical quotations from Hildegard’s chant, as will be detailed below.

**Table 1.** Text of *Ave generosa*: Latin original and English translation (Page 1983, p. 20).

Latin Original	English Translation
Ave generosa, gloriosa et intacta puella; tu, pupilla castitatis, tu, materia sanctitatis, que Deo placuit!	Hail, girl of a noble house, shimmering and unpolluted, you, pupil in the eye of the chastity, you, essence sanctity, who were pleasing to God!
nam hec superna infusio in te fuit, quod supernum verbum in te carmen induit,	For the Heavenly potion was poured into you, in that the Heavenly word received a raiment of flesh in you.
Tu, candidum lilium, quod Deus ante omnem creaturam inspexit.	You, the lily that dazzles, whom God knew before all his other creatures.
O pulcherrima et dulcissima; quam valde Deus in te delectabatur: cum amplexione caloris sui in te posuit ita quod filius eius de te lactatus est.	O most beautiful and delectable one; how greatly God delighted in you! In the clasp of His fire He implanted in you so that His Son might be suckled by you.
Venter enim tuus gaudium habuit, cum omnis celestis symphonia de te sonuit, quia, virgo filium Dei portasti, ubi castitas tua in Deo claruit.	Thus your womb held joy, when all the Heavenly harmony chimed out for you, because, o virgin, you bore the Son of God whence your chastity blazed in God.
Viscera tua gaudium habuerunt, sicut gramen super quod ros cadit cum ei viriditatem infudit; ut et in te factum est, o mater omnis gaudii.	Your womb knew delight like the grassland touched by dew and drenched in its freshness; so it was done in you, o mother of all joy.
Nunc omnis Ecclesia in gaudio rutilat ac in symphonia sonnet propter dulcissimam virginem et laudibilem Mariam Dei genitricem. Amen.	Now let all Ecclesia glimmer with the dawn of joy and let it resound in music for the sweetest virgin, Mary compelling all praise, mother of God. Amen.

The other conceptual element, that of transgression, comes from a second source: an incident related in the third book of the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* by the monks Godfrey and Theoderic:

The event took place in a Swabian town called Rudesheim. A priest in a certain place, with the day ended and night coming on, entered the church in order to light the lamps in the sanctuary, when lo, he saw that there were two candles still alight and shining on the altar, for a young scholar, who was zealous and familiar with the care of the divine services, had already gone into the church. Now when the priest asked why he had omitted to extinguish the candles, the young man replied that he had indeed already extinguished them. Then the priest went up to perform the task himself, but discovered an unfolded altar cloth such as is unwrapped for the celebration of the divine mysteries. Whilst he stood there, stupefied, the young man fell on the ground and in ecstasy, cried out:

“The sword of the Lord has struck us!” The priest thought he had been struck down, and hastened to raise him from the ground. But the young man, having no wound, gave forth the utterance: “If we see that there are letters on the altar cloth, we shall not die.” The priest then thought to himself that the youth was crying out through fear, but nonetheless went up to the altar again, and in the place where the sacred vessels are set out, he found on the cloth five letters in the form of a cross, written without human hand. They were, horizontally: A.P.H; and vertically: K.P.D. When he saw this and had carefully noted it, the young man recovered his strength and got up, whilst the priest, having folded the altar cloth and extinguished the candles, went home mystified. The letters remained for seven days, but on the eighth day and thereafter, they were no longer visible. Now the priest made known the object of his speculation to certain wise and devout persons, but none could understand what it might mean until—sixteen years having passed,—news spread through the land that the blessed Hildegard was filled with light by the Holy Spirit. So the priest went to her and merited to understand the meaning of the prophesy that she, by means of the Holy Spirit, taught him. Just as Daniel of old read what appeared on the wall, so Hildegard read what was written on the cloth, explaining the letters in this way:

K—kyrium, P—presbyter, D—derisit, A—ascendit, P—poenitans, H—homo.<sup>2</sup>

When he heard this the priest trembled with fear, and accused his sinful conscience. So, having been admonished he became a monk and strove by means of penance to amend the negligence of his past life. Thus just in the way the blessed maiden had explained the letters, he ascended to a higher and more austere life, and showed himself a perfect servant of God by his holy way of life. (Silvas 1987, pp. 49–50<sup>3</sup>)

As the authors of the above passage note, ‘there is in this tale a share of the powers of the blessed maiden [Hildegard]’, who is revealed to be herself a redemptrix, redeeming the transgression of the priest’s sinful negligence through her exegesis of the mysterious, indeed, mystical, letters. A redemptive chain leads from the priest, to Hildegard, to Mary (subject of Hildegard’s devotion), co-redemptrix with Christ.

