DISCARDING IMAGES

REFLECTIONS ON MUSIC & CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL FRANCE

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Introduction

The idea that a 'medieval' period intervened between Antiquity and the Renaissance has long been part of the Western cultural tradition. It is such a familiar idea, indeed, that we forget its deficiencies. To define nearly a thousand years of mankind as 'an age lying between two other ages', both of which are implicitly judged to be more important, shows a certain want of sympathy, not to say a poverty of ideas.

The Humanists who first distinguished the 'medieval' centuries and gave them a name were not lacking in ideas; when they began to evoke a 'middle time' (*media tempestas*) that seemed to separate them from Antiquity they were building an arch of historical imagination that reached across more than a thousand years towards the Ancients; that vault has been lovingly restored and buttressed ever since; no one has ever seriously attempted to dismantle it.

The Humanists did lack sympathy, however. Their feeling for the culture of the Ancients was highly selective and cannot be called a passion for *Antiquity* as such; they admired the Greece of Pericles, not Crete or Mycenae; they esteemed the Rome of Augustus, not the civilization of the Etruscans. Their image of the *media tempestas* was also selective, but it was also intensely negative, as the ambiguity of the word *tempestas* ('a period of time', 'a tempest') reveals.

Some modern scholars, granting all this, will argue that the Humanists' idea of a 'middle time' has now become harmless, at least in the specialized usage of medievalists, and that colloquial parlance, where the adjective 'medieval' is usually pejorative, is none of their concern (though it may irritate them from time to time). Music-ologists, in particular, might further declare that there has never been facile agreement as to what makes 'medieval' music as opposed to 'Renaissance' music,[1] and that these concepts have inspired so much

[1] For a spirited instance see Wolf, 'The Aesthetic Problem of the "Renaissance" '.

XV

valuable discussion that their usefulness is obvious—quite apart from the vivid meaning which they impart to certain facts of musical history.[2]

We may have sympathy with all these positions, and if the truth be told, we have no choice but to endorse them. A new interpretation of Western history may eventually emerge that nullifies the idea of a *media tempestas* (and such a new interpretation has been passionately called for in the past),[3] but it is far in the future.

We do have the option, however, to ask ourselves whether the concept of a 'middle period' has endured for five hundred years because it expresses truths which cannot be denied—certain truths in the history of music among them. Without hoping entirely to satisfy the advocates of that view, one might reply to their suggestion with another. The Middle Ages have certainly endured, but there is considerable scope for disagreement about the reasons for their tenacious hold over the Western imagination. Brian Stock, for example, has argued that the 'Middle Ages' have not survived because they define the past but because they serve the present:[4]

The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself: the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In their widest ramifications 'the Middle Ages' thus constitute one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world.

In many ways the endeavours of modern scholars have reinforced what Stock provocatively calls the 'cultural myth' of the Middle Ages. It is the principal claim of this book that scholarship, musicology included, has long shown a tendency to homogenize and to monumentalize the 'medieval' period. This is done with the aid of certain mental schemes which, for all the ingenuity that may be deployed in acting upon them, are simple in themselves. I refer to antinomies such as efflorescence/decay, élite/popular, literate/non-

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[2] Such as the firm view of Tinctoris that a 'new art' had arisen in the first half of the 15th c. with Dunstable and, in France, Dufay and Binchois. See the passage from his *Proportionale* in *Opera theoretica*, ed. Seay, iia. 10 and below, Afterword.

[3] For a penetrating discussion of the emergence of the 'Middle Ages' as a concept, see Burrows, 'Unmaking the Middle Ages'. Compare W. K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought, passim*; Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History, passim*; and Robinson, 'Medieval, the Middle Ages'.

[4] Cited in Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists', 192.

literate, learned/unlearned and urban/rural, most of which will sur-
face repeatedly in these chapters. No doubt these contrasts are essen-
tial, in some form, if we are to make any sense of what we find; I do
not suggest that they be abandoned. My proposal—and much of this
book is concerned to illustrate it—is that they sometimes lead to sim-
plistic and stereotyped reasoning.

