# Smith, Anne. *The Performance of 16th-Century Music: Learning from the Theorists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-19974261-5.

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Several times over the years I have been moved, or asked, to write in general terms about Renaissance performance practice. Each time I find myself staring into space and thinking how much of our effort goes into the concrete aspects of the art, like instrumentation, *ficta*, text underlay, pitch standards, tempo, proportions, and so on, and how little seems to go into matters of style. I brood about this, but I never wrote about it because it seems like such a fatuous thing to say. Style, style in performance, is tricky enough to write about when we can actually *hear* the performance, and things are much, much worse for music hundreds of years in the past. So I always wondered for a while, and then moved on to other things.

Anne Smith has not moved on to other things. She noticed what I suppose a lot of us have noticed, that the music theorists of the sixteenth century drop occasional hints, and sometimes more than hints, about how performance could be approached; unlike the rest of us, however, she has patiently collected these hints—aided no doubt by the hothouse atmosphere of the Schola Cantorum Basilensis, where she has taught Renaissance flute for many years—into a surprisingly subtle and coherent story.

It cannot have been an easy story to organize. She frames it with chapters, first on the difference between part-book and score culture and the profound differences, practically and psychologically, between reading from the sort of materials they read from and the scores we read from today, and then a chapter at the end about the return to score culture as the sixteenth century drew to a close. In the middle, she provides chapters on specific concerns like solmization and its implications, metric hierarchy and its effect on the rhythm of the music, how they dealt with cadences, and how they thought about mode. (This last one is supplemented with a rather dazzling appendix of some sixty-seven pages—more than a quarter of the book—outlining what contemporary theorists said about the characteristics of the various modes.) And then there are two wide-ranging chapters on rhetorical approaches to composition and performance, built around Joachim Burmeister's famous and frustrating analysis of Orlando di Lasso's motet *In me transierunt* (which, while I'm here, let me say somebody really good needs to record sometime) and on the skills expected of a professional musician in the sixteenth

century. All of it is backed up by quotations, as long as they need to be, from the theorists themselves, and all the quotations are given in English but with the original language in footnotes. It is a masterly job, wearing its learning lightly and always keeping the reader's needs upmost; when Smith has doubts, she's not afraid to admit them, and when she sees clarity that we may not, she gives us that too.

This is very much a teacher's book. Reading it, I had two recurrent fantasies: (a) of using it for a seminar with my own students, a chapter a week, stopping to discuss all her quotations and play recordings of the music she talks about, and (b) of chucking it all and going to Basel to study the Renaissance flute. (In case she reads this: don't worry, (a) is much more likely.) What Smith doesn't provide is a handbook of easy tips on stylish Renaissance performance. And this is not quite as obvious a point as it may sound.

I hope I am not the only reader of *PPR* who would have to admit, if hooked up to a polygraph, that I first learned baroque performance as a series of little quick fixes—*notes inégales*, over-dotting, variable tonguing, and so forth—overlaid on the way I already played, and only later, and gradually, worked that into a more sophisticated (I hope) rhetorical sensibility. It isn't actually such a bad way to learn. What Anne Smith's book shows is that there is no such quick way into the style of sixteenth-century music—but, and this is the important thing, there is a slow way. Learning to sing and play from their notation; learning to solmize the way they did; imbibing their experience of mode, of cadences, of the natural rhythms within a breve-unit, of the rhetoric of both composition and ornamentation; none of this can be learned in a hurry. But as much of it as we can accomplish, it will show up in the depth of our performances and the depth of our listening. No one who performs sixteenth-century music, and no one who cares about what this music sounded like or how they understood it back then, can afford to be without this slender and, let me add, economical (about $30 from Amazon as I write) book.