As well as providing a narrative—a common source of inspiration for programme music of any kind—this passage offered a particular opportunity for deploying musical technique to realise the ‘redemption’ programmatic concept. I used a process inspired by Tavener’s Byzantine palindrome manipulations to turn letters into notes and generate music.<sup>4</sup> The letters featured in the above passage (K.P.D.A.P.H) point (via synechdoche) to words which have a denotative meaning (in Latin, ‘[This] priest has mocked the Lord; in repentance let the man ascend’). This meaning is part of the semantic theme ‘redemption’. The iconography of the cross, or acrostic, in the arrangement of letters described by Godfrey & Theoderic, may also be considered important here; it is a visual signifier of the Cross of Christ, which connotes redemption through sacrifice. The letter-cross pattern was first expanded into a letter square (see Figure 1a,b). This was then ‘translated’ musically by freely allocating a musical pitch to each letter, as in Figure 1c.

Detailed reference will now be made to specific sections of the composition. To aid comprehension, a link to a video (Video S1) incorporating an audio recording and page images of the musical score, is included in the Supplementary Materials section at the end of this article. (The recording is from the live performance by the City Lights Ensemble/Brian Inglis, 15 September 1996.) See also Table 2 for a taxonomy of the structure. It should be borne in mind at this point that *Ave generosa* is a composition in a modern musical idiom. While the chant quotations are intended to be heard, and recognised, there is no intention to evoke the sound of medieval music, either compositionally or through performance techniques.

	A
(a) Letter cross: K	P D
	H
(b) Letter square:	K P D A P H
	D P K H P A
	H P A D P K
	K P D H P A
	D P K A P H
	A P H K P D
(c) Pitch square:	E <sub>b</sub> G D A G F <sup>#</sup>
	D G E <sub>b</sub> F <sup>#</sup> G A
	F <sup>#</sup> G A D G F <sup>#</sup>
	E <sub>b</sub> G D F <sup>#</sup> G E <sub>b</sub>
	D G E <sub>b</sub> A G F <sup>#</sup>
	A G F <sup>#</sup> E <sub>b</sub> G D

**Figure 1.** Development of letter cross from *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* into pitch square used in *Ave generosa*: (a) Letter cross; (b) Letter square; (c) Pitch square.

**Table 2.** Structural plan of *Ave generosa*.

Section	Start Time	Rehearsal Letter(s)	Description	Instruments
1	0'00"	A/B	'Pastoral' introduction (birdsong-like figures)	Flute, clarinet
2	1'20"	C/D	Birdsong-like figures/music based on pitch square	Glockenspiel & clarinet, flute, piano, harp
3	2'19"	E	Transition	All
4	3'11"	F	Cadenza (virtuosic solo)	Harp
5	3'25"	G	Bridge passage, including reference to 'in Deo claruit' chant phrase	Flute, clarinet, harp, piano, vibraphone
6	4'01"	H	Central high point: 'in Deo claruit' chant combined with Messiaen quote	Flute, clarinet, harp, piano, vibraphone
7	4'34"	I	Bridge passage. Quotation of 'Mariam' chant phrase	Flute
8	4'48"	J-L	Music originating in Messiaen quote	Flute, clarinet, various percussion including vibraphone, harp, piano, piccolo
9	6'50"	M	Coda: melody based on 'Venter enim' and 'cum amplexione' chant phrases	Flute + clarinet, harp, percussion

In the first main section of the work (section 2, from 1'20" to 2'18"), melodies played by flute and clarinet, and chords played by the piano and harp, are derived from the pitch square. In extra-musical terms, this section represents 'transgression' through the letters explicated by Hildegard in the Vita episode, and the role of her explication within it.

