

Leech-Wilkinson, Daniel. 2002. *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music: Scholarship, Ideology, Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by Thomas Irvine

*In Memory of Lenore Coral*

It is probable that we who suffer from the malady of history will have to suffer from the antidotes.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*

Anyone who has heard medieval music in live performance or on record in the last fifty years knows the sound that medieval music used to make: the joyful yowling of a mixed crew of instrumentalists, bowing, tooting, honking, and plucking, and—in the best performances—above it all, a single, ecstatic voice. Anyone who has listened to such music in the last twenty knows the sound it tends to make now: a blended and—again, in the best renditions—no-less-ecstatic combination of purely intoned *a cappella* voices. The former is now widely regarded to be “unhistorical”; it is a model that has been “superseded,” thanks to “progress” in historical research. *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* tells the story of how a music changed its sound because scholars re-thought its history and how a music changed its history because musicians re-thought its sound.

In this review I will begin by sketching Leech-Wilkinson’s gripping narrative of the “invention” of medieval performance practices in the early twentieth century (chapter 1), their “re-invention” in the century’s last decades (chapter 2), and his innovative and, at times, even compelling attempt in the book’s third chapter—the book’s heart—to relate issues normally seen as attendant only on performance to the concerns of musical analysis (i.e. whether late-medieval polyphony was sung by one voice accompanied by groups of instruments). In the second part of my review I will consider Leech-Wilkinson’s main critical message, laid out in the book’s fourth chapter and the epilogue that follows: that writing the history of the musical performances of the distant past is a dangerous game, even a fool’s errand, liable to ideological misuse. Part of Leech-Wilkinson’s argument hinges on the misdeeds of influential German medievalists between 1933 and 1945, and the analysis here makes for sobering reading. Nonetheless, some parts of

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Leech-Wilkinson's larger argument left me with more questions than answers. In the last part of my review, I will attempt to come to terms with some of these questions.

The critical moment in chapter 1, "The Invention of the Voices and Instruments Hypothesis," is Hugo Riemann's reassessment of the relation between voices and instruments in fourteenth and fifteenth century music, first set forth in his *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* of 1905. The problem is familiar to students of medieval music: how to perform polyphony with only one texted voice (as in many motets, or much Notre Dame *conductus*). Leech-Wilkinson shows that around 1905, Riemann began proposing that one voice was sung and the others played. Thanks to some historiographical sleuthing, Leech-Wilkinson is able to trace Riemann's argument to the British scholar Sir John Stainer's work in the 1890s, particularly a paper Stainer read to the Royal Musical Association in 1895. In it, Stainer argued that the Oxford manuscript *Canonici misc. 213* contained a large number of pieces that began with untexted music; moreover, as Leech-Wilkinson explains, the "frequency of untexted phrases within and at the end of pieces" made it obvious to Stainer that these were solo songs, to be accompanied by viols, which would "supply short symphonies" when the singing voice was silent (24). In a delicious serving of historiographical detail typical of this book's pleasures, Leech-Wilkinson reports that Stainer ended his presentation with what were probably the first modern-day performances of Dufay's songs, which Stainer shortened to "symphonies" performed on "three or four violas," since he could not find a singer capable of handling old French (24–25).

Stainer's lecture-recital was to have profound consequences for Leech-Wilkinson's story, consequences that speak volumes about the "historical" part of musicology as a discipline. Leech-Wilkinson pursues not only the unacknowledged sources of Riemann's theories, but also their ideological underpinnings. Riemann, he explains, seized on Stainer's hypothesis because it fit into the grander narrative he was retelling in his own panoramic history of music, which goes something like this: medieval music was in crisis, and the Florentine contribution of a discrete repertoire of instrumentally-accompanied vocal music revealed a path whose ultimate goal was the nineteenth-century German art song. Thus, Riemann's widely-read assertion that the performance of much medieval secular music ought to be on instruments comes down to his "massive cultural prejudice," as a German reacting against the perceived decadence and theoretical fussiness of French vocal music (31).

