

# "Performance Practice before 1600." Edited By Howard M. Brown and Stanley Sadie

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McGee, Timothy J. (1991) ""Performance Practice before 1600." Edited By Howard M. Brown and Stanley Sadie," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 6. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199104.01.6  
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## Reviews of Books

Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, eds.,: *Performance Practice: Music before 1600*. Vol.1 Norton/Grove Handbooks in Music. New York: W. W. Norton, and Co., 1989. xi, 281p.

Over the past thirty years the field of performance practices has moved from a relatively small sub-section of the musicological discipline where it was viewed with some suspicion, to the point where it is now recognized as an essential aspect of the scholarly study of music. Practical information brought forward by scholars has greatly improved the historical accuracy of performances of the music from earlier periods. In turn, the scholar's understanding of the repertory has been increased through the opportunity to listen to informed performances and to engage in critical dialogue with performers. The mutual interdependence of scholars and performers is the given of this handbook, and in the preface, Brown and Sadie express their intention to address both groups. They have accomplished this end to some degree, although *they serve the scholar far more directly and successfully than they do the performer.*

The present volume is comprised of 13 essays by 10 different authors, all specialists in various areas of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The book is divided into two sections, corresponding to the two periods, with an "Interlude" of chapters with topics that span both periods: *ficta*, and tempo and proportions. Inevitably, the many-author approach results in *compartmentalization*, and leaves certain connections unclear or unstated; moreover, some areas remain completely unattended. In an attempt to rectify these shortcomings an introduction is provided for the two historical periods, surveying the entire area and introducing the basic questions along with a preview of some of the answers. Aside from the secondary sources provided in the notes to each chapter, a bibliography of primary performance practice sources (to 1600) is included at the end of the volume.

The editors assure us in the preface that, although the book is issued in the *Norton/Grove Handbook* series, the articles are newly written rather than being simply extracted from the *The New Grove* (p. xi). This is undoubtedly true, but that is not to say that the material, opinions, and conclusions have not been aired in print earlier by these or other authors. A few chapters do present material and views not published previously (especially those by Planchart and Haar), whereas most appear to be either revisions and extensions of earlier published work, or simply repetition, combination, and synthesis from publications by these authors or others. Given the nature of the subject and the intention of the handbook, this is understandable, although it is unfortunate that some of the authors did not take this opportunity to refine their earlier positions in light of more recent studies.

Several of the essays dwell on the present state of investigation and information, providing a "report on the state of the art." Students will benefit from that aspect of the book in that it summarizes for each topic what is known, what is in doubt, and the current arguments for and against certain theories. Howard Brown takes this a useful step further in his two introductory chapters and two chapters on instruments by proposing directions and organizational methods for future research.

As to its avowed purpose of helping scholars and performers "ask the right questions and give them some guidance as to how and where answers might be arrived at" (p. xi), the book is only partially successful. The chief problem is that many of the authors have become absorbed in the scholarly aspect of their subject and fail to complete their statements by relating the evidence to performance. Others simply forget that most performers are not as acquainted with the field and its terminology as are full-time musicologists. For example, Alejandro Planchart's discussion of tempo and proportions (chapter 7) is so dense as to be unreadable by all but a limited number of specialists. His topic is admittedly very technical, but Karol Berger demonstrates in his chapter on *musica ficta* (chapter 6) that a discussion of a technical matter can be both thorough and clearly readable.

The editors point out that it is no longer possible for a single person to master the entire field of performance practice, which is their reason for multiple authors. An additional advantage to this format is that the reader receives a variety of points of view since the authors do not

necessarily agree on all points. (In this regard the differences of opinion among Brown, Page, Fallows, and Haar concerning instruments and their participation in polyphony, stemming in part from differences in opinion as to the amount of weight to place on certain types of evidence, is refreshing.) But there is also a down side to this: inevitable repetition. One tires of reading in every chapter the same introductory statements about how little we know and how few of the practices are recoverable. No doubt the reason is that the book will most often be consulted in single chapters as a source book, but even then a major presentation of the disclaimer could have been covered in the preface.

