

REVIEWS

Trovatore amante spia: Otto secoli di cronache intorno al celebre favorito che salvò Re Riccardo. By Davide Daolmi. pp. viii + 381. (Libreria Musicale Italiana, Lucca, 2015. €35. ISBN 978-8870967982.)

In recent years, scholars gravitating around the field of medievalism have produced a wealth of publications dedicated to the conflict between two seemingly distinct Middle Ages. On the one hand, the “found” Middle Ages—as they have recently been defined by Louise D’Arcens—are studied and interpreted through the material objects of the medieval past that have survived until our time (‘Introduction: Medievalism, Scope and Complexity’, in Louise D’Arcens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge, 2016), 1–13). On the other, the “made” Middle Ages are centred on artefacts, rituals, and performances that originated after the Middle Ages themselves, and whose overall effect is to express ‘ideas of the “medieval” as a conceptual rather than a historical category’. However, the solidity of this dichotomy has long been questioned, in music studies as elsewhere. As the work of Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and John Haines has already demonstrated, because of the necessarily limited extent of the available evidence, to write about the protagonists and the performance-related aspects of medieval music—and, perhaps, of any music—is always more about creative reconstruction than establishing historical truth (Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music: Scholarship, Ideology, Performance* (Cambridge, 2002), John Haines, *Eight Centuries of Troubadours and Trouvères: The Changing Identity of Medieval Music* (Cambridge, 2005)). In his book *Trovatore amante spia*, Davide Daolmi takes this line of thought a step further. Not only is invention inevitable, he claims, but any attempt to live without it means to give up on our collective memory of the past. ‘We have been forced to choose between the Middle Ages and fantasy—even more so in a milieu in which research is very specialized and fiction is often naïf. The result [is] that we schizophrenically detest one to love the other, depending on one’s own [choice]. And the cut of that umbilical cord that

used to connect us to yesterday has killed our memory’ (p. 196).

Daolmi builds his argument on an example ‘stubbornly chased’ over eight centuries—along with several other cases stemming from the leading narrative discourse, including that of the Chastelain de Couci, a trouvère to whom a full chapter is devoted (pp. 115–55). His primary example is Blondel de Nesle, a legendary trouvère whose biography and musical production have been the subject of dedicated dictionary articles and critical editions, many of them omitting the crucial detail that Blondel never existed. ‘We have invented him little by little along the centuries, perhaps as a pastime or out of boredom, until all of us, including the most erudite scholars, have forgotten that it was just a joke’ (back cover). Daolmi reconstructs this story from its earliest source, a manuscript from c.1260 available in a dozen existing testimonies compiled over three hundred years, the most ancient of which is currently held by the British Library (Add. 11753). That source, a French *récit* attributed to an anonymous ‘Minstrel of Reims’, tells the story of the rescue of Richard I, the Lionheart, by his trusty minstrel Blondel (‘Blondiaus’ in the sources). The king, who had been imprisoned in 1193 by Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI on his way back from the Third Crusade, was finally found by Blondel after he heard Richard singing from his prison tower a chanson that the two had composed together.

This anecdote is no more than a fictional addition to the historical episode of the capture and subsequent ransom of King Richard, which could only be paid by confiscating from the clergy and laymen of England a good share of the value of their property—the result of this was ‘widespread discontent’ and later, the popular success of another myth, that of Robin Hood (p. 23). In the following centuries, however, this story, along with the name of Blondel, would enjoy a long-lasting popularity. First, two sources of the thirteenth century, including the well-known *Chansonnier du Roi* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 844) attributed whole groups of chansons to Blondel, mainly by adding new text including

