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WHEN MUSICOLOGY GOES CULTURAL.
ON 'A CULTURAL HISTORY OF WESTERN MUSIC IN THE
RENAISSANCE'

ABSTRACT The cultural turn that transformed the humanities in the late twentieth century has also impacted musicology, which has produced significant works emphasizing music's role in cultural history. The book under review is part of an effort to write a multi-volume cultural history of Western music. Focusing on the period from 1400 to 1650, it departs from the traditional composer-centric view, opting for a thematic approach to explore the period's musical landscape, reflecting broader cultural contexts and shifts.

KEYWORDS cultural history of music, Renaissance, music historiography

ABSTRAKT *W stronę muzykologii kulturowej: o monografii „A Cultural History of Western Music in the Renaissance”.* Zwrot kulturowy, który odmienił nauki humanistyczne pod koniec XX w., wpłynął także na muzykologię, prowadząc do powstania istotnych prac podkreślających rolę muzyki w historii kulturowej. Recenzowana książka jest częścią starań mających na celu stworzenie wielotomowej kulturowej historii muzyki Zachodu. Publikacja, skupiająca się na l. 1400–1650, odchodzi od tradycyjnego spojrzenia stawiającego w centrum postaci kompozytorów, wybierając ujęcie problemowe, w celu zbadania krajobrazu muzycznego epoki, ukazując tym samym szersze konteksty kulturowe i przemiany.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE kulturowa historia muzyki, renesans, historiografia muzyczna

The origins of cultural history date back to the eighteenth-century *Kulturgeschichte*; since then, historians have approached historical phenomena in various ways from a cultural and social perspective. Cultural history gained further momentum during the 1980s, culminating in the founding of the so-called New Cultural History movement, which gave new vitality to this approach to studying the past.¹ Notoriously difficult to define, cultural history can be considered an umbrella term for a variety of different approaches and methodologies.² The common ground within this methodological multitude is a focus on cultures in the broadest sense of the term.

Despite a tendency to lag behind major research trends in the humanities, it would be unfair to affirm that musicologists have not incorporated cultural history into their research; as early as 1982, James Haar identified several contributions by musicologists throughout the twentieth century that could be compared to the methods of cultural history.³ However, it was only in the late 2000s and early 2010s that there emerged editorial initiatives clearly aimed at engaging with New Cultural History. Published in 2011 was the seminal volume *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*.⁴ In a rich introduction, Jane Fulcher develops the concept of the ‘New Cultural History of Music’, building on the methodological debates around New Cultural History and New Musicology. In founding this new field of enquiry, Fulcher invites musicologists to ‘take history seriously and remain appraised of its most fruitful new directions’, and historians to ‘work closely with musicologists, consulting the relevant musicological sources’.⁵ This interdisciplinary turn is echoed by the volumes in the series *New Cultural History of Music* published by Oxford University Press, the first book in which dates from 2008.⁶ This series clearly aims to engage both musicologists and cultural historians, with the premise that ‘no one element of culture can be fully understood alone’ and that ‘music can illuminate the

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- 1 The term first appeared in the seminal publication *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt, Berkeley 1989. For an historical overview of the various trends in cultural history, cf. Carlotta Sorba and Federico Mazzini, *La svolta culturale. Come è cambiata la pratica storiografica*, Bari 2021; Miri Rubin, ‘What is Cultural History Now?’ in: *What is History. Now?*, eds. Suzannah Lipscomb and Helen Carr, London 2021, pp. 80–94.
- 2 Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, Cambridge 2008; Alessandro Arcangeli, *Cultural History: A Concise Introduction*, London–New York 2012.
- 3 James Haar, ‘Music History and Cultural History’, *The Journal of Musicology* 1 (1982) no. 1, pp. 5–14, doi: 10.2307/763627.
- 4 *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*, ed. Jane F. Fulcher, Oxford 2011.
- 5 Jane F. Fulcher, ‘Introduction: Defining the New Cultural History of Music, its Origins, Methodologies, and Lines of Inquiry’, in: *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*, ed. Jane F. Fulcher, Oxford 2011, p. 12.
- 6 Vanessa Agnew, *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds*, Oxford 2008.

