

Plainsong and Medieval Music Society Annual Conference

Ave/Eva: Text, Music and Gender in the Middle Ages

Saturday 26 April 2008

Abstracts

Elizabeth Eva Leach (Royal Holloway): Machaut's masculinity

In the *Prologue* to his works, Guillaume de Machaut promises the god of Love to write in praise of ladies. While there are certainly many laudatory poems in his output, his works also praise and dispraise women to construct various medieval masculinities, notably those of cleric, knight, lover, and poet. The last of these typically uses the ostensible praise of ladies as a thinly veiled means of competition with other male poets. The culminating balade in praise of Toute Belle in the *Voir dit* is an example of this that is more than usually realistic, since Machaut sets one of his own poems together with that of one of his fellow canons at Reims .

Yolanda Plumley (University of Exeter): Machaut meets his Mates: Masculine Rivalries and Poetic Exchange in the *Voir Dit* and *Loange des Dames*

Recent discussion of the literary exchange between Guillaume and the enigmatic T. Paien in the *Voir dit* sees this case as betraying an all-male complicity that forms part of the poet-lover's strategy to silence his lady love. Is this case best understood as an example of male-bonding with anti-feminist intent? Or, rather, are we witness here to male rivalry expressed through mutual flexing of poetic biceps? In this paper, I shall reassess this case, as well as that one that links Machaut with his contemporary, Jean de le Mote, and explore how a study of the broader context of formalised literary exchanges at this time can enlighten our understanding of such relationships and their motivations.

Lisa Colton (University of Huddersfield): Princess, Abbess, Archbishop, Virgin: The cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins in medieval York

This paper will examine the composition of a late medieval sequence in honour of St Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins within the context of the cult and its promoters. As a strong-willed virgin martyr, St Ursula offered distinctive possibilities, because allegory could be used within new liturgical materials in order to comment upon contemporary events and issues. The 'personal' significance of St Ursula for Hildegard von Bingen has already been explored in the literature. In contrast, the importance of St Ursula's cult in late medieval England has not yet been fully investigated. One votive item, the sequence *Scropulosa*, is peculiar to the York Use. This paper will consider evidence that

the text was written by Archbishop of York Richard Scrope (d. 1405) as part of his campaign to raise the prominence of St Ursula's feast. In addition, it will explore the possible significance of this item in the diocese of York and in the context of the failed canonisation of Scrope himself in the fifteenth century.

Paula Higgins (University of Nottingham): Josquin and the Dormouse: Aesthetic excess, masculinity and homoeroticism in the reception of *Planxit autem David*

Heinrich Glarean introduced his discussion of the opening of Josquin's motet *Planxit autem David* with the famous line from Horace's *Ars poetica* 'The mountains are in labor, but a ridiculous mouse will be born'. This citation, together with Glarean's ensuing disclaimer--'nothing in this piece is unworthy of the composer'--has long been adduced as evidence of the Swiss humanist's doubts as to Josquin's authorship. While Glarean's somewhat defensive framing of the discussion appears to function as a pre-emptive strike in anticipation of harsh criticism, its presumed correlation with the motet's inauthenticity remains open to interpretation.

This paper aims to map the discourses of aesthetic excess that have long characterized the reception history of the motet and to demonstrate their indebtedness to Glarean's ostensible and insufficiently understood opprobrium of Josquin's love of musical ostentation, transgression, and novelty. I propose a more nuanced reading of portions of Glarean's original Latin text that focuses on the repeated use of the adjective 'lasciviens' which, as I have discussed elsewhere, was already freighted with explicitly homoerotic meaning in medieval music theoretical and philosophical discourse about the performance of Notre Dame polyphony. I explore the complex history of the David and Jonathan story with respect to scholarly interpretations of its original Hebrew text, as well as its treatment in subsequent medieval and renaissance biblical exegesis, philosophy, and the visual arts. I draw attention to specific interventions into the motet's reception history which may encode preoccupations with masculinity and/or resistance to homoeroticism. Such discursive strategies of aesthetic 'decontamination', I suggest, fuelled the process by which the rhetorical excess and extravagance once deemed paradigmatic of Josquin's musical style, and of this motet in particular, transmogrify over time into the disqualifying rhetoric of aesthetic devaluation and canonic disattribution. Finally, I situate the writing of the motet ca 1500 within the historical context of homoeroticism in Renaissance Florence, the provenance of its earliest manuscript source, and coeval developments in the history of art, including the completion of Michelangelo's *David*.

Anna Maria Friman (University of York, Trio Mediaeval): Modern performance of medieval music: female voices

Successful thinking performers do not exist in a vacuum: they have to relate to

what is expected from them. There is an assumption among consumers of medieval music that the plethora of recordings available to us on CD has an authority based on research. This paper is based on personal interview material and investigates the communication and collaboration between performers and musicologists of medieval music. The experience of a number of female performers of medieval music is discussed and conclusions drawn about how they engage with performance related issues such as vocal production and the problem of having to justify a sound for which there may be very little definitive evidence.

Bonnie Blackburn (Oxford University): To be or not to be flat: The ambiguous gender of b

Over the course of his writings, Guido d'Arezzo changed his mind about the note B flat, first accepting it, then calling it a licence that would not have pleased Father Gregory, and finally rejecting it altogether: his solmization melody *Ut queant laxis* contains no b at all. Up to the time of the *Dialogus de musica*, pre-dating Guido by only thirty years or so, the note B flat (till then called *nete synemmenon*) had been perfectly acceptable. What caused Guido to change his mind? And what motivated the Cistercian reformers a century later to attempt to root B flat out of chant? The answer seems to lie in the change from Greek note names to alphabetic letters, which were at first only labels on instruments, not yet pitches. Once it was realized that 'b' had more than one sound, it had to be divided: the hard b was stable, characterized as masculine; the soft b was irregular and mobile, characterized as feminine. The stigmatization of B flat, prevalent throughout the Middle Ages, posed very real dilemmas for music theory and music.

David Maw (Oxford University): The effeminacy of the *Ars nova*

In the seventh book of *Speculum musicae*, Jacques de Liège contrasts the simple, masculine qualities of the old style with the "lasciviousness" (*musica lasciva*, an expression that may be broader in meaning than the modern word) of the new. The language of this contrast evokes his paraphrase (borrowed from Boethius) of Plato's *Republic* in the first book of the treatise, in which simple, masculine qualities are endorsed over effeminate ones. At that point in the treatise, "lasciviousness" is associated with the latter. Jacques de Liège invokes a discourse of effeminacy in relation to his criticism of music in the new style. The paper will address the questions what Jacques means by this discourse and how far it corresponds to specific features in the musical practice of the *Ars nova*.