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Book Reviews

Musica getutscht: a Treatise on Musical Instruments (1511) by Sebastian Virdung. Trans. and ed. Beth Bullard. Cambridge Musical Texts and Monographs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). ISBN 0 521 30830 5.

All musicians and musicologists interested in instrumental music of the Renaissance should cheer the arrival of the fine edition and translation by Beth Bullard of Virdung's *Musica getutscht* (Basel, 1511). Virdung's illustrated volume, the first of its kind, is a central document for the understanding of performance practices ca. 1500, even though the text itself is often obscure. The language, a version of Early New High German, poses formidable obstacles, exacerbated by Virdung's often quirky perspective on his subject. The Illustrations, too, while invaluable and extraordinarily informative in a general way, are maddeningly inaccurate in detail. To have a careful translation such as this available is valuable in itself, but now we have Dr. Bullard's thoughtful commentary as well. We are fortunate, and Cambridge Press is to be congratulated for its initiative in producing this volume.

Bullard has organized the book in two parts: the first a background commentary of four chapters (general introduction, biography of Virdung, survey of the production history of *Musica getutscht*, and discussion of several volumes spawned by Virdung's effort), the second a translation with extensive notes. A substantial bibliography follows, along with a fairly extensive index (the endnotes, however, are not indexed).

To deal with production matters first, the appearance of the volume is splendid. The type is elegant and easy on the eye. The only illustrations are those drawn from *Musica getutscht* itself, but these are both attractive and germane to the text. There are few typographical errors (mostly in the endnotes; i.e. on p. 194, note 15, where "case" should be cause, and on p. 193, note 8 and p. 205, notes 18 and 19, where the reader is referred to p. 000). While one might quibble here and there, the translation is quite reliable—Dr. Bullard's command of both Early New High German and the regional idiosyncrasies of the Basel region are formidable. Her command of Flemish is less secure (on p. 56 *snar* is stated as the correct term for "string," which should be *snaar*, and on p. 87 *scarmeyen* is translated as "shawms"—the term is close to the Flemish word *schalmeyen*, but, in fact, is not the same),

though this is clearly peripheral as she refers to this language in relation to one of the later off-shoots of *Musica getutscht*. While on the subject, Dr. Bullard promotes the use of the term "Netherlandic" for Dutch and Flemish, following the recommendations of van Haeringen, although many Dutch and Flemish scholars have been reluctant to adopt van Haeringen's term.¹ Finally, for a Flemish speaker, *Dit*, meaning "this" seems clumsy as an abbreviation for *Dit is een seer schoon Boecxken* (*Boecxken* would have sounded more elegant).

The first chapter offers a summary of the context of *Musica getutscht*. The print was a small extract from a much larger work (which remained in manuscript and is no longer extant). This point, as Dr. Bullard observes, is central, for it has raised thorny issues for all subsequent readers of Virdung's text. When matters would get too complex for easy presentation, Virdung would simply refer to his larger work. Bullard believes that the primary focus was on intabulation, which permitted the author even further compression of material in other areas. Furthermore, while *Musica getutscht* presents a general survey of all instruments (loud and soft), for professional and amateur players of the time the primary interest would have been in the soft instruments. Thus this vernacular treatise is aimed "toward a wide spectrum of society," including even "wealthier members of the educated middle class." The suggestion is valid, although the term "middle class" clouds the issue (the term applies to modern society, and is generally avoided by social historians—for very good reason, as can be shown here, for example, for Virdung's main audience was composed of wealthy urban elites, a group which was restricted to about the upper ten percent of the population, which hardly fits the modern notion of middling stature).²

Dr. Bullard is most successful when she narrows her focus directly on her subject. Chapter 2 offers a biography of Virdung, with a welcome collection of documents relating to his life (most of the material has been previously available, but only in scattered sources). The sketch of Virdung's career—as a singer in the chapel of the Count Palatine, then with the cathedral in Constance, and finally as an unemployed job-seeker at the time this volume was produced—is both concise and informative. Bullard argues convincingly that most of us have erred in identifying Virdung as the more academic

¹ See for example the recent publication by Frits Pieter van Oostrom, *Court and Culture: Dutch Literature 1340-1450* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

² See J. Jahn, "Die Augsburger Sozialstruktur im 15. Jahrhundert," *Geschichte der Stadt Augsburg* (Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss Verlag, 1984), 187-93, and T. Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime, and Reform-ation at Strasbourg 1520-1555* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 34-47.

looking figure in an early illustration—our man, she points out, has just returned from extensive travels and is the rustically attired fellow. Her suggestion that Virdung probably died between about 1512 and 1516 appears plausible, and again refines previous views.

Chapter 3 treats the publication history of *Musica getutscht*. Bullard amplifies Edwin Ripin's landmark article, which revealed that there were two early editions, one from Basel in 1511, and another, copied from the original, apparently produced in Augsburg sometime before 1521. Othmar Luscinius prepared a Latin version, evidently in about 1517, but published in Strasbourg much later, in 1536. Subsequently Willem Vorsterman published a French variant in Antwerp in 1529, and we know of two Flemish versions printed by Jan van Ghelen in 1554 and 1568, also in Antwerp. Much of this retraces previous research, but Bullard updates information and adds illuminating details. Quite startling is her observation that a Flemish version must have preceded the French (several passages of the French print seem to be clear translations of Flemish, not vice versa).

Chapter 4 treats the "offspring of *Musica getutscht*" in more detail, with more expansive treatment of the connections between the various prints and the differences as well. The differences will be of particular interest to readers of this journal as it is here that Dr. Bullard deals with subtle changes that have a direct bearing on performance practice (the shift away from German lute tablatures, for example).

