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"Medieval Music, The Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice" edited by Honey Meconi and Mary Cyr

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Book review: Meconi, Honey, ed. *Medieval Music. The Library of Essays on Music Performance Practice*, series ed. Mary Cyr. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. ISBN 978-0-75462-851-4.

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This is a part of several sets of volumes published by Ashgate whose goal is to present the current state of research on a particular topic by reprinting significant essays chosen by a leading scholar in the field. By publisher's design, this series has rather formidable limitations that challenge the volume editors to select wisely in order to represent the entire subject: it reprints only scholarship originally presented in essay format in English; and page quantity limitations severely restrict the number of works that can be selected.

The area of performance practice is somewhat different from most other subjects in that there are so many unresolved issues, and therefore a presentation of the current state of research is necessarily more a guide to contrasting opinions than a summation of definitive answers. With its vast time span of more than 600 years and paucity of factual evidence, medieval music is the most complex and the least settled of all traditional historical time periods with many unsolved problems that concern such basic performance issues as rhythm, pitch, tone quality, and tempo.

Professor Meconi, editor of this volume, has dealt with the major issues both as a performer and scholar and has clearly defined the problems and cleverly selected the essays to illustrate as many of them as possible. To fill in the holes, she introduces the topic with an insightful essay that outlines the subject itself and then defines the various issues, describes the methods employed to resolve them, and discusses the often contradictory scholarly positions. She carefully avoids taking sides on most issues, choosing to step back from the arguments, look at the larger picture, and then positioning each of her chosen essay writers within that picture. This approach is quite valuable because most of the reprinted essays, by their very nature, are directed toward a specific problem and assume that the reader is well-acquainted with the issue. By consulting Meconi's overview and analysis of the writings along with the essays themselves, the novice reader receives the needed background and gains a more calculated, sober evaluation of the issue at hand as well as the intensity of the individual argument.

The essays are subdivided into five rather broad sections according to repertory: Plainchant; Secular Monophony; Polyphony to 1300; Mass and Motet After 1300; The Polyphonic Chanson; and a sixth section, titled "Other Matters," that is a catchall for important performance topics that address problems affecting more than a single repertory.

I. The performance of **Plainchant** is represented by two articles that concentrate on current performances and the evidence for the performers' choices. Lance Brunner ("The Performance of Plainchant: Some Preliminary Observations of the New Era") and Katarina Livljanic ("Giving Voice to Gregorian Chant or: Coping with Modern Orthodoxies") both address the subject from the point of view of how a performer can sort through the various issues, and both register serious questions about the relationship between the written neumes and contemporary commentary versus the performance practices advocated by the Solesmes school.

II. **Secular Monophony** concentrates mainly on rhythm, meter, and the role of instruments. Contrasting positions about the first two issues are represented by Hans Tischler ("Rhythm, Meter, and Melodic Organization in Medieval Songs") on the side of the application of specific patterns and Hendrik van der Werf ("The 'Not-So-Precisely Measured' Music of the Middle Ages"), who proposes a far more flexible set of solutions. Sylvia Huot ("Voices and Instruments in Medieval French Secular Music: On the Use of Literary Texts and Evidence for Performance Practice") pursues the topic of the use of instruments based on evidence gathered from literary texts, and Christopher Page ("Johannes de Grocheio on Secular Music: A Corrected Text and a New Translation") translates relevant passages from Grocheio's treatise *De Musica* and interprets the statements as to how instruments were used in conjunction with the repertory.