cultural context or landscape in which it was conceived and, in turn, can be further illuminated by this context'.⁷

It is against this background that *A Cultural History of Western Music*, the third volume of which is reviewed here, appeared in 2024.⁸ This is a most welcome addition to the series Cultural History, published by Bloomsbury, whose books aim to 'survey the social and cultural construction of specific subjects across six historical periods'.⁹ In the series preface, the two general editors, David R.M. Irving and Alexander Rehding, discuss the various terms composing the title as well as the general structure of the series. Being a cultural history, the objective of the series is quite different from that of other histories of music, often structured as a chronological narrative highlighting major composers and their most important works. Here music is intended as 'a set of practices that participate in wider contexts, traditions, or systems of meaning' (p. xii). In line with the orientation of cultural history not to privilege high culture exclusively, *A Cultural History of Western Music* ambitiously aims to explore not only the music within high Western culture, as we hear it in concert halls, but also to 'consider diverse kinds of practices and cultural functions of music, and how and why they have changed over time' (p. xii). Each volume in the series is therefore divided into eight chapters, each focusing on one aspect of culture and society that should function as a sort of common thread throughout the entire series, thus offering thematic continuity throughout the various periods. These are the following: Society, Philosophies, Politics, Exchange, Education, Popular Culture, Performance, Technologies. Before the eight chapters, each volume presents the Series Preface, as well as an introduction authored by the editors of the volume, in this case Jeanice Brooks and Richard Freedman.

The focus on Western music history is explained by the general editors Irving and Rehding as a paradox, since 'the idea of a continuous tradition that stretches from antiquity to the present to make up "western civilization," and in our case "western music," is both a piece of fiction and a reality, and one that we deal with on a daily basis' (p. xi). This is a necessary compromise given that a cultural history of music with a global perspective would have been an endeavour easily prone to failure, due to the vast amount of material and the diverse perspectives and methodologies required to produce a history worthy of the name.

The six volumes composing *A Cultural History of Western Music* each correspond to a different period in time, a feature common throughout the Cultural History

7 See <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/n/new-cultural-history-of-music-nchm/>, accessed 26 August 2024.

8 *A Cultural History of Western Music in the Renaissance*, eds. Jeanice Brooks and Richard Freedman, London–New York–Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024 (= *A Cultural History of Western Music* 3), pp. 282. ISBN-13: 978-1-3500-7555-9 (hardback), 978-1-3502-9095-2 (epdf).

9 See <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/the-cultural-histories-series/?Page=22>, accessed 26 August 2024.

series: Antiquity (850 BCE–500 CE), Middle Ages (500–1400), Renaissance (1400–1650), Age of Enlightenment (1650–1790), Industrial Age (1790–1920), Modern Age (1920–present). In the series preface, Irving and Rehding point out that ‘these divisions may strike readers with a musical background as unconventional’ (p. xii), as they decided to refer to general historical periods rather than resorting to terms more commonly found in music histories, such as Baroque, Classical, Romantic, etc. These terms, according to Irving and Rehding, would in fact lend themselves to misunderstanding, as they could imply ‘a homogeneous music culture in a monolithic slab of time’ (p. xii). Nevertheless, two of these terms are still commonly found in historical surveys, that is, Middle Ages and Renaissance, to which volume two and three of the series are devoted. Their choice has been justified by the general editors due to the lack of viable alternatives for the former, and ‘as an invitation to rethink what exactly we have in mind for these periods, or indeed to reclaim these terms’ (p. xii). However, one is left wondering if perhaps it would have been useful to spend a few more words on these terms, considering that, at least for the Renaissance – which is the subject of the volume reviewed here – scholars have long questioned its legitimacy in the history of music.