The heart of the volume is, of course, the translation of Virdung's text, which forms Part II. Dr. Bullard has appropriately chosen a cautious approach and gives a quite literal version. The result, while hardly elegant, is mercifully accurate and clear. The initial main section consists of the illustrated discussion of the instruments. The first group are the stringed instruments, further subdivided into four groups: keyboard, fretted, an unfretted group (harps, psaltery, and *Hackbrett*), and bowed unfretted instruments. The second are the "wind" instruments, subdivided into (1) the "woodwind" (most importantly shawms, flutes, recorder, cornetts, and crumhorns) and "brass" instruments (trombone, various trumpet types, and curiously, the bagpipe) and (2) four types of organs. This section concludes with a rather rambling discussion of bells, drums, "historical" and other unusual instruments. In her discussion, Bullard emphasizes that while Virdung presents families as consisting of four members, in fact, for important instruments such as the recorder there were actually only three sizes (with the two middle instruments, when playing in four-part textures, most often being of the same size). This is an important point, and more commentary might have been welcome here. Crumhorns were made in fours (as Bullard observes)

and shawms in twos. Lutes, too, while allowing considerable variation in terms of performance practice were generally thought of as having two general sizes, (more or less) large and small. For the recorder, we know from both surviving instruments and from inventories that, while made perhaps in three sizes, players would often have had a dozen or more instruments available. All this is firmly linked to crucial performance practice issues—concerning which Virdung hints at this, and implies that, then leaves us dangling. Concerning the reliability of the woodcuts, Bullard makes the sensible observation that these were intended to represent general types, and were therefore not accurate in all details.

With the introduction to the instruments complete, Virdung then turns to the making of the music. Bullard presents a strong case that Virdung's main purpose, not only here, but for the entire volume, was to provide elementary instruction in intabulation, his focus being on the clavichord, lute, and recorder. He begins with the clavichord, providing a brief introduction to the layout of the keyboard (with a letter notation for each note) and a few very basic instructions concerning mensural notation. It is in this section, while giving his theoretical explanation for chromatic pitches, that Virdung made his misguided and cruel attack on his highly regarded blind contemporary Arnolt Schlick, who was a professional keyboard player of the first rank, which Virdung was not.

Instrumental performance, as Bullard herself states, was "a subject outside his professional expertise," and as Virdung takes up intabulation he proposes an approach which has puzzled and irritated musicians almost literally from the day the text was printed. What he indicates was a system which took over each voice of a four-part piece exactly as it was written in the original version. When intabulated for the clavichord, the result is that some pitches are impossible because they must be played simultaneously on the same string, and even when pitches can be played the voice crossings are extremely awkward. Dr. Bullard has provided a rationale, which was that what Virdung intended was to provide an example of how individual, single lines could be transcribed, i.e. that Virdung never really intended that the piece actually be played from the tablature he has given. Bullard's explanation seems plausible, but it still leaves Virdung open to criticism. His tablature is, then, like no other tablature that has survived, either pedagogical or practical. It looks playable, it looks contrapuntal, but is neither. Moreover, Virdung provided not a word of warning in this regard—a remarkable failure in what is, after all, an instructional text. The lack of space can't be pleaded here, for Virdung rambles about concerning other matters, even stating at one point, "I can think of nothing more that you need to know" (p. 166). He certainly should have spared at least a short sentence

to clear up such a basic feature. Even had he done so, though, there would remain the fundamental issue, which is that intabulation, by its very nature, is the adaptation of a musical text to a particular performance medium. Virdung does not even touch on this subject, which resulted in contempt on the part of his professional colleagues (witness Schlick's scathing response within weeks of the publication of *Musica getutscht*), and probably on the part of reasonably competent amateurs as well.

The organization of Bullard's text, while logical, will occasionally exasperate a reader who is following her reasoning closely. The two parts of the book are *distinctly separate, but the interrelations lead to frequent cross references*—this especially in the endnotes which function as a commentary to Part II. Thus we find frequent directions to see related ideas backwards or forwards, sometimes with indications to crucial material in endnotes. The choice of endnotes rather than footnotes was very unfortunate for this particular volume—in several instances I found myself with a finger in one page of the text, another finger with one set of notes, another finger to check a related point in the text, where I would find yet another instruction to see a further endnote. Also the separation of the two parts probably explains the rather too frequent instances of repetition of material (the controversy between Schlick and Virdung, for example, is outlined in three different places).

The text is lucidly written, although one is occasionally jarred by such statements as "cultural chauvinism on the part of the Italians of the time stemmed from a prevailing historical perspective . . . which identified contemporary Germans as descendants of the barbarians" (p. 217). Obviously the Italian sense of superiority was due to a complex knot of factors which included relative wealth, advanced intellectual life, and perceived leadership in artistic matters—all too complicated for such off-hand certainty in a single case.

Bullard's command of her material is impressive, especially on the more restricted topic of Virdung and his text (which was, indeed, her subject). I would like to have heard her ideas on the relationship between Virdung and the rich tradition of theoretical commentary on instruments in German manuscript sources. Likewise the text could have benefited from comment on the considerable work done recently in 15th-century German music. Reinhard Strohm, for example, has contributed a fascinating scenario for the possible invention of the clavichord. Finally, Dr. Bullard in almost all cases is cordial as she treats her colleagues (including me) who at times have erred. Many might be perplexed, though, by her harshness toward Edwin

Ripin. Certainly his ideas needed some refining and correcting, still much of what he proposed has held up well over time.

In summary, this is a text of central importance. The translation is clear and reliable, supplemented by intelligent commentary. The production is exemplary. This is a volume worth having for any musician and scholar concerned with the instrumental music and performance practice of the Renaissance.