It is understandable that musicologists should have adopted the
concept of a medieval period followed by a Renaissance, albeit with
some vigorous protest along the way, for musicology is a young disci-
pline and all young things are dependent at first. The immense task of
devising a history of musical forms and styles between the origins of
Christian chant and the fifteenth century has been attempted many
times in the last fifty years and could not have been accomplished
without the aid of categories borrowed from historians, the Middle
Ages and Renaissance among them. The polyphony of the Ars
Antiqua, for example, has long been conceived in terms of themes
such as systematization (the rhythmic modes), centrality (the Parisian
region), and university learning (represented by the University of
Paris and its links with the cathedral of Notre-Dame). These themes
reflect the entrenched view of the thirteenth century as the great age
of the Gothic: supposedly a time of scholastic rigour, of piety, of cler-
ical élitism, and of rational (yet intensely spiritual) cathedral architec-
ture. As brought to bear upon medieval art, this is the Middle Ages
we meet in the great tradition of medieval architectural history, initi-
ated by Émile Mâle (Pl. 1) and continued by Erwin Panofsky, Otto
von Simson, and others.

In contrast, the secular polyphony of the fourteenth and even of the
fifteenth century is apt to be regarded as an art of the Gothic in
decline—of the 'waning' Middle Ages of the great Dutch historian
Johan Huizinga. In various forms, this view has been held almost
since 1919 when Huizinga's immensely influential study *The Waning
of the Middle Ages* was first published in its original Dutch edition.
The chansons of the Ars nova, for example, have sometimes been
presented as luxuriant but wilful and almost mischievous composi-
tions. It has been proposed that the leading composer of the French
Ars nova, Guillaume de Machaut, sometimes writes 'a *perverse*
accompaniment to a charming melody' (my italics).[5] The tradition to

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[5] Caldwell, *Medieval Music*, 177.

Pl. 1. Émile Mâle

which Machaut made such a substantial contribution has been interpreted as one doomed to decay by a process as inevitable as the passage of the seasons, finally going to seed with the so-called 'mannerists' of the later fourteenth century who are often judged to be wayward and, in the words of a recent critic, 'pretty unmusical'.[6] The stylistic changes of the earlier fifteenth century may be welcomed and much admired, but as we shall see in Chapter 5, a 'waning' model of a decadent and declining Middle Ages has repeatedly been evoked to provide a cultural context for the secular polyphonic art of composers such as Dufay, Binchois, and Busnoys. This is the Middle Ages of Huizinga, Cartellieri, Stadelmann, Tuchman, and of countless textbooks, articles, and exhibition catalogues.

In recent years, however, as musicology has become progressively more enterprising, some old ideas have begun to dissolve. Painstaking research on English music has uncovered not just the vigour but also the abundance of polyphonic musical traditions in medieval England, and it is becoming as unfashionable to regard these repertories as 'peripheral' to developments in the 'central' Parisian region as it is to

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[6] Milsom, 'Recent Releases', 116. Milsom makes this remark in the context of an accomplished and comprehensive review of recordings of medieval music. The question naturally arises whether it is the 'mannerist' pieces themselves or the performances they have received which are 'unmusical'.

regard English Gothic as a provincial version of a style forged at Saint-Denis.[7] Intensified work on the cultural context of major composers such as Busnoys is producing results that seem to owe little to the inherited schemata of Middle Ages/Renaissance and which are invigorated by a draught of recent developments in the New History (in this case women's history).[8]

Medieval studies have begun to take a direction that is particularly noticeable in the spheres of literary history and art history. This might be described as the move towards a more fragmented Middle Ages in which the very concept of a 'middle period' as a coherent construction of the modern mind is implicitly or explicitly questioned. In a recent article of exceptional interest, David Aers has taken issue with the specialists in Renaissance literature who, searching for the beginnings of interiority in English texts, interpret the Middle Ages as the 'other': the blank space before the supposed development of introspection and interiority in the later sixteenth century. Aers is quite right to maintain that this dismissal of the Middle Ages rests upon an ignorance of the complexity and variety of medieval thought, a debility that is enforced by patterns of university specialization in English literary studies dividing the 'medievalists' from the 'early modernists' or 'modernists'. For Aers, the Middle Ages are not 'the medieval world with its quiet hierarchies' that generations of scholars have used as the target for their generalizations; he describes them as 'centuries of Christian tradition, an extraordinarily diversified, complex and profoundly adaptive culture of discourses and practices'.[9]

Among art historians, Michael Camille has recently surveyed

[7] For a recent example of musicological revisionism see Bill Summers's review of general histories of medieval music in *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, I (1992), 101, and for the architectural historians see Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral, passim*.