The rest of the chapter reads like James Thurber's old parable of the "very proper gander" in which a barnyard compliment results in the fowl in

question being run off the farm for “propaganda.” In the years following Riemann’s “invention” of the instrumental hypothesis, it evolved from contentious theory to scholarly consensus to unchallengeable fact. This is a story that others have told before—especially the instrumental hypothesis’s debunkers, who are the subject of chapter 2—but Leech-Wilkinson’s survey is remarkable both for its detail and for its synthesis. He provides a compelling account of Arnold Schering’s “conversion” to Riemann’s hypothesis, a conversion that led Schering to propose that *trecento* polyphony was really pure organ music (44–45). Later in the chapter, Leech-Wilkinson describes the origins of the so-called “oriental hypothesis,” which proposed that the “lost” instruments of the Middle Ages were to be “found” among the “less advanced” cultures of the Middle East and North Africa (64–66). Finally, Leech-Wilkinson explains that under Rudolf von Ficker, “organum and by extension other medieval polyphony . . . became orchestral” (36). He goes on to suggest that Ficker’s re-imaginings were probably influenced by the Dutch medievalist Johan Huizinga’s seminal book *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* ([1924] 1996), whose carnevalesque, technicolor visions of medieval life were brought to sound by Ficker’s arrangements (Leech-Wilkinson 2002:58–59). Although I have some reservations about how Ficker is treated, I find Leech-Wilkinson’s ability to link the ideological perspectives of individual scholars with specific “sounds” of medieval music to be one of this book’s most impressive achievements.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2, “The Re-Invention of the *A Cappella* Hypothesis,” is the story of the decline of the instrumental hypothesis. The theory always had its doubters, beginning with Guido Adler and continuing with the influential Heinrich Bessler, who wrote enthusiastically of a *cappella* performance in the 1920s but developed a more ambivalent attitude thereafter (89–90).<sup>2</sup> The real demolition work began only in the late 1970s, with the publication of Craig Wright’s first articles and the beginning of Christopher Page’s “Gothic Voices” project. Here, the story takes on a different flavor, for as Leech-Wilkinson readily admits, he himself was a participant in these debates (102). His openness about his own role is as refreshing as it is absolutely necessary. Soon Page’s increasingly successful attempts to perform medieval polyphony take center stage, flanked by musicology’s efforts to keep up with them. Once again, Leech-Wilkinson is eager to follow the give-and-take between scholarship and performance; at times scholars lead the way, but more often than not, it is the other way around. Writing as an eye-and-ear-witness, Leech-Wilkinson states that Page’s work “came as a revelation, converting interest into belief, making the music comprehensible for the first time, no longer thin and quirky but rich and lyrical” (113). Some of this chapter’s passages have a decidedly anecdotal flair, such as the account

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of David Fallows's "invention" of a medieval instrument, the "dulzaina" or "douçaine," for the American performer/scholar Thomas Binkley (144–45). At first this anecdote sounds silly, like Stainer's violists doing their best with Dufay's "symphonies," but the point is an earnest one. Fallows later repented of his invention in print and became one of the most vocal supporters of the *a cappella* hypothesis, delivering much important scholarly research in its support.

If Leech-Wilkinson had ended his study with the eclipse of the old hypothesis by the new one, *The Modern Invention of Early Music* would stand as an impressive survey of recent musicological history. Leech-Wilkinson goes further, however, offering an ideological critique of the debunkers. His tone borders on the penitential as he reveals how a small group of academics around Page—including Fallows, Leech-Wilkinson himself, Mark Everist, Tess Knighton, and Knighton's fellow editors at the journal *Early Music*—worked with influential BBC producers to erase instrumental performance from the public and scholarly imagination (133). Leech-Wilkinson shows empathy for the losers here, among them established performing groups like the Medieval Ensemble of London, instrument makers, and amateur instrumentalists who were now excluded from much performance as the field came to be dominated by highly professionalized *a cappella* singers (138–39). Leech-Wilkinson is even able to trace the enthusiast-milieu's decline empirically, using the UK's *Register of Early Music* and advertisements in *Early Music* (141–44).

In chapter 3, "Hearing Medieval Harmonies," Leech-Wilkinson drives the "then" and the "now" even closer as he explores how music theory, especially the growing field of medieval music analysis, follows performance's lead. Once again, he displays a talent for synthesis, boiling his argument down to a simple message: the more instrumental the performance, the more horizontal the analysis, and the more vocal, the more vertical. He again serves deftly as his own witness, since, as he admits in the introduction to the book, much of his own work has been based on a "view of the harmony as purpose-directed" (11–12). Vocal performance, he writes on many occasions, makes this view seem "true." An adequate summary of Leech-Wilkinson's investigation of the tangled relations between theory and practice is beyond the scope of this review. It is enough to say that his survey, which considers everything from Raphael Georg Kiesewetter's disgust with Machaut's harmonies to the latest blends of contextual music theory and neo-Shenkerian linear reductive analysis, is both perceptive and often surprisingly sympathetic.