The converse of the musical material representing transgression is Hildegard's own chant setting of the *Ave generosa* text.<sup>5</sup> Fragments of this chant serve as melodic and harmonic material at certain points. Some of the intervals of the chant, particularly the rising (perfect fifth) interval which begins each verse except the sixth, provide harmonic underpinning to the central section 6 (4'01" to 4'33"), as well as recurring in the concluding coda section, which is the work's melodic apotheosis. The unison melody of this coda (section 9), played by flute and clarinet (from 6'50"), is derived from the chant setting of the phrases

‘Venter enim tuus gaudium habuit [Thus your womb held joy]’, and ‘cum amplexione caloris sui in te posuit [in the clasp of His fire He implanted in you]’. Hermeneutically, then, the piece concludes in a celebration of the Incarnation and Mary’s role in it, through the lens of Hildegard’s creative exposition of this topic.

Two more direct chant citations appear in the texture: the phrase for the setting of ‘Mariam’ quoted by the flute at 4’34’’; and the melismatic setting (with many notes per syllable) of the words ‘in Deo claruit [(Mary’s chastity) blazed in God]’, sustained by the flute in the intense central section 6 (from 4’01’’). The metaphor of the Virgin’s chastity ‘blazing’ in God—an image/metaphor cognate with the ‘clasp of His fire’ in the lyric’s previous stanza—informs the sonic world of this climactic section. Here, rising (arpeggio) figures from piano and harp create clouds of resonance around the sustaining wind instruments. This section also introduces a third source: a melodic pattern (note row) derived from the piano piece *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* (1949) by Catholic composer Olivier Messiaen, included to enrich the work’s musical and symbolic vocabulary. The latter major section of the piece (section 8, 4’48’’ to 6’49’’) utilises this third source.

As noted, the structure of the piece is illustrated in Table 2. The birdsong-like introduction for the two melody instruments (to 1’19’’) recalls the convention in medieval lyric poetry of the pastoral ‘nature opening’ and also of the alba, or song to warn lovers of the approach of dawn. Birdsong-like flurries continue into section 2, played by clarinet and glockenspiel. Further birdsong flurries appear in the transitional passage section 3, from 2’19’’ to 3’10’’.

In summary, the work’s spiritual programme could be understood as a metaphorical progression throughout the day, from

- the freshness of dawn with reference to the pristine state of nature, through
- the transgression of humans, to
- an evocation of the blazing of the midday sun, and
- an abstraction into pure lyricism and melody, with a final homage to Hildegard on account of her redemptive role and praise of the redemptrix Mary.

The ‘nature’ topic, while, as noted, a conventional topos of medieval literature, has an environmental dimension which gives a new context to the transgression of humans: environmental ‘sins’ rather than moral ones. Aspects of the Ecotheology movement focus on the importance of respect for/sacralisation of nature and the earth. Hildegard’s concept of ‘viriditas’ (greenness), while not specifically referenced in her *Ave generosa* text, links the flourishing verdancy of the natural world with virginity—the world’s own state being virginal before the arrival of humans. Linked with the medieval nature topos is the poetic and musical Pastoral, the latter being a topical association on which the composition draws.

The source of the second example remains within the world of the Middle Ages, but relocates from the German lands of the 12th century to 15th century England. The source of inspiration and starting point here is the spiritual autobiography *The Book of Margery Kempe*. As with *Ave generosa*, the ensuing discussion, with its references to musico-dramatic work, is best followed in parallel with the musical text. Accordingly, video excerpts (from the premiere production) are cited in the Supplementary Materials section.