Howard Mayer Brown has taken on the task of presenting the entire subject in overview, which he dispatches by introducing the two periods and by discussing the musical instruments of each. The introductory chapters look at the major performance issues, surveying topics covered in more detail in the chapters. The problems of text underlay are addressed in a number of chapters, but a broad view of the issue is presented by Brown, providing a large setting for the more particular discussions. *The introductions add to the number of times one reads about how little we know concerning each subject.* But this is minor carping; Brown's chapters are a joy to read and fulfill the expressed intentions of the book to a high degree.

Brown's chapters on instruments are not the usual lists or descriptions, but a discussion of the sources of the information and their possible meaning, the performance technique, the types of ensembles, and the possible repertory. The discussions are purposely cautious, drawing only conclusions that are called for by evidence currently available. As a reaction to the large quantity of less careful scholarship in the past on this subject, Brown's chapters are punctuated with warnings against leaping to conclusions or accepting partial evidence as conclusive. It is no surprise that the four chapters by Brown are among the most useful in the book, displaying his considerable knowledge of the historical material and an exemplary clear and concise way of stating both problems and solutions.

Within the Medieval section another admirable job of addressing both audiences is that by Christopher Page on "Polyphony before 1400." He homes in directly on some of the most essential problems: tuning, rhythm, vocal timbre, ornamentation and instrumentation, bringing to his



discussion of each area a lucid perusal of the theoretical basis and following it up with practical statements and examples. Much of Page's information has been presented earlier, but he takes this opportunity to rephrase and slightly readjust some of his points and conclusions. In this exposition his case for believing that much of the polyphonic repertory regularly received an all-vocal performance is even more compelling than in his earlier writings.

Under the chapter heading "Secular Monody" Wulf Arlt discusses relations between the written music and its performance, the relationship between text and music, and the difficulty of ascertaining the composer's intentions. His material is mostly a recycling of arguments, hypotheses, and even of examples and charts presented by him in articles over the past fifteen years without much new — either in evidence or in conclusions; but even here we can find solace in that his essay offers us the convenience of finding all the information in a single place.

David Hiley's chapter on chant adopts a "chatty" approach, and is written on a fairly general, layman's level (eg. he explains terms such as "processional"). His treatment of the subject is unfortunately incomplete and often loses sight of both the intended audiences. The rather straight-forward performance topics, such as who and how many voices sang various items of the liturgy, are spotty and glossed over with neither a solution nor a hint as to where one might find answers, and his discussion of liturgical drama is focused not on performance practice, but on whether or not this manifestation might be liturgical. Vocal improvisation and ornamentation receive cursory mention, but there is no description of what was done, how it was performed, or even where it was inserted. Much of Hiley's attention is given to a discussion of durational values in chant, but his inclusion of evidence from the late 15th and 16th century in a discussion of Medieval practices is especially disconcerting. He concludes with a diplomatic and cautious description of both the traditional (Solesmes) method as well as of more recent theories of rhythmic interpretation. (A somewhat different view of Solesmes is presented by Planchart in ch. 7.)

In the chapter "Monophony and the Unwritten Tradition" James Haar presents some refreshing new thoughts about chant practices in the Renaissance and how we might more correctly perform chant material in the context of a 16th-century performance rather than in that of the 10th

or 11th. His discussion of the unwritten tradition cites evidence for improvisatory practice, including that of polyphony. The bulk of this information is Italian, but it is one of the few places in the entire book that is directed specifically to details of execution in a way that a performer could find to be of immediate use.

Christopher Reynolds, writing on "Sacred Polyphony," gets into some practical areas: what repertory was performed where; whether mass cycles were always performed in entirety; and the number of performers in various situations. Reynolds does occasionally ignore Brown's admonition — to avoid drawing large conclusions from minimal facts — in his consideration of instrumental participation in sacred music, and of the uses and sizes of choirs. One of the most interesting of his observations is that a study of changes in organ technique and construction could yield a far better understanding of sacred performance practice. Because Reynold's discussion is so useful, both scholars and performers will decry the absence of copious footnote citations of studies and practical material.