[8] Higgins, 'Parisian Nobles'. To the extent that the New History has made any impact upon musicological writing in the medieval field, studies written from a feminist perspective are already treating the concept of the Renaissance with great scepticism. See Macy, 'Women's History and Early Music'. For a most striking (and successful) attempt to find an alternative to traditional methods of narrative history for a well-defined project, see Knighton, 'A Day in the Life of Francisco de Peñalosa'. She presents a wealth of information about the duties and lives of Spanish composers *c.*1500 in the form of a letter, of her own devising, from Peñalosa to a colleague. Compare some recent experiments described in Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative'. It may be doubted whether any male contributor to the volume in which Dr Knighton's essay appears would have dared abandon traditional methods for such a technique.

[9] Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists', 178.

attitudes to idols in the Gothic period and finds himself 'chipping away at the neatly organized foundations' of Émile Mâle's famous study, *L'art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France,* first published in 1898 and widely known in the English-speaking world by one of the two titles chosen for various editions of the English translation, *The Gothic Image*. For Mâle, initiating the modern tradition of scholarship on iconography and the meaning of medieval ecclesiastical architecture, the Gothic cathedral is 'a coherent *summa* in stone' to be interpreted in close and faithful relation to texts such as the *Speculum historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais. In contrast, Michael Camille examines medieval images and discovers 'realms of intervisual and not just intertextual meanings, where images do not just 'reflect' texts innocently but often subvert or alter their meaning'.[10]

I share the view, expressed by Aers and Camille, that the most exhilarating project for the medievalist is now to investigate the variety and complexity of the Middle Ages and to question the received generalizations that are habitually used to constitute the 'medieval' period in our minds. This is the process referred to in the title of this book as one of 'discarding images'.

The primary inspiration for these chapters has been provided by performance. The chance to hear medieval music in recorded performances of increasingly high quality is one of the most obvious ways in which the musicological opportunities available to the modern scholar exceed those of previous generations. Recordings are sometimes superseded by advances in knowledge, and are often vanquished by changes in taste, yet innovative or challenging performances can none the less disturb a wide range of preconceptions that we may unwittingly hold about the interest and scope of a repertory. One may surely go further than this, however. In 1982 I addressed this issue in general terms, arguing that the sound of medieval music, as interpreted today, has the power to influence our aesthetic and intellectual apprehension of the Middle Ages, just as a visual experience of paintings by van Eyck shaped the conceptions of Johan Huizinga:[11]

This . . . is what makes the revival of interest in the performance of medieval music significant for our entire grasp of the Middle Ages and not simply of its musical life. The images that excite the imagination [in medieval manu-

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[10] Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, p. xxvii.   [11] Editorial in *Early Music*, 10 (1982), 426.

script illumination and sculpture] have the power to form constellations with a truly astrological influence over the doings of our minds. Sounds can do the same . . . Our decades are the first in which it has been able to happen.

In recent years changes in our conception of performance practice in later medieval France have undermined (almost without our realizing the fact) some ideas that support the notion of a Renaissance in music as conventionally interpreted. Attempting to give substance to that concept, Gustave Reese wrote that[12]

The small total range that characterized medieval polyphony, and which helped to bring about frequent crossing of the voices, had made desirable a sharp differentiation of the individual parts—whether in rhythm, in melody, or in the timbres of the performing media. But as a wider total range came into use in the Early Renaissance, crossing became less frequent and differentiation between the voices less sharp. The growing homogeneity of the voices eventually resulted in the establishment of imitation as a standard technique of the Late Renaissance.