As in the previous chapter, however, sympathy itself is not enough to save an argument from critique. Having already exposed the *a cappella* hy-

pothesis as problematic, Leech-Wilkinson is forced to admit that his own preferred vertical/vocal analytical paradigm is problematic too. In this respect, his discussion of the concept of “anachronism” is especially interesting. “Anachronism” is the sin of analyzing historical music without reference to the music theory of its own historical context, and as Leech-Wilkinson shows in this chapter, the charge of “anachronism” is an effective tool for disciplining those who stray beyond the boundaries of “contextual correctness” (my term) agreed upon by most medievalists.

Many of the failures of historical scholarship exposed here result from using appeals to “context” to win historical arguments. In the first chapter, for example, Ficker and his followers saw medieval music’s context as the colorful panorama depicted in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*; Huizinga’s carnevalesque was the noise the music made and *should* make. That Leech-Wilkinson is able to draw this connection so clearly is one of his book’s signal achievements. In the second chapter, it is Christopher Page who goes too far, re-imagining the disciplined, professional medieval singer-scholars as trans-historical doppelgangers of the crack singing professionals of the 1980’s early music scene; here again, the context itself determines the sound of the re-imagined music. In the third chapter, context appears in the guise of the disciplining discourses of “anachronism,” which are used as sticks by guardians of “historical” interpretation to beat back any hermeneutics that does not define itself in appropriately “historical” terms. In each of these instances, Leech-Wilkinson reveals these contexts to be at best wishful thinking and at worst pernicious ideologies, going so far as to deploy a disciplining stick of his own, the stick of neuroscience and cognitive psychology (210–11). On an evolutionary scale, as Leech-Wilkinson reports, the difference between hearing music today and hearing music 700 years ago disappears. I guess this is the ultimate human context; next to it all the others look tiny and insignificant.

The remainder of the book is concerned with the dangerous slippage between imagining historical “context,” that is, imagining history as a narrative, and the assumption that contexts are somehow as “true” as the facts they explain. Leech-Wilkinson, of course, has a story to tell himself, in which Nazi musicology has a big role to play, for it was the Nazis who brought the manipulation of history to new lows, all in the name of *their* chosen narrative. One of Leech-Wilkinson’s main villains here is Ficker, who we learn was not above re-casting his research in a mold distinctly favorable to those in power after 1933—most egregiously claiming that there was something “northern” and “Germanic” about Notre Dame polyphony. Leech-Wilkinson, keen as always to keep our focus on how ideology *sounds*, even draws a suggestive connection between Ficker’s lush orchestrations of Leonin and

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Perotin and Carl Orff's Bavarian-Monumentalist *Carmina burana*, which is, of course, a piece of "imagined" medieval polyphony (57).

Striking as this line of argument is, I'm not sure that it is entirely fair. Ficker's fantasies about Leonin and Perotin's gothic "Germanness" (167–69) could have just as much to do with a Nietzschean north-south divide than with irridentist Nazi designs on certain parts of neighboring western Europe. That musicologists like Ficker were somehow tainted seems beyond dispute. In Ficker's case, however, the ideological positions he adopted to show loyalty to the Nazi regime predate the *Machtergreifung* by at least a decade: I would venture to guess that much of his scholarly work would have been the same had Hitler *not* come to power. There is now a broad consensus that there were many continuities between the Weimar Republic and the National Socialist era; the problem is how to portray these without whitewashing Nazi barbarity. The availability today of high-quality research on academia under the Hitler regime makes it possible to draw more nuanced conclusions about the extent of a given musicologist's cooperation with the regime. Such nuances are missing in Leech-Wilkinson's telling, and his arguments are somewhat weaker for it.<sup>3</sup>

Ficker's story is a parable about how power (over narratives and over people) can corrupt historians. This parable is central to the message of chapter 4, "Evidence, Interpretation, Power and Persuasion." One of the things that Leech-Wilkinson has done here is to make "Nazi musicology," which was doubtless morally compromised, into an "other" for some kind of morally defensible scholarly practice. Indeed, the pernicious uses to which musicology can be put are a recurring theme in the book, from Leech-Wilkinson's account in chapter 2 of how the *a cappella* hypothesis destroyed Britain's cottage industry for fanciful medieval instruments, through his explication of Ficker and Bessler's compromised hermeneutics, to a direct comparison, in chapter 4, of the academic situation in today's Britain with 1930s Germany:

