

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer. By Bruce W. Holsinger. pp. xviii + 472. *Figurac: Reading Medieval Culture.* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, \$47.50/\$17.95. ISBN 0847-3201-9/-4058-5.)

History is no less problematic and complex than other objects of study such as nature, culture, or society. In general, we never say or write precisely what we would wish to. From data and facts—derived from Latin verbs revealing that they are ‘given’ and ‘made’—discourse leads to frames of thought, to categories, with which we aim to define them. The coherence we hope to see realized in any flowing discourse is constantly irritated, owing on the one hand to the sketchiness and deficiency of the data, on the other hand to the disparity of language and meaning. No wonder that Clio, the muse of history, is a poet.

Bruce W. Holsinger has, since the 1990s, lent an especially attentive ear to history, focusing on the interpretation and re-examination of medieval thought, especially with regard to medieval art and music. His study ‘The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)’ (*Signs*, 19 (1993), 92–125) was followed by his dissertation ‘Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture, 1150–1400: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer’ (Columbia University, 1996). In the same year appeared ‘Sodomy and Resurrection: The Homoerotic Subject of the Divine Comedy’ (in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (eds.), *Premodern Sexualities* (New York, 1996), 243–74). Three years after that ‘Langland’s Musical Reader: Liturgy, Law, and the Constraints of Performance’ was published in the important *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 21 (1999), 99–141. And now we have *Music, Body, and Desire* in substantially revised book form.

Two lengthy studies appeared shortly after Holsinger’s book, prepared over the same decade: Daniel Leech-Wilkinson’s *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music: Scholarship, Ideology, Performance* (Cambridge, 2002) and my study in the history of concepts of medieval music *Ein Traum vom Mittelalter: Die Wiederentdeckung mittelalterlicher Musik*

in der Neuzeit (Cologne and Weimar, 2003). Both attempt to show medieval music—whether in sound or as a concept—as the result of complex strategies of interpretation and evaluation. Leech-Wilkinson’s book, through the analysis of changing conceptions of medieval music *as music*, shows hermetic scholarship at work. Mine traces back to the eighteenth century the sources and shapes of ideas that modernity has evolved around and about medieval music, and excavates concepts with extremely long duration, ranging from definitions of ‘the Gothic’ in architecture and music, across artificial Minnesang in song and on stage in the nineteenth century, to the founding fathers of musicology around 1900 in Germany and France and their strategies of separation or adaptation of their subject, reaching into twentieth-century composition and reception, the whole process resulting in a music more invented than discovered. All three books are symptomatic of the scope and status of medieval studies in the new century. Nevertheless they have different aims. Two of them are much closer in that they deconstruct prevalent concepts and undermine authenticity as the phantom of historic imagination, showing medieval studies to be a special form of medievalism; but Holsinger’s book moves back in time methodologically and tells the story as it really was—or, to borrow from the slogan of the Society for Creative Anachronism, as it should have been.

In its focus on the flesh, carnality, and the body, Holsinger’s monograph mirrors the desires and interests of a postmodern age in medieval souls. Even before diving into the book in more detail it is clear that the topic is really reception aesthetics. It is perhaps appropriate to recall the famous medievalist Robert Guette who in his *Questions de littérature*, published between 1960 and 1972, criticized orthodox medieval studies and fought for the alterity of medieval literature. Alterity meant for Guette historic distance (not the Romantic distance of Novalis) and otherness in this ‘politically, socially and culturally strangely and exemplary closed epoch’. It is no coincidence that Guette, an extraordinary scholar and philologist, could combine aesthetic theory and poetic practice in his texts as well as literary criticism, text editing, and theories on the

history of reading. For medieval studies, his concepts are invaluable especially in regard to the poetry of *trouvères* and *troubadours*, but it is also evident that his concepts were made possible by two intertwined facts: the basic experience of anti-Romantic poetry since Verlaine and Mallarmé as well as Guette's own interest in writing poetry—he had himself belonged in the 1920s to the literary *avant-garde* in Paris, along with Blaise Cendrars, Fernand Léger, and André Lhote. The aesthetic stimulus of the formal poetry of the Middle Ages, along with the longing to experience it directly, through 'the brushwood of philology', emerges as the fruit of a special convergence in reception history.