Already in 1990 Jessie Ann Owens investigated the use of the term in music historiography, inviting scholars to challenge the dominant perceptions of the Renaissance as a historical period.¹⁰ Several alternative terms have been proposed since then, ranging from ‘late medieval/early modern’, either singly or together, through new terms – for example, ‘Age of Discovery’,¹¹ reflecting the new changing geography of the period which deeply shaped societies – to refuting terminology related to periodisation altogether.¹² The concept of Renaissance has also been widely discussed and contested outside of musicological scholarship.¹³ Providing an overview of a decades-long debate would go beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to recall here that the positions go from those staunchly opposed to the term to those embracing it and proposing its application to global history. Various publications in the Blooms-

10 Jessie Ann Owens, ‘Music Historiography and the Definition of “Renaissance”’, *Notes* 47 (1990) no. 2, pp. 305–330, doi: 10.2307/941953. A critique of the term ‘medieval’ for music history, with interesting reflections also on ‘Renaissance’, appears in Reinhard Strohm, “‘Medieval Music’ or ‘Early European Music’?”, in: *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, eds. Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly, Cambridge 2018, pp. 1177–1200.

11 Allan W. Atlas, *Renaissance Music. Music in Western Europe, 1400–1600*, New York 1998, p. 702.

12 See for example two volumes in the series *The Cambridge History of Music: The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-century Music*, eds. Anna Maria Busse Berger and Jesse Rodin, Cambridge 2015, and *The Cambridge History of Sixteenth-century Music*, eds. Iain Fenlon and Richard Wistreich, Cambridge 2019.

13 Among others, see William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance*, Malden, MA 2011; Marlisa den Hartog, ‘Why We Need to Lose “the Renaissance” as a Means of Periodization’, *Historisch Tijdschrift Groniek* 206/207 (2015), pp. 91–102; Jacques Le Goff, *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?*, Paris 2014. See also the stimulating reflections in Zrinka Stahuljak, ‘How Early Before it is Too Late? “Medieval” Periodization, Epistemic Change, and the Institution’, *Viator* 54 (2023) no. 2, pp. 1–24.

bury Cultural History series reflect the multiplicity of options, adopting different solutions in the titles of volumes devoted to the period ranging between the fifteenth century and the seventeenth century.¹⁴

In the introduction to the volume, titled ‘Mobilizing Music’ (pp. 1–37), the editors Brooks and Freedman argue that ‘music is a relational practice’ and that ‘not only scores and texts, but also images, objects, and spaces can reveal something about the fleeting presence of music in early modern Europe’ (p. 2). Thus, the main questions driving the volume are what purpose music served for Europeans between 1400 and 1650, and how they used it to define their place in the world. These are answered through the lens of mobility, which is identified as a ‘significant feature of the expansion of European culture’ (p. 37). According to the editors, music plays a significant role in shaping a European identity. But what is the geographical conception of Europe adopted here? Already in the first pages, it seems that the editors adopt a particularly narrow definition of Western music, one that is limited exclusively to certain areas of Europe. This is most evident in the list of places mentioned at the beginning of the introduction: Cambrai, Ferrara, Nuremberg, Basel, Antwerp, Venice, as well as the Iberian Peninsula. This perspective undoubtedly poses a limitation, as a view on Western music produced outside of Europe would have been quite welcome; even within Europe, the places mentioned are the usual suspects. The readership of *Muzyka*, traditionally interested also in Central Europe, will also unfortunately note that its borders seem to be limited exclusively to the German-speaking area. It is indeed unfortunate that past criticisms directed at other initiatives aimed at mapping the history of music in the late medieval and early modern periods – particularly those concerning overcoming the traditional centres of musical production and consumption – have gone unheeded.¹⁵

In the introduction, Brooks and Freedman identify several recurring trends across the various themes explored in the volume. One of them is the relationship between knowing and making music. In examining the tension created by theory and practice, Brooks and Freedman briefly trace how music has been conceived by various theorists over the 250 years covered in the volume. They mention, as an example, Monteverdi as a promoter of a ‘novel approach to musical harmony’ (p. 6) in opposition to the theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi. Although they acknowledge that the situation is far more complex, one wonders if they could have used a different example to explain how music often departed from theorists’ prescriptions, considering also

14 Three examples deviating from the standard ‘A Cultural History of ... in the Renaissance’ are: *A Cultural History of Race in the Renaissance and Early Modern Age*, eds. Kimberly Ann Coles and Dorothy Kim, New York 2023; *A Cultural History of Genocide in the Early Modern World*, ed. Igor Pérez Tostado, New York 2023; *A Cultural History of Furniture in the Age of Exploration*, eds. Christina M. Anderson and Elizabeth A. Carroll, New York 2024.