#### 4. The Song of Margery Kempe

In contrast to St Hildegard’s professionalised and widely celebrated theology and art, which emanated from the rarefied world of monasticism, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a confessional account of a very material mysticism.<sup>6</sup> This was experienced in the context of what Anthony Bale describes as a ‘mixed life’, combining the role of housewife and mother, and occasional businesswoman, alongside her religious practice and spiritual journey. Her *Book* is an invaluable primary account of late medieval pan-European religious practice, and thus an important source in the history of religion. Dramatising this source, as in the solo a cappella opera *The Song of Margery Kempe*, brings this history and the referenced practices, beliefs and experiences to life—to reference a medieval concept, it ‘enlivens’ them. And as well as the inherently dramatic episodes in Margery’s life, such as her vividly described

visions of tormenting demons following postpartum psychosis after the birth of her first child, her story is particularly suited to musical setting because the world she evokes is full of sound. Materially, these sounds include the voices of birds who sing into her ears, interpreted by her as visitations from the Holy Ghost. For example, a robin is referenced in Book I chapter 36: ‘a little bird which is called a red breast that sang full merrily oftentimes in her right ear’ (Staley 2001, p. 66); and in chapter 89: ‘she heard many times a voice of a sweet bird singing in her ear’ (p. 159). Metaphysically, there is a heavenly melody which rouses her from her postpartum psychosis, leading to her conversion to an intensely spiritual inner life manifested outwardly through overt, exaggerated religiosity: ‘One night . . . she heard a melodious sound so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in paradise . . . This melody was so sweet that it surpassed all the melody that might be heard in this world, without any comparison’ (Windeatt [1985] 1994, p. 46). And linking the two realms, perhaps her most famous or notorious attribute: her version of the gift of tears, described variously in the *Book* as weeping, sighing, sobbing, crying, wailing, and roaring, which attracted much attention from her contemporaries: alarm, awe, admiration, criticism, ridicule.

Writing an opera (Inglis 2015) provided an opportunity to realise, musically, these two compelling challenges, as well as picturesque incidental details such as the birdsong. (The latter is imitated by the character of Margery herself during transitional material, as noted in Table 3 below). The structure of the opera, and the sources of the libretto in episodes from Margery’s *Book* (which is structured in two volumes), is shown in Table 3. The ‘base text’ for those sections of the libretto based directly on the *Book* is Windeatt ([1985] 1994), with Staley (2001) used as a supplementary source.

**Table 3.** Structure of *The Song of Margery Kempe*.

Scene/Section	Title	Episode/Description	Source	How Dramatised
1	Margery’s temptation and madness	the spiritual crisis associated with Margery’s postpartum psychosis following the birth of her first child	Book I chapter 1; concluding prayer of Book II	scenario shows Margery attempting to pray (the <i>Veni creator spiritus</i> ) but being assailed by visions of tormenting demons
2	Margery’s conversion	the celestial vision of Jesus which roused her from despair, and inspired her to embark on a life of piety	Book I chapter 1	depicts her conversion experience and includes representations of the ‘heavenly melody’ she hears and the first iterations of her gift of tears
3	Margery’s trial	her trial for suspected heresy (Lollardism) at Leicester	Book I chapter 46–49	scenario shows Margery behind a chair, as if in dock, subjected to questions from an invisible and inaudible interlocutor
Transition	Transition	sounds of birdsong and bells from offstage		stage in darkness
4 (Epilogue)	Margery’s epiphany	Margery’s review of her life and spiritual progress	Various, including concluding prayer of Book II	structured as an extended prayer (with reflective interjections) based on conclusion of <i>Veni creator spiritus</i>

The music, even within its single a cappella vocal line (as in early medieval music, such as Hildegard’s), adds another semantic dimension to the dramatised situations.<sup>7</sup> As in *Ave generosa*, musical quotation is utilised, significantly in Scene 1 and Scene 4 (the Epilogue), which quote the music and text of the plainchant *Veni creator spiritus* (which Margery is reported to have used in her prayers) in a ‘diagetic’ context.

Expounding the notion of materiality in Kempe’s world, Bale notes that:

For Kempe, religious media are not cheap substitutes for religious experience but, rather, a mode of having a religious experience. Medieval culture abounds with enlivened things, objects that transform themselves and do things to the people around them . . . . These lively things represent intersections of life and death,



miracle and mimesis, the extraordinary and the mundane. Kempe's experiences with crucifixes show how public icons and objects could be engaged in intensely subjective encounters. (Bale 2021, p. 133)

