

"Manuscripts and Medieval Song: Inscription, Performance, Context" by Helen Deeming and Elizabeth Leach

Timothy McGee
University of Toronto

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Book review: Deeming, Helen, Elizabeth Leach. *Manuscripts and Medieval Song: Inscription, Performance, Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Timothy McGee

This volume is a collection of ten detailed studies of medieval manuscripts that contain songs. Some of the manuscripts are well-known (e.g. Carmina Burana), and others have been overlooked by musicologists (e.g. Oxford, Bodlean, Douce 308). All contain songs, but some are fully notated (e.g. La Clayette), some are partially notated (e.g. British Library, Add. 36881), and some have no notation (e.g. Codex Manesse). They are presented as ten separate essays by eight different authors, in more or less chronological order from the late ninth to the mid-fourteenth century. The sources represent a variety of European geographical areas, types of organization, and purpose, and contain texts in Latin, French, English, and German. The word “song” in the book title is intended to cover the entire field of vocal music, both sacred and secular. The term “performance” has a very broad reference: it encompasses both the traditional meaning of presenting the songs by singing aloud, but also silent prayer, and the much broader meaning of presentation, including their very existence in written form.

The stated main purpose of the collection is to demonstrate that an investigation of the songs within the context of the entire manuscript produces a significantly different view of the repertory and its place in medieval society, an objective repeatedly emphasized in the introduction, concluding chapter, and in most of the essays. The point is a bit of a “straw man”: although this methodology is not as novel as the authors claim, they are correct that it certainly has not been the dominant approach. More commonly we study music after it has been extracted from its sources and gathered for us according to genre. As useful as this is for an understanding of musical forms, techniques, and types, it is not the way the people of the Middle Ages perceived it, and it is the aim of this book to provide us with the opportunity to see the music repertory in the context of medieval intellectual society as represented by the ways in which it was gathered and preserved in book collections. This goal is brilliantly accomplished, not only in the book taken as a whole, but also in the individual chapters that contain a number of interesting discoveries and thought-provoking reflections, as well as the revision of several long-standing misconceptions about some of the manuscripts and their contents.

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Each manuscript is given a thorough technical examination with regard to its manufacture and organization: size, gatherings, scribes, notation, illuminations. This provides the reader with an excellent idea of the technical aspects of the entire manuscript, which is then used as the basis for the discussion of the musical contents as a part of the whole.

This is not an easy read; most chapters are not very “reader-friendly” and require considerable effort on the part of the reader. The book takes advantage of modern technology by providing links to URL digital surrogates that are available for most of the principal manuscripts and for a large number of others brought into the discussions. This has both good and not-so-good consequences. It allows the reader to follow the detailed analyses and check the strength of the authors’ arguments in a way not formerly available. On the other hand, in some cases this availability becomes a requirement in order to follow the argument; since the authors know the reader can access the sources and closely study the references, the writing often is so dense that the point being made cannot be understood without carefully examining the online sources. All authors delve into lengthy discussions of the tiniest details when discussing such technical matters as manuscript assembly, concordances, notation, and scribal hands, often bringing into the discussion theories and conclusions from iconography, literary studies, palaeography, and codicology. The reward for the intrepid reader, however, is a strong confidence in most of the conclusions.

What follows is a brief summary of the individual chapters and some of their revelations and conclusions:

In chapter one, Sam Barrett examines Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, lat. 1154, which is the earliest of the medieval lyric collections. Copied at St. Martial in the late ninth century, it is comprised of four distinct sections: litany; prayers and Collects; Isidore of Seville’s *Synonyma*; and *versus*, eighteen of which are notated. A study of the notation leads Barrett to conclude that the development and use of Aquitanian notation can be assigned to the Abbey of St. Martial much earlier than previously thought. After a detailed discussion of the notation, he concludes that there is evidence of a master notator using the manuscript as a way to teach less skilled student scribes. The tiny size of the manuscript, as well as an examination of its total contents and the collection of *versus* identify the book as a prayer-book. Barrett suggests that this book, similar to many others, had multiple uses within the monastery, including private prayer and teaching.