It should perhaps have been plain long ago that this view involves certain contradictions. If the lines of medieval polyphonic compositions were already differentiated, either in rhythm or in melody, then it would surely have been in the Renaissance, when the voices became more homogeneous, that some differentiation in the timbres of the performing media would have been required, not in the Middle Ages. Be that as it may, recent research into the performance of late medieval music suggests a rather different picture of medieval sonorities and one that makes a comparison with Renaissance sonorities much more difficult to draw in these sweeping terms.[13]

At bottom, this book has been written because I could not reconcile the sound of much medieval music, and the aesthetic experience of hearing it, with some conventional judgements about its imaginative properties, its cultural meaning, or its intended audience. It is in the nature of things that these judgements should often derive from authors writing many decades ago. A great deal of recent interest in medieval music has been (quite properly) philological and historical in character, concentrating upon sources, transmission, composer biography, and institutional history. Ideas about the aesthetic properties of medieval music, of its creative processes, and of the milieux in

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[12] *Music in the Renaissance*, 4.

[13] For a recent review of this issue see Page, 'Going Beyond the Limits'.

which it was performed have been very slow to change; those ideas lie in our minds like a sediment where some venerable things—some almost a century old—have gradually come to rest for want of anything to stir them. They represent the deposit of many years' work in the humanities: art history, architectural studies, iconography, literary criticism, and more besides.

This book offers a sequence of essays, some of them (such as the first and fifth) devoted to very broad issues in our interpretation of the Middle Ages, and others devoted to narrower questions which (it may be hoped) possess a wider significance. In various ways, the chapters presented here ask the following questions, all of which are designed to explore suppositions about what is medieval, and which may be stated here in their barest essentials:

What is distinctly medieval? Some of the most influential writing about the distinctive character of medieval civilization is characterized by a reluctance to consider post-medieval conditions in either an erudite or an intuitive fashion. The belief that the Middle Ages formed a kind of sublime anomaly in the history of Western culture has become so strong that no reference to modern experience is deemed necessary (or legitimate) to test the validity of what is said about the medieval period.

What is the nature of medieval critical language? In our determination to reconstruct a distinctively medieval aesthetic which meets scholarly standards by being based upon written evidence, we fall into the trap of mapping medieval perception in terms of contemporaneous written expression. Medieval ways of describing the materials and effects of the 'arts', music among them, have a tendency to carry the discussion of artistic materials no further than basic matters of form and structure, and their language of praise, like the things which they can identify for praise, are governed by convention.[14] In some cases (the reaction to Chaucer's poetry in the fifteenth century provides an example), it is clear that we shall form a very distorted impression of medieval susceptibilities to art if we found our judgements upon what medieval writers themselves declare. Musicologists are particularly vulnerable in this regard since very little medieval writing has yet been discovered which records a personal or impressionistic reaction

[14] The outstanding guide to these tendencies as manifest in medieval writing about *ars musica* and *ars poetica* is now Stevens, *Words and Music*.

to music. Throughout most of the period covered by this book, the earlier thirteenth century to the mid fifteenth, the principal authors who wrote about musical matters (that is to say, the 'theorists') resembled their counterparts in the sphere of medicine. Like the physicians who studied their Galen and Aristotle, the music theorists were constantly drawn by the 'seductive distractions of scholastic elaboration';[15] they were often inclined to treat their material in a scholastic or philosophically oriented manner because 'the ability to do so was a skill that both made individual reputations and also helped to secure for medicine [and music] a position of respect'.[16] At the same time, the music theorists shared a large body of authoritative material; as with the physicians, 'adherence to a learned tradition expressed in a body of authoritative . . . writings constituted a guarantee of the separate identity of rational enquiry about the human body [and music] . . . as an authentic intellectual enterprise, distinct from natural philosophy'.[17] For a great deal of the Middle Ages the composition and study of medical texts bore no simple or direct relationship to clinical practice and experience; so it was with music. This problem surfaces throughout the chapters of this book.

What is the evidence of modern performance worth? The reluctance of some musicologists to draw upon the evidence (if it may be so called) of modern performance can be explained in various ways.[18] At the present time research in this field is moving so rapidly that recordings—which would be a vital part of the 'evidence' if we admitted it—are soon out of date. Furthermore, it might be argued that to perform medieval music in the twentieth century is to abandon the caution required of any scholar when evidence is sparse, and to do so in a fashion that must be brazen if it is to be effective. This is not the

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[15] Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*, 79.   [16] Ibid. 80.   [17] Ibid. 81.