Reading Holsinger's lengthy and imaginative study we need to keep in mind that we belong in an age where body toning, sexual desires, and surface are issues that many societies worldwide—especially those in the West—focus upon, and also that within the field of recent musicology attempts have been made to deconstruct models and structure of history writing to pave the way for a fresh outlook. These simultaneities seem to mark a special convergence in the historiography of medieval culture. We find ourselves, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, about a hundred years away from the founding of medieval studies in music—a reasonable distance from which to evaluate the 'work of the fathers' (unfortunately no mothers at that time). Are we going to follow their legacy of constructing new models of thought or are we going to spend some time evaluating the set of dispositions forming the paradigm 'medieval music'? The connection between constructivist and deconstructive, along with the emergence of queer studies and new musicology in the last decades of the twentieth century—all fresh and welcome approaches to subjects on which time has snowed not only white hairs but hardened methodologies, concepts, and biases as well—is interesting, to say the least. But then who would wish the fathers to return after a hundred years of medieval studies, only with different coats and hats?

In focusing now on Holsinger's book and in attempting to read it properly one cannot help but be reminded of crucial moments in medieval studies within the twentieth century. While many struggled at the beginning with medieval literary and musical sources, others used them to paint an image of medieval culture in considerable detail. Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* was published in 1919 (in German in 1924) to shape scholars' images of medieval culture, describing the medieval world as a time full of imagery, a world of flesh and bone—yet sad and dying. Rudolf von Ficker's studies of the school

of Notre Dame resonate with emotional devotion to his subject and use analogies to describe two-voice chant and alleluias through metaphors charged with symbolism. The art historians Otto von Simson and Erwin Panofsky with their famous studies not only helped to guide thought towards a hieratic, symbolic, and miraculously strange Middle Ages, their monumental work helped at the same time a disillusioned post-war period in Europe to build up the shimmering model of a meaningful, sacred past which had sunk into oblivion. So what one should be interested in first of all in Holsinger's book is what kind of image of medieval culture he paints, what the basis of this image is, and what the scope of his writing—his audience—might be.

The book is arranged in four main parts (plus introduction) which themselves are subdivided again into two chapters, an arrangement that incidentally copies the construction of one of the most important books of theoretical writing from the twentieth century, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, published in 1966 and a best-seller ever since. Foucault's was a courageous but also a wise and modest book, which predicts that man, a subject formed by discourse as a result of the arrangement of knowledge, will be erased 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'.

After an introduction Holsinger moves into the subject of musical embodiments in Christian Late Antiquity, to be followed by the chapter that will be most interesting and provocative for musicologists, 'Liturgies of Desire'. In Part III he analyses 'Sounds of Suffering' and speaks about the musical body in pain, as well as musical violence and the ideology of song, focusing on intersections of musicality and pain—as well as on the ambiguity of musical pleasure—and of pleasure and musical pain. This chapter concludes with remarks on Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and its depiction of torture, giving insights but also displaying a fascination with the medieval morbid—as the cover of the book stresses. In Part IV, 'Resoundings', Holsinger analyses the Orphic myth and explores its musical embodiment through time, delving into its reception history from antiquity to the present. He closes his study with an epilogue, arguing for a musicology of empathy—a quality that one should ask for in all kinds of scholarship.

Holsinger offers his monograph as an attempt to irritate generally accepted notions of medieval musical aesthetics as locating 'the beauty of music and musical experience in number'; in other words, the interplay of numeric ratios abstracted from sensual considerations (p. 5)—thereby, I suppose, helping scholarship to take

on emphatic character. In Holsinger's view many musicologists took the Platonist disdain for the 'flesh' so prominent in medieval thought and projected a theoretical divorce between music and the material, embodied world. It is in the last chapter that Holsinger's main *scopus* is revealed most clearly. He hopes to get 'the dirt', the stain of human corporeality, which had been lamented by the *Schola enchiriadis* as an impediment to true musical understanding and enlightenment, back into musical practice, back into the discourse of medieval music. The residue of intervening history, of historiography as well as music history, layers of enmity to body culture, to its strange moves and acts, are peeled back to reveal music as a kind of cultural acting and to 'forge new identifications with those whose musical remains we enliven and study, to invent new ways of merging and blending the musical cultures of our time with the musical cultures of the dead' (p. 348—an echo of Christopher Page's brilliant *Discarding Images* (Oxford, 1993)).

