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Review: Vincenzo Borghetti and Tim Shephard (eds.), *The Museum of Renaissance Music: A History in 100 Exhibits* (Turnhout, Belgium, Brepols, 2023), 523 pp., ISBN: 978-2-503-58856-8

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THIS AMBITIOUS COMPILATION WAS INSPIRED, as the editors acknowledge (p. 12), by the remarkable book by Neil MacGregor of the British Museum, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. First published in 2010 and reappearing as a paperback in 2012, it strove to tell the story of the world in a novel manner—traversing a chronological journey over a two-million-year period, covering the entire globe. It was based on a series of broadcasts on BBC Radio 4, and the objects were intended to be imagined on the strength of the audible descriptions alone. The history emerged object by object, as a series of individual chapters devoted to each of the hundred exhibits. The ingenuity of the selection was matched by the beauty of the descriptions, and the book proved a great success.

This ingenious formula—whereby a book is constituted as a catalogue albeit for a non-existent exhibition—has been exploited for *The Museum of Renaissance Music: A History in 100 Exhibits*. There are, however, important differences, and this book is in some ways even more adventurous than the model on which it was partly based. First, the book does not seek to observe chronology, and the period covered is narrower, embracing the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—at least nominally, for many of the articles use the renaissance 'exhibits' as a point of departure, placing them in a wider historical context, adumbrating far later developments. The insights that so emerge constitute one of the glories of the book. Second, in the absence of a strict time axis the editors have purposely adopted a splendidly sprawling, almost (but not quite!) chaotic structure, with the exhibits distributed into eight 'Rooms'—of Devotions, of Domestic Objects, of Books, Instruments, Sacred Spaces, the Public Sphere (embracing Cities as well as Travels), Experts, and, finally, a Room of Revivals. As the

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appellations themselves strongly suggest, this categorisation is in itself highly original and often surprising. Helpfully, the 'Rooms' are provided with their own introductions, conducing to the cohesion of the overall compilation with information that connects the various items together and justifies their placement. This manner of presentation proves highly conducive to multi-pronged examination. Third, unlike the inexpensive paperback *A History of the World*, wherein the exhibits were each accorded a small black-and-white image (and a smaller selection furnished with colour plates), *The Museum of Renaissance Music* is lavishly illustrated in full colour (a fact inevitably reflected in the price-tag). The graphics are first-rate; the volume is a thing of no small beauty and could be enjoyed as a fine coffee-table book. Indeed I suspect few will read it continuously from cover to cover. Yet those who choose to do so will not be disappointed, for the dazzling scope and ingenious organisation is matched by the quality of the individual essays by some ninety-six or so contributors, who have written in a lucid and accessible style. Replete with all manner of analogies and metaphors linking the palpable, visual and aural, they evince intellectual virtuosity and impressive reach across space and time. To demonstrate this, I shall present some small samples.

One exhibit is a sixteenth-century knife (pp. 14-5) at the V&A in London, with an etched steel blade and ivory handle. A fascinating discussion follows about the possible original contexts of this object and its provenance. It is, as Flora Dennis explains, both a knife and a piece of music, since the blade bears a musical inscription on either side: a blessing of the table and a prayer giving thanks, to be sung before and after the meal. The author's commentary is satisfyingly insightful. Benediction and the Grace, written in the first person plural, express 'the idea of uniting collectively to share food', and the knives similarly need to be 'united' for the music inscribed thereon to be performed. Yet there is a parallel involving 'dismemberment'—for the music has been scattered over a number of knives, each bearing one vocal part derived from a single choirbook (this particular knife bearing the part for tenor I), in a manner analogous to the act of carving the meal by means of the implement. By 'slicing meat, the knives permit it to be shared between the gathered company in the same way that dismembering and scattering the musical text across the knives enabled a group to share the music'. The knife is thus seen to reveal 'the intimate connection between sociability, dining and music'.

A late sixteenth-century painting from the National Museum of Art in Bucharest—a 'Musical Allegory', depicts a dance scene in a vineyard, set in antiquity (pp. 106-9). Are the graceful figures dancing a *moresca*, or is this an 'intense musical therapy session' involving dance moves in a bid to heal people bitten by the tarantula spider? In her excellent discussion Camilla Cavicchi cites a poem (with text and parallel English translation) by Serafino Aquilano, *Similitudine della Tarantola*, which likens the spider's poison to the affliction of love: perhaps this dance is 'a cure for love-sick hearts'.