15 Tim Shephard, ‘Centres and Peripheries of 15th-century Music’, *Early Music* 44 (2016) no. 3, pp. 475–479.

the encouragement of Irving and Rehding to depart from traditional musicological practices surrounding the ‘genius composer’ and the ‘stories of continual progress’. Religion is another element of continuity throughout the volume, particularly in examining the role of music within a confessional landscape that gradually diverges from the dominant Catholicism of the Middle Ages, witnessing not only religious wars within Europe but also continuous and new encounters with other faiths. Finally, the editors consider as a recurring trend the material and spatial dimensions of music, which allow for the use of diverse and novel sources of evidence. As to the former, they also highlight a particular element that appears to define the cultural history of music during this period, and which will recur in nearly every chapter of the volume: the advent of music printing. Discussing this, Brooks and Freedman recognise one of the main shortcomings of musicological scholarship, that is, approaching music books ‘through a process of bibliographical abstraction’ (p. 28). It is undeniable that musicologists have in the past – and often still do today – tended to prioritise the content of music books, while almost entirely ignoring the physical aspects of the books themselves. A quick glance at various cataloguing initiatives reveals a dominating focus on inventories of manuscripts and prints, often overlooking their physical descriptions and omitting crucial information about their material features. Moving to the geography of music, Brooks and Freedman note that despite internal conflicts and dissensions, it is precisely during this period that Europeans begin to conceive of themselves as such and to view the continent as a culturally coherent entity.

Kirsten Gibson authors the first chapter, devoted to Society, and titled ‘Music and Musicians in the Renaissance Social Order’ (pp. 39–63), which is investigated from three perspectives: professional musicians, amateur musicians, and music on all levels of society. Regarding professional musicians, the main question Gibson asks is ‘where did professional musicians fit in the social order?’ (p. 44). Musicians were part of a highly hierarchical social order, and they stand on various levels according to their employment as well as their skills. Evoking Boethius, who placed music among mathematical subjects, Gibson reminds the readers that the social standing of musicians could be enhanced by this perception of music as being akin to a science, and that those with a university education attained a much higher status. Particularly welcome is Gibson’s discussion on the status of women as musicians and composers, often absent from music historiography. The geography of women as musicians in Europe is highly diverse, ranging from England, where they were not allowed to enter the profession, to Italy, where many women became famous as singers, performers and composers. However, this issue would have merited more space, as it would have been interesting to learn about the status of women in other areas, and how representative Italy and England are as regards the status of women as musicians and composers. Women are also mentioned in the part devoted to amateur musicians; in

particular aristocratic women who received a musical education in convents, as well as singing nuns.

Talking about amateur musicians, Gibson focusses mainly on nobles who received some sort of musical education. The ownership of music books is also identified as an important feature of society, and one that pervaded not just the aristocracy but also the bourgeoisie, as well as intellectuals and institutions such as universities. In the final part of the chapter, Renaissance England is used as a case study, in line with the author's specialisation, in order to show how vernacular music permeated society and shaped identities. Gibson discusses here broadside ballads and metrical psalms, which could be considered popular but were in fact consumed across various levels of society; thus 'they simultaneously reveal the complexities of defining the popular' (p. 58). Gibson argues that, despite their consumption among people belonging to different social and cultural milieux, these genres reflected social differences between elites and non-elites.

In the second chapter, on Philosophies, Melinda Latour authors a contribution ('Skepticism and the Crisis of Musical Knowledge', pp. 65–89) aimed at exploring how music developed as a way of knowing, balanced between rational and embodied knowledge. Latour examines different theoretical materials, ranging from Sextus Empiricus to Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon, as well as literary works and religious debates on folly that permeated the cultural history of the period. The result is a dense discussion concerning the philosophical conception of music as a tool for knowledge. The role of global exploration and colonialism is recognised as instrumental to a shift in the way knowledge was conceived and the revival of Skepticism. Interestingly, Latour – elaborating on the works of David Irving – argues that European polyphony, despite the difficulty in understand its texts, can be considered a soundtrack of power, as it became 'the perfect cultural agent to promote colonial hegemony' (p. 87). Overall, the impression is that Latour's contribution, to be fully appreciated and understood, requires prior knowledge of at least the philosophical debates of the period, which can at times make it challenging for a reader unfamiliar with the subject.