This is a valuable effort indeed, an attempt to combine the legacy of Foucault with positivism in the historic disciplines, working at understanding the narrative structure of historiography and using the power of premisses and concepts developed in the wake of Foucault and Hayden White. But it is only an attempt, and in lacking empathy the author, who tries to hide behind the words throughout the book, appears to be present between the lines. To locate him, I pick out the sections on music history in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and focus on two aspects: Hildegard of Bingen and the Notre Dame school.

In the second part of his study, in a chapter entitled 'Polyphones and Sodomites', Holsinger writes about Leoninus and the Notre Dame school. It may well have appeared too late for him, but it is a pity that he could not take account of and comment upon Rudolf Flotzinger's hotly debated study *Perotinus Musicus: Wegbereiter abend-ländischen Komponierens* (Mainz and London, 2000), which discusses possible biographies of Leoninus and Perotinus. Holsinger focuses mainly on the intersection between diatribes against sodomy among the clergy and those against polyphonic practice (or more specifically the singers of the polyphonic practice) and reveals in the medieval discourse an interesting vocabulary of inversion, effeminacy, excess, and 'penetrability', which he suggests may be evidence of a metaphorical connection between the two in the interpretative community of the thirteenth century. Piling up one interpretative layer upon the other he arrives at the conclusion that the design of the vox organalis in the *Magnus liber organi* in fact represents

the amorous same-sex coupling of the two soloists (p. 173). In a peculiar loop in his hermeneutic approach, Holsinger moves from his masterly interpretations of Leoninus' homoerotically charged poetry to consider Notre Dame polyphony, for in order to back up his interpretations of polyphony he refers to his own interpretation of the sources, which are to be interrogated and interpreted on different levels, as if the modern mind and the medieval writer shared the same concepts in thought.

Judging by Holsinger's publication history, it was with Hildegard of Bingen that he began, and so special attention should be paid to his writing about her. The chapter 'Sine Tactu Viri: The Musical Somatics of Hildegard of Bingen' focuses on her. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was not just an important abbess and the founder of a convent, a mystic and visionary, the writer of letters, theological tracts, and exegetical discourses, the author of numerous writings on medical and scientific questions, a diplomat and counsellor of high-ranking personages of her time, dubbed 'the Sybil of the Rhine' by her contemporaries and calling herself 'a note from the trombone of God'; she was also one of the few medieval women who composed music—songs, hymns, antiphons, etc., and her sacred morality play in dramatic verse *Ordo virtutum*. While indeed some put her texts on the same level as the book of sequences by Notker, the poems and treatises of Walter of Châtillon, the hymns of Peter Abelard, and the sequences of Adam de St-Victor, her stock of monophonic settings known under the title *Symphonia harmonie celestium revelationum* is regarded as the most comprehensive work that can be attributed to any person known by name in the twelfth century.

In recent years Hildegard has been pushed to the front of public attention, mainly as a witness to contemporary ecological, esoteric, alternative trends, being also regarded as the originator of an especially individual corpus of music—'the visionary, who is also an artist'. In countless books her music is described as the product of a highly original thinker, turning her into 'our' woman in the twelfth century and presenting the missing link to a politically correct view of Western music history. But legends more than facts have painted this image as our source for a twelfth-century compositional mentality—and Holsinger does not clear up any of the legends (another kind of 'dirt?'), but rather adds new ones. The historic legends range from her fame as a composer during her lifetime, over commissions from cloisters in her neighbourhood, to a special liturgy that she and her religious sisters performed on occasion. Allowing that there is

some truth here, it remains mysterious why her music did not enter the musical mainstream of her time and is found in so few sources. Also the question of why the literary and musical reception of her life and work faded relatively quickly awaits an answer.

A babble of voices began to grow through the 1980s and reached a peak at the time of the first large international and interdisciplinary conference on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of Hildegard's birth in 1998 at Bingen, which turned most of the research on her on its head (see my report in *Early Music*, 27 (1999), 156–7). Many questions, especially regarding the specific culture of her music, questions of authorship and style, of liturgical context and manuscripts, of melodic formulation and aesthetic evaluation, arose—questions asked, answers formulated, material presented and published, articles written, and all absent from Holsinger's book.