Inspired by the exquisite painting 'Sacred and Profane Love' by Titian, Antonio Cascelli has provided an excellent discussion on the suggestion by theorists Vicentino and Tigrini that the clothed figure be associated with polyphony for three or more voices, and the nude with two-part writing (pp. 400-3). The ramifications go well beyond the practice of writing Mass settings on the music of secular songs, or of creating contrafacta (reusing secular music for sacred texts), and lead us to the emergence of opera—where 'solo song is the musical embodiment of the human figure, exposed in its nudity to the audience'.

The Musical Staff, by Jane Alden, centres around heart-shaped, blank (but ruled) facing folios in the Chansonnier Cordiforme of c. 1475 (pp. 196-201). A seemingly prosaic technical examination of the ruled folios culminates in an at once moving and witty peroration, worthy of Italo Calvino himself: 'Although these staves remain empty, they fill the imagination, by inviting consideration of potential music-making, in all forms. Perhaps this is the message to be taken to heart.' And upon turning the page, we are treated to the splendid folios bearing the opening of *Ma bouche plaint*—all the more impressive following the intensive focus on the blank folios! Another fascinating exemplar of this genre is the beautiful Chansonnier of Margaret of Austria, presented by Vincenzo Borghetti (pp. 140-3); Margaret, her tragic personal circumstances notwithstanding, sought and ultimately gained political office. Hers is considerably larger than a typical exemplar, and, remarkably, opens with a lengthy canonic six-part motet. The folios bear illuminations that are duly decoded and interpreted as metaphors for Margaret's own status and the compromises she had to make as a successful woman who confronted limits that, as 'widow and sovereign' she could not transcend.

Alongside the Eton Choirbook (discussed by Magnus Williamson, pp. 182-5), less famous exhibits such as the Jistebnice Cantionale are included. Lenka Hlávková (pp. 152-5) relates this manuscript to the tempestuous times in which it was produced. This 'unique testimony to the first attempt in Europe to translate and transform the repertory of liturgical chants into the vernacular' also evinces connections with Smetana, Dvořák and Janáček, although music that is nowadays recognised as 'an audible sign of the Hussites in Czech musical culture' does differ appreciably from the original *cantio* as sung in the 1420s.

Refreshingly, the *Museum* includes items in Greek (Alexandros Maria Hatzikiriakos presents 'Erotokritos Sings a Love Song to Aretousa'—a Greek manuscript with a graceful pen drawing, pp. 132-5) and Armenian. The Սաղմոսարան or Psalter of Abgar Dpir Tokhatetsi (Ortensia Giovannini, pp. 64-7) is presented through an essay that claims (with little justification) 'the psalms were intended to be performed in unison by the whole congregation'. On the grounds that the Psalter lacks musical notation, she posits that it was 'not intended for practical use'—yet types for the Armenian neumes were not cast until the mid-seventeenth century, and ecphonetic chant did not

generally require notation. Armenian psalms are deployed in a variety of sophisticated liturgical and musical contexts; the authoritative account on their historical evolution, by Fr. Vardan Hac'uni (Venice, 1965), is nowhere mentioned. The author seems unaware of the richly-neumated *Manrusmunk'* codices with their elaborate psalm settings. The word դպիր is first transliterated as *dpir* (and mis-translated as 'sacristan'), then as *tbir* (rendered as 'chorister'). Kushnaryan is mis-spelt as Kushnatyan throughout (p. 67, p. 511); the late Gabriella Uluhogian fares better, twice mis-spelt as Uhluhogian (p. 66) but listed correctly as Uluhogian (p. 528). Nevertheless, I appreciated this stimulating and unusual contribution.

All in all, the *Museum* is a glorious achievement—the first of its kind, and unlikely to be surpassed in the foreseeable future. It will appeal to a wide readership, and stimulate, surprise and delight in equal measure. I recommend it as an aesthetic and intellectual *tour de force*, and quite simply as a book to cherish and enjoy for years to come.

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