

## **A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music.**

edited by Ross W. Duffin,

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Review by Nicky Losseff

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Note first that this book is a 'performer's guide to', not a 'guide to the performance of' medieval music. We expect it to tell performers something of what they need to know to perform medieval music in an informed and convincing way. There needs to be information about the cultural and historical contexts for repertoires as well as a hands-on, 'how-to' approach. It should have something to offer for those who are experienced performers and cater for those who know nothing. It should review all the available evidence for our current state of knowledge about medieval music and make us reflect on what the performance of medieval music represents.

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Even in places where evidence is sketchy, the reader does not want to pull this book from the shelf and find writers unwilling to commit themselves to practical solutions, albeit surrounded by cautionary notes. If the book does not show you possible ways of finding repertoires, reaching performance decisions and realising performance responses, then it has failed. We need to know not only how it appears to have been done then, but also how to do it now.

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Happily, the volume answers positively to these issues on the whole. It mainly digests existing knowledge, but two chapters must be singled out for providing new food for thought. Barbara Thornton's moving 'Poetics as Technique' sums up her approach to medieval performance, daring to speak of poetic truth and admitting that she had suffered from a '*rigid and judgemental attitude towards Hildegard's spirituality*' (p. 286) before finding a way to think in the kind of 'spatial and simultaneous relationships' that opened Hildegard's world to her. Thornton is finally persuaded to define how she approaches a

piece for performance: recitation in a group situation in which the listener's response is crucial in establishing successful means of musical communication; rhetoric; as full a knowledge as possible of the poetic contexts of the song. In the final analysis, though, one wonders what the difference can be between her concept of 'interiorization' and the process that, say, a concert pianist goes through if she or he is to 're-compose' the piece in the process of its performance? (p. 276). Perhaps what is missing from this explication is that if it is to make sense, every listener has to have been through the same process, has to have done this much work too. Her chapter is highly speculative, thought provoking, giving us much to argue with: a poignant testament to a lifetime's work.

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William Mahrt's 'Chant' suggests that how to 'perform' plainsong depends on the purpose of the performance, which may be given for any number of reasons. Mahrt points out that in this genre, authenticity is a particularly perplexing and complex issue; chants were written over the course of centuries, yet one assumes that all the pieces were performed in the prevailing style of performance at any given time. Given that no 'original' version can be recovered anyway, he suggests that notions of 'authenticity' should not be abandoned but developed according to the demands of the material. He proposes types of authenticity as a set of tools for thinking about appropriate styles. In doing so he makes a plausible communication between all the problems that the idea of 'authenticity' has thrown up and the performer's necessity of 'just doing it.' On the latter subject, Mahrt also goes through some practical advice for how to think about a considered performance responsive to these issues, focussing on 'Justus ut palma'. He also gives a general set of guidelines for performing the main types of chant from the recitational to the melismatic. He concludes that historically informed performances of chant may be inclusive of various styles and that 'authenticity' also depends on how they serve their purpose, one aspect of which is how beautifully they are sung. There is something of an avoidance of the rhythmicisation issue. It would have been useful for some concrete examples of different rhythmic realisations, even if they might have ended up looking like Bartok's folksong transcriptions.

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The volume is divided into three parts: Repertoire, Voices and Instruments, and Theory and Practice. The chapters in Part 1, dealing with genre, are varied. Julie Cumming's 'Motet and Cantilena' is a model essay, where the historical and cultural information is given careful

consideration, does not shirk complex issues, yet remains readable; performance material is given full weight. Alejandro Planchart's chapters on 'Organum' and 'Polyphonic Mass Ordinary' are useful. They review the repertoire with appropriate information on what is known about performance. There is not enough on how to approach contemporary performance, though. It is time, for instance, that someone stuck their necks out on the question of the rhythm of organum duplum and stopped using unstemmed black noteheads in the transcriptions, which tell us little. For those wanting to perform a polyphonic Mass setting, some information about where you find the plainchant, how to approach the use of bells in the service, and what it would have been like to hear any of these settings in their liturgical contexts would have been helpful. On a positive note, his acknowledgement of the misogyny that has blighted too much medieval scholarship was very welcome (p. 96).