[18] Despite advances in the performance of medieval music during the last thirty years, little attempt has yet been made to assess the influence—constructive or otherwise—which modern performance can bring to bear upon musicological enquiry. For a fascinating hint of what performance may contribute to the editing process, see the prefatory remarks by Fallows to his completion of G. Thibault's edition of the chansonnier of Jean de Montchenu, p. xi: 'Enfin je dois témoigner d'un privilège extraordinaire, qui constitue en vérité un rêve devenu réalité. Grâce à l'appui d'Anthony Rooley, la société Decca a eu le courage d'entreprendre l'enregistrement sur disque du chansonnier tout entier. Rooley et ses musiciens du Consort of Musicke m'ont permis d'assister à toutes les répétitions et séances d'enregistrement. Beaucoup de leurs idées, exprimées soit verbalement soit musicalement, ont amélioré de façon sensible le commentaire.' It would be of the greatest interest to know *how* the remarks and interpretations of performers contributed to Fallows's work.

place to debate whether there is ultimately any qualitative difference between the speculations of the scholar on one hand and of the performer on the other; what I wish to suggest is that sustained exposure to the sound of medieval music contributes to a vital sense of proportion (in the colloquial sense of those words), not only in the analysis of specific musical details and effects but also in conceiving what the music may have meant. As an academic study, performance practice embraces more than what performers do; it asks who performed where, for whom, to what effect, and upon what occasion. The second chapter of this book is a modest contribution to the history of performance practice in this sense, for it endeavours to suggest a broader social and artistic base for the motet and its audience than has hitherto been acknowledged. The third continues this theme, concentrating upon a famous remark by Johannes de Grocheio which is usually construed—mistakenly, in my view—as a reference to the 'élite' or 'intellectual' audience of motets *c*.1300. These two chapters, together with Chapter 5, have drawn much of their inspiration from the experience of listening to motets and chansons in performance during the last ten years and developing an *ear* for them.

How are medieval people to be described? Terms such as 'élite', 'intellectual', 'learned', and 'popular' are often used by medievalists, and are freely employed by musicologists when discussing the audience for secular polyphony. It is by no means certain what such words can be taken to mean in a medieval context; the answer will not be the same for the tenth century as it is for the twelfth, nor will it be the same for a thirteenth-century friar as it is for a thirteenth-century monk. The danger of such words is that they carry associations that are generally comforting to the modern scholar (who belongs to an intellectual élite) but which may be irrelevant and therefore deceptive.

Preface

In a review, Liane Curtis has described a previous book of mine in words that I am glad to apply to this one: 'It is not a book on music but rather a social history illuminated by its interest in music as an essential part of human experience.' The chapters gathered here form a series of essays, united by their concentration on music and culture in France between the thirteenth century and the fifteenth. They all attempt to examine images of musical life in medieval France, and they are designed to be brisk and suggestive.

In writing them I have incurred many debts. John Stevens read the entire book in a previous version and returned it with the usual wealth of subtle but searching comment. John Caldwell, Tess Knighton, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, Ann Lewis, and Régine Page did the same. Jill Mann provided vital help when I was trying to trace the excellent study by David Aers, cited in the notes to the Afterword. Chapter 5, in an abbreviated form, was read at the Twentieth Annual Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Music held at the University of Newcastle in July 1992, and I am grateful to several delegates for their comments, especially David Fallows and Reinhard Strohm. Parts of Chapter 3 were aired informally when I had the pleasure of being *respondedor* at a session entitled 'Words and Music in the Medieval Motet', chaired by Margaret Bent and held at the meeting of the International Musicological Society in Madrid, 1992.

I owe a special debt to Bonnie J. Blackburn and Leofranc Holford-Strevens for their meticulous work on the typescript and their many pertinent comments. Duane Lakin-Thomas provided the essential technical help and advice as always.

I offer special thanks to Malcolm Gerratt, who has done so much to encourage musicologists in Britain during the last few years and to whom this book is dedicated.

<div align="right">C.P.</div>

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Contents

List of Illustrations