III. The major issues in **Polyphony to 1300** are similar to those in the previous section: rhythm and the role of instruments, but in the case of early polyphony, many of these issues are far more complex since different musical forms seem to require different solutions. The application of modal rhythm is central to all of the essays presented here, and it is enlightening to see how different scholars interpret the existing evidence. Edward Roesner ("The Performance of Parisian Organum") and Charles M. Atkinson ("Franco of Cologne on the Rhythm of Organum Purum"), drawing on similar theoretical evidence, arrive at different conclusions concerning the application of modal rhythms to *organum purum*. Jeremy Yudkin ("The *Copula* according to Johannes de Garlandia") interprets a definition provided by medieval theorist Johannes de Garlandia in order to identify what is a copula and what is its rhythmic organization. Ernest H. Sanders ("Conductus and Modal Rhythm") explores the various layers of the conductus repertory and proposes a flexible approach to the application of modal rhythm as suggested by analysis of the accompanying poetry. Christopher Page ("The Performance of Ars Antiqua Motets") draws on personal performance experience as well as theoretical treatises and literary analysis in his discussion of motet performance. Both Page and Roesner address the topic of accompanying this repertory with instruments and agree that it was probably intended for all-vocal performance.

IV. **Mass and Motet after 1300** concentrates principally on the issues of who and how many performed polyphonic music, and although the three articles approach the subject from completely different angles, they arrive at quite similar conclusions. James McKinnon ("Representations of the Mass in Medieval and Renaissance Art") examines iconography and discusses what the images represent and how reliable they are as evidence of performance norms. Roger Bowers ("The Performing Ensemble for English Church Polyphony, c. 1320-c. 1390"), relying heavily on archival records, investigates the membership of English church ensembles and their duties. Gilbert Reaney ("Text Underlay in Early Fifteenth-

Century Musical Manuscripts”) looks carefully at text underlay for evidence of performance intentions, and whereas the first two essays concern only sacred music, Reaney considers secular performance as well. All three scholars conclude that vocal performance of all lines, without instruments, was probably the norm.

V. The possible use of instruments in combination with voices continues to be an issue for performance of **The Polyphonic Chanson**. Reprinted here are two of Christopher Page’s early essays (“Machaut’s Pupil Dechamps on the Performance of Music: Voices or Instruments in the 14th-Century Chanson,” and “The Performance of Songs in Late Medieval France: A New Source”) that contradict the long-held theory by presenting evidence that in both the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this repertory was intended for solo voices alone. Lawrence Earp (“Texting in 15th-Century French Chansons: A Look Ahead from the 14th Century”) contributes to this conclusion by advocating a vocalization of lower, untexted parts rather than the addition of text. David Fallows (“Embellishment and Urtext in the Fifteenth-Century Song Repertories”) looks at the subject of whether the chanson repertory was intended to be embellished in performance and presents evidence for both arguments.

VI. The larger issues, those that concern nearly every area in the previous five chapters, are found in **Other Matters**, and include discussions of the complex and difficult questions: how, where, and when to introduce chromatic alteration (Margaret Bent, “Musica Recta and Musica Ficta”); the way in which proportional signs relate to one another (Anna Maria Busse Berger, “The Origin and Early History of Proportion Signs”); and the possible influence of Middle Eastern sounds and practices on European performance practices (Shai Burstyn, “The ‘Arabian Influence’ Thesis Revisited”). Christopher Page (“Jerome of Moravia on the *Rubea* and *Viella*”) presents a translation of the chapter in Jerome’s late thirteenth-century treatise *Tractatus de Musica* that includes virtually the only known tuning and playing instructions for the two most popular bowed string instruments, thus providing valuable information about instrumental performance and its relationship to the repertory.

In designing her volume, Prof. Meconi has chosen well by including essays that not only present specific points but also provide broader and more far-reaching views of the subject, thereby giving the reader material on more than one performance issue. For those who would pursue the topics further, references can be found both in the introductory essay and within the included articles. An extensive bibliography of works in English is included at the end of the introductory essay, which completes this extremely helpful guide to the subject.

This volume is an excellent source of material for anyone wishing to know about the current state of research into medieval performance practices. The reprinted articles present the widest possible collection of views and thoughts on the many issues, and the editor’s comprehensive introductory essay enormously helps the reader by situating the individual essays within the broader picture.