the name of Richard's trouvère to that of pre-existing chansons that had already been circulating anonymously (pp. 236–8). At the end of the same century, Blondel—whose name may have originally referred simply to ‘a young man with fair hair, that is the typical image of the courtly lover’—is legitimized via his association with the noble stock of the Nesles. Daolmi suggests that the true reason behind this affiliation was the fame surrounding the iconic (though no longer standing) Tour adjacent to the Parisian residence of the Nesle family, regarded in the thirteenth century as one of the most ‘famous and picturesque towers of Paris’ (p. 242). One poetically talented member of that family, Jehan I de Nesle, participated in the crusade on King Richard's side. When the medieval scholar Claude Fauchet rediscovered the story of Blondel in 1581, he carefully distinguished between the author of the many chansons attributed to Blondel—who may have been Jehan I, according to some later scholars—and the legendary rescuer of King Richard (pp. 273–4). However, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, one of the earliest writers responsible for the emergence of the new genre of the fairy tale in France, conflated the two figures in the preface to *La Tour tenebreuse*, a volume she published in 1705 as a transcription of an autobiographical chronicle allegedly written by King Richard himself (pp. 275, 277, 280–1).

Blondel achieved recognition among music scholars only in the final decades of the eighteenth century. In 1780, the composer and musicologist Jean-Benjamin de La Borde included in the appendix to his *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* the transcription of three chansons attributed to Blondel, set to music of his own invention (pp. 316–18). Five years later, André Grétry was inspired by one of the chansons published by La Borde for the refrain of the crusade song *Que le sultan Saladin*, included in his opéra-comique *Richard Coeur de Lion* (pp. 327–8). In the following century, the rediscovery of the medieval *récit* by the Minstrel of Reims reinvigorated scholarly interest around the figure of Blondel (pp. 37–53). But as a new hypothesis suggesting King Richard's homosexuality began to circulate around the middle of the century, the myth of Blondel gradually fell out of popular favour (p. 343).

The most recent incarnations of that story, briefly recollected by the author in the last chapter—among them, the novels *A Search for the King* (1950) and *The Lute Player* (1951), by Gore Vidal and Nora Lofts respectively, and the unsuccessful musical *Blondel* (1983) by Tim Rice and Stephen Oliver—are quite distinct

from the increasingly self-referential scholarly research whose quest for the ‘uncorrupted source’ can only produce the ‘blurred profile of somebody who is one, no one and one hundred thousand’ (p. 365). Daolmi suggests as a possible antidote to this obsession that musical philology should conceive of a text ‘as the ideas that it generates’ as it passes down from generation to generation, rather than as something to be reconstructed in its hypothetical original form (pp. 34–5). The philological interest of the author should not surprise, as Daolmi, although primarily active as a medievalist, has also recently published critical editions of works by Cavalli, Rossini, and Zingarelli.

By inscribing himself into the long history of the reception of Blondel, Daolmi is aware of not only contributing to the story of the trouvère with a new episode, but also of ‘interfer[ing] with those who preceded him’, once more coming to a compromise with the supposed ‘original product’ (p. 34). To be sure, the argument that history writing, far from producing objective accounts of the past, is always a form of politically charged storytelling is hardly a new idea in the Humanities. After all, historians such as Hayden White, in turn influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, argued this several decades ago. Yet, Daolmi exercises the creative agency of the author by explicitly—and polemically—eschewing every possible convention of scholarly writing. No opening introduction illustrates the overall purpose and layout of the volume, and the readers—or, better, those patient enough to keep reading—are left to figure all of this out by themselves, until some two hundred pages in (pp. 195–201) some sort of explanation suddenly appears. A bibliography is absent, and footnotes are avoided too, replaced by countless captioned images, and detailed tables and schemes that baroquely adorn the volume. Unfortunately, Daolmi laments, footnotes have become a tool to grant an unattainable status of scientific legitimacy to academic publications in the Humanities. Getting rid of footnotes becomes a political act, as it forces Daolmi—as every good Gramscian organic intellectual would do—to direct his energies towards what matters the most to him: a more direct engagement of the reader with the ideas that gradually emerge. A similar strategy is in play in the overall layout of the book. Although the volume is divided into four sections, the story of Blondel permeates all of them and is interwoven with many other narrative lines and interrupted at every turn by digressions and even textbook-like explanatory boxes on

the most disparate topics, from Romantic novels to the Holy Grail.