The life of a Renaissance ruler from their accession to their death is at the centre of the third chapter, devoted to Politics and titled 'Staging Power', by Vincenzo Borghetti and Tim Shephard (pp. 91–120). They argue that politics is a term that lends itself to various interpretations, ranging from state governance to social interactions on the local level, and that power is an element that they share. In this context, Borghetti and Shephard highlight how music was deeply involved in power dynamics and acted as a 'performative mode' through which a regime presented itself. To showcase this, Borghetti and Shephard analyse a few instances of these 'musical theaters of power', like two paintings by Peter Paul Rubens representing the accession of Maria de' Medici and her education. Both images make use of

musical elements, demonstrating the importance of music in establishing Maria's role as queen of France. An account of princely power in the Renaissance cannot overlook one of its most splendid courts, that is, the court of the Burgundian dukes, and Borghetti and Shephard are no exception. Discussing one of the most important manuscripts for the polyphonic tradition of *L'homme armé* works – that is, Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, Ms. VI.E.40 – they detail how the gift economy was an integral part of political networking in the late medieval and early modern period. The discussion of festival books is perhaps the most valuable part of Borghetti and Shephard's analysis. Too often overlooked, these booklets are of fundamental importance to cultural history, as they help us understand the role of music in many celebrations and rituals that were integral to court and city life.

The chapter about Exchange ('Conduits, Objects, and Earwitnesses', pp. 121–144), by Evan A. Maccarthy, is perhaps the one that best embodies recent historiographical trends investigating the mobility of music and musicians. This chapter is dense with methodological considerations, making it valuable reading for those approaching the phenomenon. Maccarthy argues that measuring exchange in music is not a straightforward operation, as it can happen in many ways concerning performance, material culture and people. Similarly difficult is establishing the power dynamics behind those exchanges. Most importantly, Maccarthy invites us to reflect on 'the relationship between human agency and musical artefact in the context of migrations' (p. 123). Although encounters with non-European cultures are of great importance, given that this is the period of the great geographical discoveries, it is commendable that Maccarthy does not limit himself to this topic but also acknowledges that musical exchanges and encounters between different cultures were occurring within Europe as well – something often oversimplified into a narrative of a single international style. The paragraph on mobility and the migrations of musicians presents interesting remarks regarding how they were often defined by their geographical provenance, a feature worthy of a more in-depth analysis and comparison with other arts. Maccarthy identifies patterns of migration, focussing on the importance of the Italian peninsula. The chapter concludes with a discussion on 'travel and encounter with musical difference', a topic at the forefront of historical musicology, given the need to move beyond an overly Eurocentric tradition. Here, Maccarthy focusses attention on the numerous travelogues and chronicles detailing how Europeans perceived the musical cultures of other people; however, one would have appreciated a more organic discussion of how cultural – and not just musical – stereotypes shaped European identities.

Daniele V. Filippi is responsible for the chapter 'Music Among the Challenges of Early Modernity', devoted to Education (pp. 145–170). Here, Filippi delineates the role of music in three challenges that education faced during the period 1400–1650: the shift from scholasticism to humanism, the pursuit of universalisation, and

the redefining of identities in the landscape of the religious reformations and other events that deeply impacted European societies. Serving as a common thread in the discussion is the role played in the European educational system by the Jesuits, whom Filippi identifies as one of the main driving forces of the era in both musical and general education. A particular strength of this chapter lies in its geographically broad overview of education, which is not limited to the usual locations (Italy, the Low Countries, France, etc.), but finally also addresses places that have traditionally been marginalized in musicological scholarship. Filippi's perspective also extends beyond the European continent, illustrating how musical education played a fundamental role during the colonial era, particularly in the spread of Christian doctrine. Equally important is Filippi's focus on the education of women; here, too, the significant role played by convents is highlighted.