Chapter two is an analysis by Jeremy Llewellyn of the un-neumed “Cambridge songs” in Cambridge, University Library, Gg.V.35, probably copied in the mid-eleventh century at St. Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury. The songs make up the last fifteen folios of a 446-folio manuscript that mainly consists of Latin poetry, prose, miscellaneous texts, Greek prayers, and music theoretical texts. The author makes the point that this manuscript is an example of the breadth of Benedictine culture, and he goes to elaborate

lengths to associate this manuscript with the role of the *prudens cantor* (careful cantor) as described by Guido of Arezzo in his *Regulae rhythmicae*.

The manuscript London, British Library, Add. 36881, a twelfth-century collection of monophonic and polyphonic Aquitanian song, is the subject of chapter three, by Rachel May Golden. The tiny book, originally from the library of the Abbey of St. Martial (but probably not written there), is a personal collection consisting of only twenty-four folios, and was probably used as a performer's reference. It contains the newly-cultivated Aquitanian *versus* in one and two voices, most of which are notated, as well as some short devotional texts, and a sequence. The author associates the repertory with similar structures in the troubadour culture of Occitania and emphasizes that the texts contain both courtly and sacred themes, demonstrating the multiple purposes of medieval collections.

The discussion of the "Carmina Burana" manuscript by Gundela Bobeth (transl. Henry Hope) in chapter four is particularly revealing considering the quantity of misunderstanding that has surrounded the material. The bulk of the manuscript was copied in the early thirteenth century with additions in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It probably originated in South Tyrol; the author suggests the Augustinian Abbey in Neustift/Novacella, or possibly Trent with connections to Emperor Friedrich II, rather than Benediktbeuern as has formerly been thought. There are 254 song texts from German, Austrian, French, Northern Italian, and Spanish traditions, fifty of which have at least some diastematic neumes. They are gathered in four thematic sections: moralistic-satirical; love songs; drinking and gambling; and a final section that includes two large sacred dramas. She concludes that the collection presents an "image of a rich, secular musical life at a clerical centre in the German-speaking countries, which took up songs from diverse provenances and repertories in a process of creative reception, adapting and recontextualizing the songs to its own needs and preferences" (p. 113).

Chapters five and six are both written by Helen Deeming and deal with two thirteenth-century manuscripts in the British Library, one a miscellaneous collection known mostly for a single composition, the other long considered an important repository of monophonic and polyphonic pieces.

Manuscript Harley 978 is an English monastic miscellany of poetry and prose in Latin and French, fourteen pieces of music, and best known in the musical world for the canon "Sumer is icumen in." It was most likely compiled between 1261-65 at Reading Abbey. In addition to the Sumer canon (the only piece with English text), the music consists of three, 2-part textless dances, a 3-part motet (Latin and French), monophonic Latin songs, and three instructional songs. Considering the entire contents, Deeming concludes that the manuscript most likely was the product of a small group of educated enthusiasts.

Egerton 274 also contains non-musical material in the form of Latin narrative verse, but its musical contents are far more extensive, consisting of monophonic and

polyphonic Latin songs, French chansons, and liturgical material. The author concludes that the purpose of the manuscript changed over the period in which it was gathered, with successive owners exhibiting different priorities for its contents. A codicological examination suggests that the original book consisted of the first four fascicles copied in the mid-thirteenth century. The original contents were Latin songs including polyphonic conducti and motets, troped liturgical pieces, and French chansons. Deeming describes this compilation as “musica cum littera,” not intended for practical performance use. In the late-thirteenth century, a section of un-notated Latin narrative verses was added, and, in the early-fourteenth century, one of processional and responsory chants. The repertory of the final section can be identified as belonging to Ghent, and the notation identifies it as from the northern French/Flemish region. This later material and the details of the notation, including tampering with the notation in the earliest sections, suggests a more performance oriented interest on the part of the owner.

Codex Manesse, the subject of chapter seven by Henry Hope, is devoid of music notation but is well-known to musicologists because of its collection of 137 miniatures, twenty of which depict music making. This is an extensive collection of Minnesang, probably compiled in Zurich under the influence of Rüdiger Manesse ca. 1300, with later additions in mid-century. Each set of texts is preceded by a miniature of the poet, ranked by social standing. Although the poets include Tannhäuser and Wolfram von Eschenbach, only Reinmar der Fiedler is depicted performing an instrument. Hope spends considerable time analysing those miniatures that have musical instruments and discussing the lack of clear references to music in the remainder of the codex.