Trovatore amante spia is a book that encourages slow-paced contemplation in a frenetic academic world whose apparatuses and conventions (which Daolmi avoids) allow one to absorb as much information as possible in the least amount of time. To those who are not used to reading through dense chapters to extrapolate what they need, repeatedly stumbling into the many detours will appear as an unnecessary nuisance. (And to them, the summary I provided above, complete with page numbers, can hopefully offer some guidance.) At its best, however, Daolmi's book, with its brilliant, accessible prose, is a declaration of faith in the usefulness and importance of the Humanities, an act of love for a kind of knowledge that, like life itself, has to be experienced as an 'endless discourse, beyond any possibility. Like a shark that, in order to breathe, cannot stop swimming' (p. 363).

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Tactus, Mensuration and Rhythm in Renaissance Music.

By Ruth I. DeFord. pp. xii + 504. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2015. £80. ISBN 978-1-107-06472-0)

The scope of this book is very large indeed: the theory and practice of musical rhythm and notation over the two centuries of the 'Renaissance', a period in which musical style changed dramatically. It covers terrain last traversed in J. A. Bank's *Tactus, Tempo and Notation from the 13th to the 17th Centuries* (Amsterdam, 1972), but treats the topic with considerably more subtlety and depth. While the purpose of Bank's analyses seemed principally to be to establish correct performance tempos, DeFord wants to understand how the mensural system was employed by composers to create musical structures and affective settings for text. In the first part of the book, labelled 'theory', DeFord gives us the tools to analyse the rhythmic dimension of the music, and in the second, 'practice', she deploys these tools in a series of case studies ranging from Du Fay's songs of the earlier fifteenth century, to cyclic Mass Ordinary settings of the high Renaissance, to the popular song and dance forms of the later sixteenth century, showing the beauty of the mensural system at play.

The 'theory' portion of the book unfolds in seven chapters that combine a discussion of the writings of the most important theorists over the two centuries with DeFord's own careful analysis of difficult terms and concepts. Two short initial chapters survey the theorists under discussion (including a useful table on pp. 10–14) and offer a primer on the mensural system for the uninitiated. Chapter 3, 'Definitions and Descriptions of *Tactus*', begins the work of careful philology that is one of the book's most outstanding features. The nuance with which DeFord approaches her subject is put into relief if we compare her definition of 'tactus' with that of Bank in 1972. Bank wrote that *tactus* is 'the twofold down-up motion of the hand or a baton made by the directing cantor' (p. 7). DeFord's definition of *tactus* (pp. 51–2), on the other hand, parses it into six inter-related aspects of musical time, of which only the first corresponds to the physical beating that Bank refers to. *Tactus* as physical motion that articulates a time unit is given the name 'performance *tactus*', to distinguish it from two other meanings of *tactus* that play an important role in organizing musical time: 'compositional *tactus*', discerned from the rate of contrapuntal rhythm and dissonance treatment of a given musical work; and 'theoretical *tactus*', the unit of measure that functions as timekeeper in a given mensuration. (In modern notation a crotchet in 4/4 would be the 'theoretical *tactus*' even though a performer might choose to beat minims or quavers, a choice that constitutes the 'performance *tactus*'.) In addition to these three principal uses of the term *tactus*, there are three subordinate ones: it can be taken to mean the abstract unit of time corresponding to one of these three qualities (the 'value of the *tactus*'); a time unit in the mensuration that corresponds to the performance *tactus* or the compositional *tactus* (the '*tactus*-unit'); or the absolute value of any of the three principal definitions of the *tactus* (that is, its metronome marking).

Crucially, the performance, compositional, and theoretical *tactus* are not always the same value in a given piece, so that to determine them in relation to one another in a given composition is already to discover much about its mensural character, as we learn in the analyses offered in the second part of the book. Chapter 4 sets the stage for these analyses by exploring the inter-relationship between *tactus* and musical rhythm in general. The chapter begins by describing mensural structures with a binary versus ternary *tactus*, then moves on to