It would be optimistic to suppose that circumstances conducive to perverted research will not arise again . . . it is not hard to see how pressures from society and government can turn research in one direction or another whenever scholars find it convenient, when it increases their power or protects their work from attack. The case of academics' response to the UK government's Research Assessment Exercise . . . is just one example. (252)

This is provocative indeed; and, in my opinion, wrong-headed. It is without a doubt worth debating if the brave new academic Britain created by the Research Assessment Exercise (a kind of simultaneous national tenure re-

view and accreditation process) is worth the trouble. Surely some colleagues have lost their jobs, and others may have been driven to conduct more conformist research. But there have been no midnight knocks on the door, no threats of bodily harm—thinly-veiled or open—to non-conformists, and no souls dragged off into “protective custody.” A comparison of the two situations is at best naïve; at worst it has the effect of making what happened in Germany in 1933 seem somehow a little less monstrous by an implicit comparison to the current situation, however regrettable, in Tony Blair’s British academia. It is a shame to find this metaphor in an otherwise admirable study.

By the time the reader reaches the middle of chapter 4, it is clear that one of Leech-Wilkinson’s main purposes is to warn about the dangers of claims built on historical “facts”:

historical musicology has . . . a dangerous tendency towards absolutism, grounding it in the truth of securely established facts about the past and therefore in the special value given to such facts. At its most extreme, the historicist project views facts as recoverable, and, once recovered, as having absolute authority over us . . . From this follows inevitably the insistence that there are valid and invalid ways of handling the surviving material, appropriate and inappropriate, historical and modernist, and that these equate to right and wrong in absolute moral terms. I stress that such a view is extreme, but it is only an extreme realization of a tendency that we have been able to see at work in much of the musicology we have examined. (252)

True enough: facts are matters of interpretation, as he demonstrates again and again. This realization seems perhaps naïve, but it would be a mistake to dismiss *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* as a simplistic work. Indeed, Leech-Wilkinson’s stubborn insistence on the question, “what do we *really* know about medieval performance, and *how* do we know what we know?” leads to some unsettling answers.

Nonetheless, the lack of a clear definition of “historicism” hampered my understanding of Leech-Wilkinson’s wider argument. As I read chapter 4, it occurred to me that Leech-Wilkinson uses the word “historicism” in a different sense than the one to which I am accustomed. For him, “historicism” is a kind of historiography that depends on claims to “historical fact.”<sup>4</sup> Many historians and philosophers of history, however, associate “historicism” with the German *Historismus*.<sup>5</sup> The legacy of *Historismus* includes the notion that all human actions are historical, that we as humans are swimming in history’s currents, that all historical situations are inherently unique, and, most importantly, that history means something. Figures like Wilhelm von Humboldt, G. W. F. Hegel, Leopold von Ranke, and Johann Gustav

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Droysen, contributed to the formation of the historicist philosophical position in the nineteenth century. Some of them, especially Ranke and Droysen, who were also founders of the professional discipline of history in Germany, stressed the importance of what they called the “historical-critical method,” that is, the methodologically-regulated search for facts. But they and their followers—and these would certainly include every German and German-influenced scholar whose work Leech-Wilkinson considers—would never have considered fact-collection their only business; indeed, they would have been repelled by the notion.

The idea that there is really no such thing as objectivity belongs squarely to the tradition of which Leech-Wilkinson’s inventive music historians were a part. It is important to understand that the German idealist—*historicist*—way of looking at history is not really oriented toward getting at the “facts” as they “actually” were. For the historicist must admit, when telling it *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (Ranke’s famous, much-misunderstood phrase) the “facts” are only there for the sake of the story.<sup>6</sup> Or to put it another way: there are no facts without *Geist*. Is it really so terrible that generations of medieval music lovers were able to sense some of history’s powerful current, by imagining that they might be a part of it—even if they were imagining it incorrectly? However misguided they were, they were partaking of a grand narrative, that has informed much historical thinking in the West since the Enlightenment, particularly in Germany. From Riemann to Binkley there was simply no other alternative available. And isn’t just this feeling of being able to recognize the flow of history’s currents, and one’s own place in them, one of the joys of reading Leech-Wilkinson’s book?