As Bale observes, 'Kempe . . . has several vivid encounters with crucifixes', including from early in her conversion experience (Bale 2021, p. 138). The libretto of *The Song of Margery Kempe* and its premiere staging (designed by Paul Burgess) foreground the cross as a prop. Margery prays in front of it during Scene 2, which depicts her conversion experience, externalises the 'heavenly melody' she hears, and shows her becoming convulsed by her 'gift of tears' for the first time (see Video S2). In Scene 3, which deals with the taxing situation of Margery's trial for heresy at Leicester, she acknowledges it to make her witness statement. As played by Loré Lixenberg, Margery clutches it in an almost talismanic fashion (see Video S3). This is a key moment in Margery's spiritual progress and in the opera: her successful negotiation of the religious and secular authorities' inquisition leads to a reprieve and official sanctioning of Margery's eccentric, though theologically orthodox, religious devotional practice. In this scene of the opera, the music supports the situations through the deployment of style and technique. Bale observes: 'The entire episode at Leicester is structured through Kempe's interactions with male authority', and notes that the mayor of Leicester, her first interrogator, 'seems to have conjoined gender and heresy' in his accusations (not directly named in the Book) (Bale 2021, p. 126). In the dramaturgy of Scene 3 I have, literally, silenced the authoritative male voice by representing the questions of Margery's interlocutor with silent pauses. Margery's is the only voice heard. As in her first response, to quote from the libretto (Inglis 2023):

BRIGHT SPOTLIGHT ON MARGERY UP SUDDENLY

Margery: [from behind chair, as if in the dock being questioned]

My name is Margery Kempe. [question] I am from Lynn in Norfolk, the daughter of a good man. I have a good man for my husband also. [question] You call me a false strumpet, a Lollard, and I say I am not afraid to go to prison for the love of my Lord, who suffered much more for my love than I may for his. (Inglis 2023, p. 17)

Bale identifies this strategy as one of abasement, which turns into a strength when she invokes a conventional and accepted exemplar of female sanctity: 'What she can do . . . is to find power in her own powerlessness, as she restates, echoing St Katharine, her fearlessness of imprisonment and her devotion to abjection'. (Bale 2021, p. 128).

In the musical setting, I use a somewhat angular melodic technique, based on a specific row of notes, for passages where Margery is defending herself, such as that above. The note row uses two complementary scales to encompass the chromatic whole (i.e., all pitches available in common Western practice). Metaphorically here, Margery is covering all bases in her defence.

In other passages, Margery enters a spiritual reverie even as she is being interrogated, and in these instances, I use intertextual strategies, of which I offer two examples. Firstly the case of the following passage: 'I would have you know that there is no man in this world I love so much as God, for I love him above all things, and I tell you truly, I love all men in God and for God' (Inglis 2023, p. 17). A chorale melody is used to set this phrase, invoking, to recall Fassler's typology from medieval text-setting, 'the power generated by particular famous melodies, which, charged with the sense of their texts and position in the liturgy, could be reused with new texts and offer symbolic meanings to new words through past associations.' (Fassler 1998, p. 162).

Secondly, and to conclude this discussion, at the end of the scene, Margery quotes the words of Christ:

When the woman in the Gospel heard our Lord preach, she came before him and said in a loud voice: "Blessed be the womb that bore you, and the breasts that gave you suck". Then our Lord replied to her: "In truth, so are they blessed who

hear the word of God and keep it". And therefore, sir, I think the Gospel gives me leave to speak of God.

[She has a faraway look, drawing into herself as she is led away]

LIGHTS DOWN (Inglis 2023, pp. 17–18)

In setting Margery's reporting of the speech of Jesus Christ, I use a style alluding to that of Arvo Pärt, whose spiritually inclined works have gained great popularity, and whose style is likely to be known to classical music audiences (amongst other audiences). As a modern 'style indicator' (Tagg 2013) this intertextual reference multiplies meaning for audiences and is also comparable with Fassler's 'association with genre and style' in medieval music text-setting.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary and in conclusion, I have offered a frame for considering music composition—through the two works discussed here—as a commentary, or gloss, on both religious history and enduring theological themes. Through this frame, music composition is considered as an *enlivening* 'translation' of said themes. The frame, and its contents (the compositions chosen as examples), offer a different domain in which to contemplate religion and spirituality. Consideration of composition in this light has been essayed before in, for instance, Scholl and van Maas (2017) (canon as agent of revelation in Ligeti; singularity in Ustvolskaya; Harvey's 'positive' negative theology). Relatedly, Roberts (2020) explores the notion of composition as public theology in John Tavener's music (specifically *The Veil of the Temple*, 2002). I build on this scholarship, adding the poetic element inherent in analysing and interpreting my own compositions. There is scope for more work on how theological ideas are manifested and encoded in the processes and compositions of composers such as, for instance, Peter Maxwell Davies and Sofia Gubaidulina. From the creator's viewpoint, spiritually inclined composers might themselves consider more consciously and explicitly how to embed intentions through their process and in its outcomes.

