

Review: Helen Deeming and Frieda van der Heijden, *Medieval Polyphony and Song* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023), 248 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-15116-1

Mark Everist

University of Southampton
m.everist@southampton.ac.uk

HANDBOOKS, COMPANIONS, INTRODUCTIONS, HISTORIES... For decades now, the two presses of the oldest universities on the north-east Atlantic archipelago have vied with each other to produce series which package information ‘on a topic fundamental to the study of music at undergraduate and graduate level’, as the ‘Cambridge Introductions’ have it. There’s an explicable irony in the fact that Oxford and Cambridge University Presses are the main drivers here: such ‘course texts’ are traditionally treated with some suspicion or not used at all in the UK and across continental Europe, as opposed to the US where they are familiar contents of the undergraduate backpack. Whether this is an attempt to develop US practices in British universities is an intriguing question, although the descriptive text on the back cover of Helen Deeming’s and Frieda van der Heijden’s *Medieval Polyphony and Song* does also invoke ‘readers who want to broaden their understanding of the music they enjoy’: the legendary general reader.

The Cambridge ‘Introductions to Music’ series is now over a decade old with the first volume, David Hiley’s *Gregorian Chant* appearing in 2009. It was followed by introductions to music technology, programme music, music notation and electronic music, most of which span broadly across the discipline and in some respects offer a different perspective as they cut across repertoires and traditions. So it is perhaps a little bit disappointing to see the music of the middle ages and renaissance packaged in such conventional ways: renaissance polyphony and here medieval polyphony and song. Perhaps it reflects an innate conservatism in the ways in which music before 1600 is taught in universities, perhaps even the way it is considered *tout court*; but this view is almost certainly wrong, I think. The best ways of teaching medieval and renaissance music with which I am familiar have left behind the tired old survey of western music a long time ago to focus on such

different issues as the history of western music in a global middle ages (I have always been impressed by colleagues who have exhaustively retooled the *curricula* to such ends), histories of technology, performance, to say nothing of the 1980s buzzword ‘interdisplinary’, still relevant, in which medieval music is put back into broader medieval culture.

With those constraints in mind, you must admire the way in which Deeming and van der Heijden have set about their task. They apparently divide their work into what looks like topical chapters: ‘Court and Cloister in Aquitaine and Occitania’; ‘Paris: City, Cathedral, and University’; ‘Courts and Cities in Northern France’; ‘Scribes Scholars and Secretaries in Fourteenth-Century France’. On closer inspection, these chapters could have come from a book written half a century ago, titled: ‘Aquitanian Polyphony and *Troubadours*; Notre-Dame; ‘*Trouvères*’ (splitting up French and Provençal song this way is however a welcome alternative to the usual ‘secular monophony’ trope); ‘Vitry and Machaut’. These chapters are followed by three chapters on ‘England [*sic*] after the Norman Conquest’, music in the Mediterranean and music (mostly) east of the Rhine, a pattern than replicates the one in the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Music* from 2011. The final chapter should have been one of the most interesting on modern ‘encounters’ with medieval music, given the degree of attention that musical medievalism has received in recent years. But so little of it engaged with the types of issues evoked by James Cook, John Haines, Stephen Meyer, Kirsten Yri, and others, and the focus collapses into an account of scholarship and performance by ‘early-music’ ensembles.

Deeming’s and van der Heijden’s final chapter emphasizes one of the fault lines in the entire series; their account has necessarily to exclude accounts of performance and re-use of Gregorian chant since there is already a Cambridge introduction to the subject (although there is nothing there about the consumption of the genre in film, TV or popular music). This systemic distinction poses real problems for *Medieval Polyphony and Song*, especially when it comes to liturgical polyphony. Perhaps this is why you must work very hard (I was thinking of a hypothetical ambitious sophomore) to realise that Parisian polyphony was not mostly for four voices. The long account of the four-voice setting of ‘Viderunt omnes’ (edition of the opening; full-page analysis of monophony and polyphony; example that summarises harmonic motion) completely dwarfs the central repertory at Notre-Dame that was for two voices. Just to give the context that my hypothetical sophomore so urgently needed, the repertory of chant-based polyphony at Notre-Dame consisted of no more than four works for four voices (one of which is a *clausula*), around 40 pieces for three voices (with a few additional *clausulae*) but nearly a hundred *organa* for two voices (and that excludes *clausulae*). Similarly, the choice of ‘Aurelianis civitas’ to illustrate the *conductus* repertory is a strange one: it relates to events in 1236 (the year the author of the poetry, Philippe le chancelier, apparently died), and must have been composed shortly afterwards. Given that the *conductus* as a Parisian genre emerges in the 1160s and

its development largely complete by the 1230s, *Medieval Polyphony and Song* gives a curiously lopsided view of the subject.

The rhetoric of the book is driven by the series, so there are several boxes with extracts from key documents, digressions and even some activities for my sophomore to undertake in their class. Box 2.2 invites and instructs the users of the book to improvise *organum* in ways that must have been undertaken simply hundreds of times in lecture theatres and seminar rooms across the globe since systematic teaching of music history has been in place.

In general, *Medieval Polyphony and Song* feels rather old. The accounts of isorhythm, the *Ars nova* and the emergence of the motet, for example, do not take account of the ways in which those subjects have been interrogated over the last two decades. This is a pity, since this is one of those places where the book could have usefully problematised some critical issues that went beyond merely reporting contending views. Normal practice in the book—as in the case of the rhythm of monophonic song of all types—is to offer summaries of both points of view and then to effectively shrug the scholarly shoulders: to say that both sides have equal value or that nothing is really known, despite that fact that the simplest critical engagement would be to add a date to each of the contending points of view, and possibly the age of the scholars holding them. We like to talk a lot about how important the arts and humanities are in developing skills in critical reasoning; this sort of relativism does not support the argument.

When I was sharing a cup of coffee with my hypothetical sophomore after our hypothetical class using *Medieval Polyphony and Song*, they reminded me just how visual contemporary culture is today in comparison with the one in which undergraduate educations were embedded in, say, the 1970s, and what opportunities now exist for tutors and lecturers. While the maps in *Medieval Polyphony and Song* are well chosen and for the most part extremely useful, there are some opportunities missed: ‘Aurea personet lira’ is given in transcription (18) but no facsimile while there is a facsimile of the *Musica enchiriadis* but no transcription (25); the quality of the facsimiles is poor, incidentally, and no better in the html or pdf versions of the book. And when there is a transcription and facsimile supplied, as in the case of the ‘Viderunt omnes’ by Perotinus (65), the facsimile (again of such poor quality as to be largely illegible, and just ignored by my hypothetical sophomore, and only marginally better—it is the same image—in the pdf version; no better in the html form) is given ten pages away (74), making meaningful comparisons largely impossible.

Mark Everist's research focuses on the music of western Europe, 1150-1330, music in nineteenth-century France, Mozart, and critical theory. The author of ten monographs, he has published over 90 articles in peer-reviewed journals and collections of essays. The recipient of the Solie (2010) and Slim (2011) awards of the American Musicological Society, Everist was President of the Royal Musical Association from 2011-2017, and elected a corresponding member of the American Musicological Society in 2014. He was visiting professor at the Sorbonne in 2021-2022 and declined a fellowship from the French Institutes of Advanced Studies for 2024-2025. In July 2024, Everist was named *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Minister of Culture. His monograph for Oxford University Press, *Opéra de Salon: Parisian Societies and Spaces, 1850-1870* is forthcoming, as is his article 'Resonances from Beyond the Grave: Music and the Occult in Nineteenth-Century Paris' in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*. <<https://everist.eu/>>.