

Book review | Hilkka-Liisa Vuori

A comprehensive study of Birgittine chant across the centuries

Karin Lagergren: *Birgittine chantscales. Chant and liturgy in the Order of St Birgitta of Sweden 14th–21st century* (2025). Uppsala: Uppsala university.

Musicologist Karin Lagergren has carried out research on the material for this book for more than a decade, and from a glance at the table of contents, this is easy to believe. The book is divided into eight chapters, each of them covering approximately one hundred years of Birgittine chant history.

She begins her journey with the most difficult part of this history, namely the early period of the Birgittine Order, when *Cantus sororum*, the sisters' liturgy of the hours, was being planned and designed by Birgitta's confessor Petrus of Skänninge and by Birgitta herself. This period is difficult to reconstruct because of the paucity of evidence. No manuscripts of Birgittine chant survive from the fourteenth century. In her revelations (*Revelationes Extravagantes*), Birgitta refers to Petrus of Skänninge as the creator of the sisters' liturgy. Lagergren questions this attribution and proposes her own theory regarding the early development of Birgittine liturgy. In this theory, Petrus of Skänninge played a vital role in developing the liturgy. However, he did not complete this task. Rather, his successors completed the work so that a codified liturgy existed by the 1430s. Lagergren shows an ability to present a complex argument in a reflective, academic and humble tone. The reader is not required to agree with her theory, as an openness to reasonable possibilities lies behind the argumentation.

Another major theme in her book is her search for melodies or melodic fragments typical of the Birgittine liturgy. This is not easy, since one widely acknowledged feature of the *Cantus sororum* is its musical diversity. The liturgy includes simple hymns, simple and complex antiphons, unique *Benedicamus* chants, and the most complex great responsories. It contains known traditional chants, variations of traditional chants, and unique chants of the

Cantus sororum, which partly consist of musical formulas typical of Gregorian chant. The musical landscape – or the chantscape as Lagergren calls it – varies greatly.

The book demonstrates how a diligent study of melodies can lead to the identification of order-specific melodic characteristics. Through meticulous analysis, Lagergren finds a recurring pitch group originating from the introit *Salve sancta parens*. As the same group of pitches appears in many Birgittine chants that were especially important to the sisters, she argues that ‘this use [of a pitch group] is a conscious way of creating a musical signal that can be experienced as Birgittine within the Birgittine chantscape’ (p. 85). The group can also be identified in some chants of the offices honouring Birgitta and her daughter Katherina. It is indeed a courageous argument to state that a certain melody, a pitch group, marks the Birgittine identity when keeping in mind that the whole music genre is built on corresponding modal formulas, common melodies and formulas shared in different chants. Yet Lagergren’s theory is intriguing and indicates a possible trait in the sisters’ liturgical and musical languages.

Lagergren’s account of the history of Birgittine abbeys through the centuries, the early history of Vadstena, and the development of liturgy and book production in abbeys in Germany (Altomünster), Belgium (Mariëntroon) and Netherlands (Mariënwater / Maria Refugie) is both admirable and valuable. She also traces the development of Latin chant into the vernacular. The absence of Nådendal (Naantali) abbey in the Turku diocese, Finland (then part of medieval Sweden) from Lagergren’s book is regrettable but understandable, as only a few fragments of the *Cantus sororum* survive in the National Library of Finland, and no complete manuscripts of the liturgy have been preserved.

These comments apply to only a small portion of the book. Lagergren’s work is a valuable cultural-historical and musicological contribution and an impressive piece of scholarship that can be highly recommended for professional as well as general readers.