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The section on Non-Liturgical Monophony is dominated by Elizabeth Aubrey's excellent chapters: she brilliantly sums up the arguments for mensural, declamatory and isosyllabic performance, going over the theories of leading scholars, and she gives basic means to analyse the repertoire so as to produce an informed performance. While admitting that no information survives about how to accompany troubadour song, she still gives ideas as to how it can be done, suggesting things that might be appropriate. Contexts are also addressed: '*where a song was performed, by whom, and for whom, are factors that help to define it*' (p. 134). The only issue that is avoided here is that of pronunciation. The other writers in the section do tackle this, most notably Paul Hillier on English monophony, though Hillier's other discussions veer towards the naïve – it is not helpful to talk about developing an 'instinctive sense'. Charles Brewer provides useful material on how to understand musical style in Latin monophony; Manuel Pedro Ferreira gives a good review of the question of rhythm but disappointingly little on Arab characteristics, in 'Iberian Monophony'. Hubert Heinen also gave good rhythmic realisations in 'German Monophony'. Blake Wilson, on Italy, is the only writer to talk meaningfully about soundscape. Sadly, no one discusses a possibility that has occurred to any Arabic speaker, that the etymology of the word 'troubadour' is from the Arabic three-consonant root 't-r-b' meaning 'to sing, to entertain, to give pleasure'.

Polyphonic music is also covered by genre. Charles Brewer's 'French Ars Nova' plays down Vitry's contribution in an oddly skewed way but gives the best discussion of the place and the problems of the *vielle* in polyphony (examined elsewhere in the book but not cross-referenced), as well as of other instruments and a capella performances. Alexander Blachly presents a lucid examination of Italian *ars nova* notation and an effective comparison of editions. Lucy Cross's 'Ars Subtilior' lacks stylistic analysis; it would have been helpful to discuss these alongside notational complexities. Ross Duffin makes up for this in 'Early Du Fay', an enthusiastic chapter in which he rightly points out how sad it is when differences of opinion on performance issues actively discourage performances. Both Timothy McGee and David Klausner on liturgical and vernacular drama are excellent, giving detailed instructions on how to go about putting on a performance, where to find the materials, when to ring bells, and just as important, what not to do (for instance, use any old fourteenth-century dance in geographically inappropriate places).

The chapters on practice in Part Two, 'Voices and Instruments,' all deal efficiently with the matter in hand. They are mainly devoted to describing usage. This section lacks an introduction, so some information is presented more than once (one does not need the arguments for and against iconographical evidence for musical practice to be rehearsed time after time). Nevertheless, no chapter is less than merely 'useful' (Robert Green's 'Symphonia' and Peter Maund's 'Percussion' fall into this category, with the latter in need of a stiff edit). Some are excellent, packed with practical information on how to play the instrument; others focus more on cultural contexts. Margriet Tindemans on the '*Vielle* before 1300' is highly informative and her chapter full of concrete information, but it is left to Mary Springfels ('*Vielle* after 1300') to outline the scope of the scholarly field and provide some sociological detail. Sterling Jones ('Rebec') actually tells the reader how to play the instrument – I tried the York University rebec (dating from the 1970s, that golden age of enthusiastic medieval performance) with at least some degree of confidence after reading this, which I hope is the kind of reaction the writer wanted. Herbert Myers is excellent on flutes, giving fascinating discussions of overblowing techniques and of the bistable nature of the *chalemie*, illuminating much for the non-specialist. He is less good on 'Harp', with more about building techniques than anything else, though a paragraph near the

end gives us the somewhat unhelpful information that that harps can play intabulations of the complete texture '*ficta willing of course – though one defensible solution to the ficta problem is to ignore it*' (p. 334). The subject of *ficta* could have benefited greatly from a general editorial discussion., as this quotation demonstrates. Myers's enthusiasm for the reconstructed string keyboards of Arnault of Zwolle and plea for them to find wider acceptance in the world of Medieval performance does not fully take into account that Zwolle's instruments date from around 1440, some time after the remit of this book (the turn of the fifteenth century). In contrast to Myers, Cheryl Ann Fulton gives a proper and considered discussion about *ficta* and tuning in 'Playing the Late Medieval Harp', suggesting that Pythagorean tuning '*wakes up the ears*' (p. 347) and encourages the harpist to think and feel in linear terms – advice that applies not just to harpists, surely. Sandwiched between these two rather prosaic and hands-on chapters, Benjamin Bagby 'imagines' the early medieval harp more poetically, discussing the impossibility of recreating the sound-world of the medieval harp and the problem of scholarly research on the harp not helping the practical harpist. The introductory part of this chapter reviews useful points about performance of lost repertoires, musings that should have found a place in the (missing) introduction to the volume. Some might be irritated by the end of Bagby's chapter which becomes a bit 'new-age' (p. 336). Crawford Young ('Lute, Gittern and Citole') seems to be heading in a similar direction, but his chapter would have been better informed by Bruce Holsinger's *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

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The two remaining chapters in this section are Adam Gilbert, 'Bagpipe', and Kimberly Marshall, 'Organ'. Gilbert acknowledges that many questions warrant further study (what was the pitch relationship between bagpipes in shawm ensembles? did they play professionally?) but is willing to consider possibilities. Marshall's is one of the most elegantly written chapters, providing a mass of detail, but somehow does not give us a flavour of what the organ meant, nor what it sounded like. Margriet Tindemans's 'Improvisation and Accompaniment' is full of marvellous teaching material, with plenty of practical advice and ideas for the beginnings of improvisation. Her chapter is well complemented by Ralf Mattes's 'Ornamentation and Improvisation after 1300'. Excellent sociological perspective and a good overview is given by Timothy McGee ('Untexted Instrumental Repertoire').