Table 7.2 is a list of the miniatures, naming the Minnesänger whose text it accompanies as well as various features within the depiction, including the appearance of musical instruments that are identified in the chart by a code consisting of upper and lower case letters. Unfortunately, there is no key that links the letters to the names of the instruments, and I was unable to make any sense of this aspect of the table. Readers interested in knowing which instruments are illustrated will have to go to the online address and, guided by Table 7.2, make their own list.

In chapter eight, Sean Curran looks at the “La Clayette” manuscript, in which only twenty-two of 419 folios contain music. The music repertory, fifty-five *ars antiqua* motets, is found in the midst of thirty-five Old French literary texts. The physical layout of the music precludes the possibility of using the manuscript for performance, and there does not seem to be a clear principle in the ordering of the compositions. A palaeographical study of the manuscript suggests to the author that it was compiled over a period of at least thirty years, ending shortly after 1300 in France, although he is unable to be more precise about location than to say that it probably was outside a major scholastic centre. The devotional and didactic texts place it in the category of those books intended to be read aloud to auditors.

In Chapters nine and ten, Elizabeth Eva Leach looks at two quite different manuscripts from courtly circles: one a mixture of prose and verse, probably copied in Metz in the early fourteenth century and containing material from numerous authors dating back to the mid-thirteenth century, the other from the mid-fourteenth century containing only works by Guillaume de Machaut.

Manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 308 includes over 500 lyrics arranged by genre and is identified by Leach as “one of the most extensive trouvère collections” (p. 221). The song collection is placed as the sixth of nine large sections, most of which are highly decorated with miniatures. The other contents are narrative verse and prose in Old French. In spite of the complete absence of notation, the author insists that this is an important music manuscript, stating that “The pitches of song are not figured in musical notation here because it is not necessary in order to fully notate them within the cultural practice of which they are a record” (p. 245).

Leach identifies the Machaut manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fonds français 1586, (known to Machaut specialists as manuscript “C”), as the earliest surviving of Machaut’s collected-works manuscripts. As well as being the first single-author compilation, it is important for several other reasons: it coincides “with a change in musical style, the increased use of polyphony, the development of *formes fixes*, a marked change in notation, and an increasingly literate culture for music-making” (p. 7). Leach includes case studies illustrating how scribal practices adapted to developing forms and the complexities of polyphony.

In a concluding chapter, co-editors Deeming and Leach summarize the major issues and restate the underlying belief that this new approach results in a far broader understanding of music and song manuscripts in medieval culture. It would be difficult to argue with this point of view, but the constant emphasis throughout the book—which often carries with it a criticism and rejection of past scholarship—takes on an almost sanctimonious air that is a bit uncomfortable.

While my view of this collection of essays is extremely positive, there is one aspect in which this “new” approach is seriously crippled by an old fashioned assumption. When dealing with the subject of songs entered in manuscripts without music, all authors base their remarks and conclusions on a single, unstated basic belief: that for the most part, each song text was set (or intended to be set) to a specific melody. All discussions proceed from this assumption, and the conclusions vary only slightly from one to another as to why some texts are copied without their melodies. The authors also have similar basic ideas about how the texts were to be united with their missing melodies, and they express remorse about texts for which no melodies can be found, since those melodies are now “lost.”

This concept really is from a much later age when all song texts were provided with set melodies by composers. Medieval literature provides ample evidence that until

the last century of the Middle Ages, the majority of texts—especially secular ones—did not usually receive fixed melodies but were sung to improvised melodies that varied each time according to the performer. The concept of a single, fixed melody for a text developed slowly over these centuries. It would follow that during the centuries under investigation in this book, the traditional attitude toward song texts would linger, and even after a text had received a composed melody, presenters would still feel free to ignore it and improvise their own; a phenomenon observed by one of the authors in conjunction with multiple versions of troubadour chansons (p. 64). I do not propose this as the only reason for the lack of music in some of the manuscripts, but I am surprised that it is not entertained by any of the authors.