Particularly challenging is Remi Chiu's task of addressing Popular Culture in the sixth chapter ('Three Cases and Some Observations', pp. 171–194). As Chiu notes, the concept of popular culture is difficult to define, especially in the period 1400–1650. Chiu's approach is to examine the common ground between the people and the elite, that is, to 'abandon the assignment of particular cultural forms of "popular" and "non-popular," and to expose instead the continuities across oppositions' (p. 173). In describing popular music culture, Chiu follows Peter Burke's asymmetrical model, which posits the existence of two cultures: one shared between the elite and non-elite, and another reserved exclusively for the elite. The two are not mutually exclusive but often interact with each other, and it is not always a straightforward operation to clearly distinguish between them. This is well illustrated by Chiu in the three case studies, respectively devoted to the rite of the Mass, the madrigal, and Venetian opera. Chiu highlights the musical dimension of the Mass as one of the essential elements of the rite, serving as a mediator of the liturgy and holding particular significance for the lay community. The music printing industry is also identified as an element that contributes to the 'popularisation' of music; this is seen through the first book of madrigals by Jacques Arcadelt, which gained great popularity, being published in Italy by 25 different printers. Finally, Chiu addresses the phenomenon of Venetian opera, perhaps the closest to a modern concept of popular music, as it was primarily a commercial enterprise, in contrast to court opera, which followed very different dynamics. Here, Chiu highlights how, for the first time, the audience was composed of both elite and non-elite members, who found themselves consuming the same performance in the same place. Nonetheless, Chiu warns against identifying Venetian opera as a popular product *tout court*, emphasizing the need to consider who the stakeholders were for each individual production and theater in these commercial ventures.

The seventh chapter, authored by Jeanice Brooks, one of the book's editors, and titled 'Expression, Emotion, and Identity' (pp. 195–218), is dedicated to Performance.

The words that make up the title are three facets of performance that, according to Brooks, best help one to understand the musical culture of early modern Europe. They correspond respectively to modes of performance, emotions expressed, and a means of shaping identity. The subject is highly controversial and one to which many musicologists and performers have contributed. Brooks's perspective is quite radical, asserting that 'what we hear in the performance of early modern repertoires today is inevitably partly or even entirely guesswork' (p. 197), considering also that compared to the sheer amount of music that reached us, we received very little information on how to perform it. The period 1400–1650 witnessed a true explosion of treatises on performance, and, for the first time, composers themselves began to include specific information regarding the execution of their works in their publications. Brooks also identifies this period as the one in which virtuoso musicians came to the fore. Their virtuosity lay not only in their technical abilities but also, and especially, in their capacity to convey emotions to the listener, a notion that has recently been explored by many musicologists and cultural historians. The most interesting part of the chapter, however, is the one dedicated to the performance of identity. It was in the early modern period that performance explicitly focused on the construction of identity. Brooks cites the cases of Tarquina Molza and Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, two singers whose voices and performance abilities conveyed ideals of femininity and masculinity, respectively, to their listeners. However, a reference to queer identities and their performance would have been appreciated, especially considering the substantial body of work on the topic that has emerged in recent years.¹⁶

The eighth and last chapter, 'Music, Art, and Technē in the Renaissance' (pp. 219–243), is devoted to Technologies, and is authored by the other editor, Richard Freedman. Freedman equates technology with the artisan's craft, and an important point of inquiry throughout the chapter is the dichotomy of music, considered as both an *ars* ('a way of doing things') and a *scientia* ('a form of knowledge'). Freedman also claims that technology as we understand it today did not exist in the period ranging from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, defining technology in its modern meaning as either 'something distinct from nature, or something identified exclusively with a scientific approaches [*sic*] to knowledge' (p. 222). Freedman discusses two developments of notation identified as a technology: the use of graphic symbols to measure musical time and the writing down of specific executive practices that were previously left to oral tradition. For the former, Freedman acknowledges that the mensural system originated in the centuries prior to the period covered by the book, but argues that it is in this period that it was consolidated. It is difficult,

16 One eminent example is that of the *castrati*, as discussed, among others, by Emily Wilbourne, 'The Queer History of the Castrato', in: *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, eds. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, Oxford 2018, pp. 441–454.