"Secular Polyphony in the 15th Century" by David Fallows concentrates almost exclusively on the chanson repertory, delving into details, including the probability of instrumental participation and the nature of the singing voice. Echoing Page's findings about polyphony in the Middle Ages, Fallows presents the case for all-vocal performance of much of this repertory. This chapter is especially useful for its summary of our knowledge about chanson performance.

Anthony Newcomb's "Secular Polyphony in the 16th Century" is quite inaccurately named, since it discusses Italian music almost exclusively, and is in fact even more narrowly confined, relying most heavily on earlier research done by himself and others on Ferrara. It is true, as Newcomb states, that much more investigation has been done on practices in Italy than in other countries, but that does not excuse his failure to take advantage of the available information on England, France, Spain, Germany, and the Low Countries. In addition, he frequently lumps together facts from the extreme decades of the sixteenth century in spite of his own statement that tastes and customs changed in the course of the century. Since this is the only chapter to concentrate on secular music of the late Renaissance, it is a big disappointment. In comparison, Fallows's chapter, which concentrates

on French repertory, at least discusses the presence of the chanson in other countries. But even Fallows does not point out the performance differences from one country to the next, and the practices in England seem to have been left off everyone's list with the exception of Hiley's chapter on chant, which concentrates on English practice and ignores most other areas.

As stated earlier, the two "Interlude" chapters, "Musica ficta" (Berger) and "Tempo and Proportions" (Planchart), are a study in contrasts of communication level. Both chapters are admirably thorough and demonstrate their authors' impressive ability to comprehend difficult subjects; but there the similarity ends. Berger addresses the scholar and performer alike, condensing from his provocative book-length study in such a way that allows him to present the full range of the problem on a level that can be readily followed. He has not really left anything out, but has merely presented his major conclusions without the full recitation of background and evidence found in his larger study. Performers will probably yearn for musical examples illustrating his points, but the arguments can be clearly followed as presented.

Planchart, on the other hand, writes for the initiated few. The article begins well, but as it proceeds it becomes more and more dense, the last few pages resembling a textbook in higher mathematics. Long and serious study of the chapter rewards the reader with a marvelously complete overview of the subject, but I fear few musicologists — to say nothing of performers — will be able follow without taking copious notes and making charts as they wade through. Perhaps if the author had stretched out his discussion to somewhere near twice its length and filled it with illustrative examples, it would have been easier to follow.

The most serious omission from these discussions of medieval and Renaissance performance is the failure of so many authors to confront the problem of national styles. The notable exception is Howard Brown, who brings up the subject in all four of his chapters; but he writes intentionally in overview, and the other authors do not pick up this thread for further expansion. In many chapters, in fact, the periods are approached as if there was a single performance tradition in all aspects (ornamentation, ensemble, occasion, etc.) that was valid in all countries. It would be difficult to imagine a discussion of baroque practices that did not emphasize the basic national differences, but hardly a word on that



topic can be found here for the earlier centuries. National performance style is admittedly a difficult subject, and there is not yet a large amount of material to support a detailed discussion for all areas. But that is hardly a good reason to omit a discussion or even a mention of it, and in fact, some evidence does exist, especially for the broad differences between Italy and France. Until we assist performers in this important area, our discussions of medieval and Renaissance performance will be woefully incomplete.

In summary, the book is a worthwhile, if uneven and incomplete, addition to the field in that it collects in one place so much current knowledge. It is disappointing that many of the authors were content to inform us as to the present state of research, bemoaning a lack of information on most subjects, while only a few seized upon this opportunity to accept the challenge, actually invading some of those areas to ferret out new information. That the book falls short of a complete picture is to be regretted, but there is material in all chapters to stimulate both graduate student and seasoned scholar for a long time to come.

Performers, on the other hand, will not find the book to be of such immediate use, unless one believes in the "trickle-down theory" of scholarship. It is true that some performers are also scholars and obviously can profit from the contents. But it is doubtful that those not trained as musicologists could get much out of many of the chapters. Most will have to await less technical presentations of this material.

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