

## Review Article: Early-Modern Music

**Review Number:**

804

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 1 October, 2009

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**ISBN:**

9780754663263

**Date of Publication:**

2008

**Price:**

£60.00

**Pages:**

340pp.

**Publisher:**

Ashgate

**Place of Publication:**

Farnham

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**ISBN:**

978-0-7546-6268-6

**Date of Publication:**

2008

**Price:**

£60.00

**Pages:**

274pp.

**Publisher:**

Ashgate

**Place of Publication:**

Farnham

**Reviewer:**

Peter Webster

For scholars of early modern church music, monographs are rather like the proverbial bus; one waits a decade or more for one, and then two come along together; in this case, in the same year, and in the same series. The editors of the *St Andrews Studies in Reformation History* are to be commended for publishing two substantial studies in what has hitherto been a neglected area. Both studies focus on a topic (one a book, the other an individual) which has hitherto been more referred to in passing than studied in depth. In so doing, both will significantly shift the angle from which the subjects have been viewed, filling gaps in the literature, and both may well remain for some time as the first reference for scholars on the topics concerned.

Readings of the significance of John Merbecke have shifted with the tide of opinion in the English church. Editions of his *The Book of Common Praier Noted (BCPN)* appeared in the 19th century as part of a post-Tractarian project of theological aesthetics, recovering the plainchant practice of the 'ancient' church. The work of Robin Leaver in the 1970s, by contrast, focussed on the Merbecke that was tried for heresy under the Six Articles in 1543 (mentioned in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*) and who later appeared to renounce composition as vanity and to devote himself to biblical study. Leaver's evangelical Merbecke was engaged in a Lutheran project of congregational hymnody.

Kim's project is to place Merbecke in a much wider context and so to short-circuit the Protestant-Catholic oppositions, in the light of which he has been viewed. Merbecke should instead be situated in the widest European context of humanist rhetoric. For Kim, Merbecke is an 'Anglican epitome of the Erasmian synthesis of eloquence, theology and music', the ideal 'Christian-musical orator' (p. 199). As such, the study has points to address to several fields of scholarship: to the (limited) field of Merbecke studies, narrowly defined; to scholarship on the theology of music in the Reformations, which has tended to focus on the magisterial reformers and their exposition of Scripture, to the neglect of the humanist context; and to the European story of the influence of humanism on music theory, which has tended hitherto to be written to the exclusion of England. As such, the book will be of interest to musicologists, to historians of the Reformation and to theologians with an interest in the aesthetics of music.

There is much to be heartily welcomed in the book. For musicologists, chapter three provides a useful reading of the *BCPN* as indicative of the influence of continental theories of accentuation and the relation of text and music. The insight that humanist influence needs to be taken more seriously when studying 'Protestant' or 'Catholic' theologies of music in worship is an extremely important one, since attention has often been focussed on treatments of Scripture or the fathers, and scholars such as Erasmus regarded as simply one more 'evangelical' interpreter of them. So full is Kim's examination of the context that the book in fact often threatens to break out of its confines as a study of Merbecke and to function instead as a more general survey of humanist influence on musical thought in England.

If there is any criticism to be made, it is that Kim seems somewhat to overstate the case. So concerned is the author to restore humanist influence that the book often appears to collapse the evangelical impulse into a general subset of humanist concern. For instance, for this reviewer, it is not quite enough to read the thought of Thomas Becon as motivated by a 'humanist moralistic approach to music' (p. 103). Becon was surely one of the hotter sort of Protestant, holding the church music of his day against the yardstick of scriptural and patristic testimony and finding it wanting; in the passage that Kim cites, it is the absence of a godly preaching ministry that has left cathedrals and chapels prone to 'all kind of abomination' (p. 104). Kim's approach sometimes seems to empty the reforming impulse of any motive force in its own right; concern for reform of religious music seems to be reduced to part of a broader concern for education and the right use of language.

The study is also not aided by its structure, in which the contextual material (to this reviewer) tends to repetitiveness. It has also not made the transition from thesis (University of Durham, 2005) to monograph wholly successfully: the footnotes are often considerably overloaded (page 17 has room for only six lines of text, since one note refers to no fewer than 28 works) and it is prone to over-lengthy quotation of primary sources. These points aside, Kim's study is a valuable contribution to the literature and is likely to remain a fixture in Merbecke studies for some time to come.