It is a considerable weakness in what is otherwise such an imaginative study that Holsinger does not take account of the mass of literature on Hildegard of Bingen in languages other than English and seems to like only what he knows already. It's as if source readings could threaten a fresh interpretation, as if a discourse with hard science posing soft problems would result in soft science with a hard problem. A new book by the American-German musicologist Marianne Richert Pfau and the German musicologist Stefan Morent, entitled *Hildegard von Bingen: Der Klang des Himmels*, and inaugurating the first large series of women composer biographies (Cologne and Weimar, 2005), offers an especially good opportunity to open the discourse and to start debating what Rolf Meyer once called 'the other revelation', a specific type of female mystic that is so fascinating to many of us, Holsinger included.

Holsinger relies in this chapter on Barbara Newman's studies in the 'homoerotics of devotion' ('O feminea forma: God and Woman in the Works of St. Hildegard (1098–1179)' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1981); 'Hildegard von Bingen: Visions and Validations', *Church History*, 54 (1985), 163–75; *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1987), and on Claudia Eliass, *Die Frau ist die Quelle der Weisheit: Weibliches Selbstverständnis in der Frauenmystik des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts* (Pfaffenweiler, 1995), and in essence the argument in his interpretation of Hildegard is the same as in his reading of the *Magnus liber organi*: 'sexual dissidence' and homoeroticism. As the chapter is for the most part repeated from his 1993 study, which of course pre-dates the Bingen conference, he refers to female mystics of the High Middle Ages in the same way as before and

stresses the connection between 'musical pleasure', 'musical violence', and 'sacred history' (p. 101). His focus is Hildegard's musical, literary, and scientific productivity—and he knows what he wants to find in the sources before he sees them. There is an imperial attitude of knowledge looking downwards on the subject of research, in this case an American man looking down on a German woman, before attempting to sustain the otherness of the medieval Hildegard. In this regard Holsinger's research has a well-defined aim, though he describes 'any attempt to interpret the contours of medieval monody (especially sacred monody) as expressive' (p. 108). This statement is followed by a description of Hildegard's sexual desire and of the female body in her important treatise *Causae et curae*, relating it to the melodic design of her hymn *Ave generosa*, based on his own listening experience of it as having 'sensuous, erotic, and fertile qualities' (p. 115). Holsinger suggests an expression of erotic desire towards the Virgin Mary and Ecclesia, and since he does not explicitly stress the subjectivity of his interpretation he reveals himself as one of the most traditionally minded positivists in town. The female body's openness and looks are related to intervallic leaps and range in the above-mentioned hymn in order to find a feminine presence (p. 107)—albeit stepping back from his original 1993 interpretation, in which he found in this hymn 'an active and restless desire for [its] subject, the Virgin Mary'. Implied here is an understanding of medieval interpretative communities—the interplay of mysticism, Benedictine religious and spiritual life, the specific design of Hildegard's cloisters Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg.

Holsinger relates anew the interpretation of the virga that Wolfgang Scherer published in his monograph *Hildegard von Bingen: Musik und Mönchmystik* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1987). The wordplay between 'virgo' (virgin) and 'virga' (branch, rod) is at the centre of his interest, for it connects the modes of desire expressed towards 'virgo' in Hildegard's text to an eroticized virgo (p. 124). As Holsinger does not move on to interpret the virga—also the name for a neume prevalent in Hildegard's monophony—he naturally continues to present the homoerotic connotations of virga nonetheless, a word used as a euphemism for the phallus since Cassiodorus. It is arguable that the Virgin Mary is not only venerated but longed for in a sensual way—given the specific cult of the Virgin Mary in Europe since the Middle Ages up to Lourdes, Pope John Paul II, and Latin American spirituality—but Holsinger leaves no room for the possibility of any form of desire other than the homoerotic, or the