however, to agree with the assertion that musicians ‘could not sing what they could not encode in graphical form’ (p. 224), which seems to overlook the possibility of improvisatory practices that went beyond the confines of the system in place. As to the latter, Freedman identifies the development of printing as an engine for technological innovation, taking as example the infamous topic of text underlay, that is, the coordination between text and music. Here, however, it is hard to accept Freedman’s claim that it was thanks to printing that text underlay ‘became instead part of the compositional (or at least editorial) process’ (p. 228), and that previously ‘composers did not care about such variability’ (pp. 227–228). Recent literature on texting has in fact argued the opposite, demonstrating that composers did care about texting but most likely had different priorities than us when it came to aligning carefully the syllables to the notes.¹⁷

In general, the book is structured in a fairly symmetrical manner: each chapter presents a brief introduction, usually followed by two or three case studies, and a short conclusion summarizing the key elements discussed. Numerous colour images are included, which enrich the narrative and help even the less familiar reader to delve into the musical cultures of the late Middle Ages and early modernity. References are cited within the text using the name-year system, which unfortunately forces readers to constantly flip back and forth between the chapters and the bibliography at the end of the volume. Footnotes are entirely absent, which detracts from the book: not only would they have allowed for a more convenient and familiar referencing system for readers of musicological and historical literature, but they would also have provided space for further insights and discussions that, while diverging from the main narrative, would have been equally important for understanding the nuances of a cultural history of music. However, both the referencing system and the absence of footnotes seem to be restrictions imposed by publisher, as one can see in other volumes of the Cultural History series. Musical examples and any form of notation are also missing from the book, aside from a few images. This points to one of the major questions regarding the volume; namely, the intended readership.

Whether the volume is intended for students or academics, for those specialised in musicology or cultural history, or for a more general audience interested in music or history, remains unclear. The absence of footnotes and the relatively slim format of the volume (which is under 300 pages) seem to suggest an audience beyond just

17 Cf. among others: Edward Wickham, ‘Realization and Recreation: Texting Issues in Early Renaissance Polyphony’, *Journal of the Alamire Foundation* 3 (2011) no. 1, pp. 147–166, doi: 10.1484/J.JAF.1.102197; Thomas Schmidt, ‘Making Polyphonic Books in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries’, in: *The Production and Reading of Music Sources: Mise-en-page in Manuscripts and Printed Books Containing Polyphonic Music, 1480–1530*, eds. Thomas Schmidt and Christian T. Leitmeir, Turnhout 2018, pp. 3–100, esp. 61–66 and 84–89; Nicolò Ferrari, ‘Texting Polyphonic Settings of the Ordinary of the Mass in the Late Fifteenth Century’, *Journal of the Alamire Foundation* 15 (2023) no. 2, pp. 225–242, doi: 10.1484/J.JAF.5.135282.

scholars or specialists. However, the occasionally highly specific content, which requires at least a basic understanding of music history, seems to target a different audience more versed in historical musicology.

Writing a history of music, whether cultural or otherwise, is never a straightforward task; in fact, it is undoubtedly one of the most complex challenges a musicologist can face. Inevitably, choices must be made regarding what to include and what to omit, the chronological and geographical scope, the historiographical approach to be taken, and so forth. A history is also the product of the historical and cultural context in which it is written, shaped by broader theoretical trends that inform its reflections, and – naturally – by the individuals who write it. For these reasons, and considering the cultural approach taken here, the broader historiographical context of both musicology and cultural history must be taken into account when forming an assessment of this book. The objectives outlined by the general editors, Irving and Rehding, were undoubtedly ambitious, and even though some of them do not seem to have been fully achieved, this should not detract from the overall opinion of the book. The innovative approach of *A Cultural History of Western Music*, which favours a thematic history over the traditional (geo)chronological structure, represents an added value of this book. Many of the chapters serve as excellent introductions to the study of music within its historical and cultural context, particularly Filippi's chapter on education and Chiu's on popular music. However, one should note that any engagement with cultural history theories is almost entirely absent, as evidenced by the bibliography, which is composed almost exclusively of musicological literature, with only a few notable exceptions. The general impression here is that the opportunity, articulated by Jane Fulcher more than a decade ago, to establish a closer relationship between musicology and history, ensuring that musicologists remain abreast of recent trends in cultural history, has been missed. Given the lack of clarity regarding the intended audience for this book, readers will be more or less satisfied depending on whether they find what they are looking for or not.

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