Moving beyond music to other artforms, the two medieval mystics who formed my starting points here—Hildegard of Bingen and Margery Kempe—have, of course, been the subjects of considerable attention beyond theological and historical circles (including feminist scholars therein) in recent decades. Many creative artistic responses have ensued, across the arts from music, through dance, to literature. It would be fascinating to investigate how, for instance, Robert Glück explores the erotic element in medieval mysticism through imaginatively developing it via translation as a queer twentieth-century romance in his novel *Margery Kempe* (Glück [1994] 2020) (This has been explored through the lens of language studies, but not theology), or how Victoria MacKenzie frames the spiritual relationship of Margery with Julian of Norwich in her novel *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain* (MacKenzie 2023).

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information is available: Video S1: Inglis, *Ave generosa* (score video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANr0rd94pyk> (accessed on 28 February 2023). Video S2: Inglis, *The Song of Margery Kempe* Scene 2: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pj8FR\\_9OWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pj8FR_9OWc) (accessed on 28 February 2023). Video S3: Inglis, *The Song of Margery Kempe* Scene 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyLTjsH66B4> (accessed on 28 February 2023).

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## Notes

- 1 Examples include Peter Maxwell Davies' *Ave Maris Stella* (1975), whose technique, affect and sound-world were directly influential on *Ave generosa*; and John Tavener's *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* (1983) and *Icon of Light* (1983).
- 2 [This] priest has mocked the Lord; in repentance let the man ascend.
- 3 Silvas subsequently published a slightly revised translation in book form (Silvas 1999).
- 4 Tavener's method was first identified by Geoffrey Haydon: 'John calls it his "Byzantine palindrome" . . . an arrangement of twenty-five letters . . . read either forwards or backwards, spells out the same message . . . [which] can be found on Byzantine gravestones' (Haydon [1995] 1998, p. 164). For an example of how the method can work in practice, see my book chapter Inglis (2020).
- 5 A recording of an unadorned solo vocal performance is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9hBPuPeEkU> (accessed on 28 February 2023). An interesting instrumental realisation directed by Jordi Savali can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnSPI2S5xPY> (accessed on 28 February 2023).
- 6 Modern English translations include Windeatt ([1985] 1994), Staley (2001) and Bale (2015). In recent years interest in Margery has grown beyond the academic community. She, and the 'recordings' of her experiences found in her *Book*, is one of three pioneering women profiled in experimental artist and musician Cosey Fanni Tutti's *Re-Sisters* (the others are electronic musician Delia Derbyshire and Tutti herself) (Tutti 2022). She is also, in fictionalised form, the joint subject (with Julian of Norwich) of Victoria MacKenzie's novel *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain* (MacKenzie 2023).
- 7 The opera received its concert premiere from Loré Lixenberg (mezzo-soprano) at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, London, UK on 8 August 2008, promoted by Tête-à-Tête: The Opera Festival and supported by funding from the Bliss Trust/PRS Foundation. The first stage production was at the same venue and festival on 1–2 August 2009, financially supported by the RVW Trust. Margery was played by, again, Loré Lixenberg; the designer was Paul Burgess; the technical director Marius Rønning, and the lighting designer Mark Doubleday. An abbreviated video performance was shown—with accompanying introductory talk—at the symposium Moving Performances, Oxford University, 23 June 2016. Excerpts were also displayed, as noted, in the online Gallery of the BIAPT conference, in July 2022. Aspects of the opera have been discussed previously in Inglis (2016) and Inglis (2019).

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