The Sternhold and Hopkins metrical psalms, or the Old Version as it was to become known, has had a bad press. Published as *The Whole Book of Psalmes* in the early years of Elizabeth's reign, 'Tom Sternhold's wretched prick-song for the people' had by the end of the 17th century garnered a (justified) reputation for literary fault. At the same time, through the polemical efforts of figures such as John Phillips, Richard Watson and Peter Heylyn in the mid 17th century, a not unrelated taint of Genevan disorder and popularity had attached itself to the book. Included in this polemically charged reading of the recent history of English worship was a faint but insistent suggestion of unlawfulness, since the use of metrical psalms by

congregations had at no time in been explicitly authorised in law.

In part due to this settled reputation, the book, despite its ubiquity in English worship and the colossal printed stock, has never attracted a full length academic treatment. Nicholas Temperley's account of its actual use remains after 30 years the authoritative account (1); Ian Green has more recently opened up the publishing history (2); and the texts of the *Whole Book* have been treated before as part of larger studies, notably by Rivkah Zim.(3) Beth Quitslund's admirable new study is likely to become the standard account of the making of the book and its texts.

Quitslund's study is intent on rescuing Sternhold and Hopkins from the condescension of the 17th century, and to reposition it as part of the religious history of the 16th. In doing so, she reveals a story of repeated remaking and repurposing of texts, in which the metrical psalms develop from a courtly experiment in instruction to a young king into the secret literature of refugees, and eventually to be adopted as the language of public worship. Chapter one examines the *Certayne Psalmes* of 1547–9, created by Sternhold and used in the court of Edward as a 'delightful form of instruction in godly government' (p. 20), by which a young king, mindful of the expectations placed upon him, might develop habits of mind that would in time ensure a godly commonwealth. Chapter two examines the explosion of published imitations of Sternhold in the remainder of Edward's reign; psalms that were still not yet a liturgical feature, either in intent or use, but now a published form of private instruction and devotion, whilst retaining their function as counsel for kings. Quitslund throughout the work provides sparkling readings of texts and their making, drawing out the purposeful 'misreadings' of the psalms, and the manner in which the successive waves of paraphrasing and versification were shaped by the audiences being addressed and the religious atmosphere in which the versifiers worked.

Chapters three and four deal with the marked shift in function of the psalms amongst the Marian refugee congregations in Europe, and the making of the Anglo-Genevan Psalter of 1556–60. Singing the Lord's song now in a strange land was a profoundly different experience; one which served to bind together the scattered flock, as a powerful weapon of proclamation against the Popish enemy, and as a former of character. The singing of psalms together allowed 'penitence, consolation and oppositional self-presentation' (p. 152). Quitslund vividly reconstructs the circumstances in which the versifying of psalms occurred in several of the refugee communities. The Anglo-Genevan psalter is firmly located in its context as part of an over-arching programme of constructing a godly church order. In the textual community of Geneva, Sternhold's texts were substantially rewritten to conform to evolving understandings of fidelity to the original, and of congregational participation in public worship.

As Elizabeth succeeded her sister, and hopes for further reformation were rekindled, there appeared to be an opportunity to influence the future shape of English worship. Chapters five and six deal with the role of the printer John Day in the formation of what was to be the final version of 'Sternhold & Hopkins', and their use in the Elizabethan church. The final chapter is perhaps the least original, based as it is less on readings of texts and more on the very parlous evidence for the local use of the psalms in English churches that has frustrated generations of scholars. Quitslund however rightly argues that the aesthetic objection to the psalms, common in the later 17th century, had not yet emerged by 1603, and that the imaginative association between the psalms and Puritanism was similarly weak or absent. The *Whole Book* was widely accepted due to Day's astute presentation, the support of some on the Episcopal bench and no little public enthusiasm. While not engaging with the importance of anti-Calvinism directly, the study both builds upon and strengthens readings of the Elizabethan church as dominated by what has been termed a 'Calvinist consensus.'

Overall, Quitslund's study is lucidly written and admirably concise and, apart from one typographical error in a running header, which is perforce repeated across 35 pages, it is handsomely presented. It is likely to remain central to the literature on English psalmody for many years to come.

Both authors declined to respond to this review.

## Notes

1. Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1979).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms. Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535–1601* (Cambridge, 1987).  
[Back to \(3\)](#)

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