possibility of something beyond, the possibility of a specific form of spirituality not shaped by twenty-first-century same-sex desires. It might have been fun to discuss with those interested in research into early thirteenth-century music and poetry the alleluia *O virga mediatrix*, which is to be found in the manuscript Österreichische Nationalbibliothek 1016 (fo. 118^v) as well as the Rupertsberger Riesencodex. It appears also in a sequentiary from the early sixteenth century (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 546, ed. Joachim Cuontz von St. Gallen, dated 1507–14; German Hufnagel notation on five staves. See Frank Labhardt, *Das Sequentiar Cod. 546 der Stiftsbibliothek von St. Gallen und seine Quellen* (Publikationen der Schweizerischen musikforschenden Gesellschaft), 2 vols. (Berne, 1959–63). Hildegard's alleluia is printed in *Monumenta monodica mediæ ævi*, vii–viii. 382.) In this sixteenth-century version some melodic and textual variants occur that appear like a kind of redaction, and the beginning of the text is given as 'O virgo mediatrix'—virgin instead of rod. So what does that mean for Holsinger's argument? Strengthening and weakening it at the same time? The discourse is open. The sources are well edited and accessible, and they do not bite. And there *are* studies that strike a balance between shaking off the dust of the past, being aware that scholarship is more about asking questions than pushing for answers, and looking with curiosity into the Middle Ages and its legacy: one outstanding recent example is Giselle de Nie's *Word, Image and Experience: Dynamics of Miracle and Self-Perception in Sixth-Century Gaul* (Aldershot, 2003), which offers interesting methodological approaches to medieval culture.

In a kind of morose interest in interpretation and in finding a meaningful approach to an epoch that has disappeared, the image of a strangely familiar Middle Ages appears. The tremendous appeal of the Middle Ages in our time, of which the fascination with medieval music is only a small, though prominent, part, reflects a yearning for meaning, for purpose, for guidance and worth, for 'the real stuff', and this is Holsinger's topic: familiarization. He is a twenty-first-century host inviting us into frames of thinking and living which are much more familiar to many than bourgeois lifestyles today. This book is indeed of the *Zeitgeist*, and one cannot help but be reminded of James Hynes's satire *The Lecturer's Tale*, which relates the story of a seminar lunch of a department of English literature in order to discuss a paper entitled 'The Lesbian Phallus of Dorian Gray'. The heated debate culminates in the exchange between Vita Deonne and her colleague Nelson, who exclaims: 'So I can only understand your argument if I don't understand it?' 'You are

missing the point', Vita had said, as if to a child. 'If you agree with my analysis, then you understand.' 'What if I understand but I don't agree?' 'That's not possible.' Is that what empathy is all about?

After Foucault's *The Order of Things*, and after a decade of deconstructivist approaches to historicism in medieval studies, we should be able to say that we understand but do not agree. That *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture* is an inspiring read—welcome in that it provides anyone interested in the historiography of medieval culture with much food for thought—is true as well. It is also an example of a particular kind of hermeneutics and will be a subject of historiographical study as the twenty-first century moves on, reflecting the specific coincidence of queer studies, medieval studies, and the turning away from deconstructivism. Medieval studies would be less colourful, less 'pop' without Bruce Holsinger—but more 'medieval', more 'studied', perhaps. The closedness of the interpretative circle has not been opened. Thus very little new ground opens up, and we continue to construct images for ourselves. In the words of Philip Hensher (the epigraph to another recent book on medievalism), 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we will go on guessing, I suppose'.

ANNETTE KREUTZIGER-HERR
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Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life at the Habsburg-Burgundian Court. By Honey Meconi. pp. xxiii+385. (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2003, £75. ISBN 0-19-816554-4.)

A little more than a decade ago, John Milsom reviewed a pair of then recently published volumes of the masses by the prolific but often neglected Renaissance composer Pierre de la Rue (see his review of *Pierre de la Rue: Opera omnia*, vols. 2–3, in *Early Music*, 21 (1993), 479–82). Reflecting on the music he found there, rich in polyphonic interest and distinctive in its contrapuntal design, he wondered about La Rue and his art. By what aesthetic standards ought we to judge these works and the place they should hold in the tapestry of Renaissance styles of the years around 1500? In what ways is his music like (or unlike) that of the equally prolific Josquin? What connections can we trace between La Rue's compositional choices and those of older composers such as Ockeghem? And what can we learn about La Rue's music from his enduring relationship with the Habsburg-Burgundian court and its important musical scriptorium, headed by Petrus Alamire, where so many of La Rue's