The third section is subtitled 'Essential Theory for Performers'. None of the chapters here give more than a flavour of the problems that face scholars, but as all are fully footnoted (one of the best features of all the chapters in the book), it is possible to follow up the issues through further reading. Mahrt's 'The Gamut, Solmization and Modes' should be read in conjunction with Rob Wegman's chapter in Tess Knighton and David Fallows's *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music* (London: Dent 1992) but does offer something new in the form of ideas for reading the 'Hand', Guido of Arezzo's device for showing pitches to choirs. I tried it on my students and it worked, but students working on their own would benefit from more examples in this, rather than other books. On the other hand, the 'Modes,' had many lovely examples, giving typical intonation figures (though it would also have been useful to include references to chants that use them). Tantalizing reference to Dufay's chansons' use of mode and how Ockeghem and Busnois have their own personal ways of doing it (p. 493) begged much more detailed treatment. Mahrt ends by asking singers to perform modal analysis in order to clarify which notes are important – very useful information for beginners for establishing melodic sense in an unfamiliar repertory which can too easily seem monotonous. Lucy Cross's 'Musica ficta' is a marvel of lucidity, delineating the problems step by step but admitting that the serious decision making responsibility begins when rules, signatures and different manuscript versions appear to conflict. The examples are useful and fully discussed, but the chapter concludes 'You are on your own': rightly, no attempt is made to minimize the problems, and performers looking for an easy fix will come away realising that ficta will never be anything but musically and intellectually challenging. Alexander Blachly's 'Proportion' is confusing and unhelpful and will only persuade performers to rely on modern editions rather than go to the sources. (It does remind one, though, how greatly students of mensural notations would benefit from an up-to-date exercise-based textbook.) The discussion overlaps with the following chapter which presents the material more lucidly.

Mahrt is again thought-provoking in 'Notation and Editions', making a strong case for singing chant from square notation, and stressing the importance of singing chant from memory. His sensitive discussions are informed by practical experience, and make you want to rush out and try out different chant notations on your nearest choir. As most of us know, problems that theory seems to make intractable can often be sorted out in practice.

At times, though, his blithe confidence can seem misplaced. For instance, in the Notre Dame repertoires, modal notation often does not allow you to infer rhythm from context. The particular problems of the conductus repertoires are not mentioned. Reading mensural polyphony sounds easy, and those of us who have tried this 'intuitive' method with our students know that there is no substitute for familiarity with the style. In other words, it's not as easy as it sounds. Of the publications mentioned in this chapter, some really need a word of caution – Greene's *Ars subtilior* (the later volumes of *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century*) is notoriously flawed, as is Anderson's conductus (see Gordon Athol Anderson, *Notre Dame and Related Conductus : Opera Omnia*. Henryville, etc: Institute of Medieval Music, 1979- ; Gordon Greene, *French secular music French secular music: ballades and canons; French secular music: virelais; French secular music: rondeaux and miscellaneous pieces*; *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century* vols 18-22. Monaco: Editions de l'Oiseau-Lyre, 1981-89). Elsewhere in the book, one is warned about Anderson: another annoying lack of cross referencing.

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Mostly, then, this makes a positive contribution to more general books on medieval music; serious seekers will continue to go to the scholarly literature, but students will benefit from the (mostly) easy style and useful information, and the volume could well be recommended in conjunction with older staples (such as Jeremy Yudkin, *Music in Medieval Europe*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989; David Fenwick Wilson, *Music of the middle ages: style and structure*, New York: Schirmer, 1990; Andrew Hughes, *Style and symbol: medieval music, 800-1453*, Ottawa, Institute of Medieval Music, 1989. and Knighton and Fallows). The discography in particular is excellent, but otherwise, the editing process could have contributed more. Editions are not given in the bibliography. There is virtually no cross referencing and the index is not complete. There is hardly any editorial material – there is a short preface but no introduction: this would have been the place for a discursive chapter in which to focus on the ahistoricities and problems that confront the performer of distant repertoires. (Mahrt and Bagby do this to some extent, but it should be the editor's job.) There are no contributor biographies. These are especially important given the diverse nature of the writers.

This review has been critical of some aspects of the *Performer's Guide*. However, the publication does represent an important addition to the general literature, covering an aspect that is not available elsewhere. As well as summing up the current state of knowledge, it can provide excellent teaching material – at the very least, there are some excellent examples, especially Tindemans on improvisation; possibly, even, one could rethink how one will teach medieval music courses in the future.