“Progress” is another commonly-held notion that is subjected to a stringent critique in the book. Leech-Wilkinson argues that the arrival of instrumental performance of medieval music is a “beautiful example” of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions, in which steady “progress” is interrupted by violent “paradigm shifts,” causing profound consequences (225). But he claims that the arrival of the *a cappella* paradigm is not such a shift, since it “has not been universally accepted, by any means.” Instead, it is a “rather particular instance of the impossibility of improving knowledge.” Since “what we ‘know’ is what we agree to know”—and since here we do *not* agree—it follows that we do not “know” medieval music, nor can it be argued that we have made any progress in all the years of research we have spent getting to know it (231).

Max Weber discussed this problem in his famous essay “Science as Vocation.”<sup>7</sup> In it, Weber argues that in scientific inquiry “progress” is the wrong goal to have. The right goal is *clarity*—clarity about the limits of our inquiries, but also clarity, it is to be hoped, about the questions we are asking,

which can and should be big ones. For example, the medievalists of the 1930s seem to have ignored Weber's warnings, seeking grander implications for their work than their projects ought to have had. But their lack of clarity is not enough to consign their inquiries, and indeed an entire historical project, to the methodological dustbin. By challenging claims of "progress" Leech-Wilkinson suggests that there *is* a simple thing called "progress," in which research moves forward by "sorting out" problems, thereby *eliminating* questions. I disagree. Real progress, in the human sciences at least, ought to raise more questions than it answers.<sup>8</sup>

These are trying times for the philosophy of what was once known as "historical performance practice" (if not for the practice itself, which is relatively resilient to the blows occasionally dealt it by academics). *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* is a logical successor to Richard Taruskin's celebrated yet controversial essays of the 1980s and 1990s. If Taruskin's well-taken point was that the exigencies of performance need to be separated from the imperatives of scholarship, Leech-Wilkinson's message is that scholarship itself is a kind of performance; this is the meaning that I take away, at least, from his final conclusion: "good musicology is whatever musicologists do interestingly as musicologists" (260). Ironically, despite a valiant attempt to avoid ending up here, we find ourselves at the bottom of historicism's relativist slippery slope. Leech-Wilkinson seems to suggest that the best way back up is to embrace the present and the empirically verifiable. His agenda establishes present performance as a major concern, if not the major concern, of musical scholarship, while de-emphasizing the past's traces in it; or at least those traces not accessible through recordings. Past performances are too ineffable, too unreachable, and too liable to be pressed into the service of this or that ideology to be of much use to "presentist" scholars.

*The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* is an important book. It raises fundamental questions about the relation among music, performance, and historical writing. It belongs on the reading lists of every graduate course in musicological methods, and by extension in the hands of any musicologist interested in how and (more importantly) why we write about music. If the diagnoses here can be applied, and I think they can be, to any historical approach to musical composition, performance, listening practice, reception, and thinking—in short to any historical approach to music in its broadest sense—it follows that much of what we call "historical musicology" is at worst useless and at best a kind of enjoyable game, a pleasant and stimulating pastime. Anyone who studies music history ought to confront this verdict, which I find a bit bleak. Nonetheless, this book is an encouraging sign of readiness to examine basic premises, a necessary step in any journey to

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Weberian clarity. Finally, no study of which I am aware brings performance into the panorama of music historiography so well, while at same time cutting the Gordian knot of historical thinking and historical performance so cleanly. I cannot praise this book enough for its imagination, daring, and élan. It is a book that hits us where we live.

### Notes

1. I am grateful to Dr. Christian Thomas Leitmair for sharing an unpublished paper on Ficker with me; see Leitmair (2004).
2. Besseler, Leech-Wilkinson reports, never moved beyond ambivalence because the instrumental hypothesis was so deeply ingrained (90–91).
3. Leech-Wilkinson depends almost exclusively on Pamela Potter's research into the role of musicology on Hitler's Germany; see, for example, Potter (1998). His arguments might have profited from a look at recent German-language literature on Nazi academia like the essays in Oexle and Schulze (1999).
4. For an introduction in English, see Iggers (1983), Cf. also Dahlhaus (1983).
5. Leech-Wilkinson uses Robert D. Hume's definition of "archeo-historicism": "an approach to studying the past that takes as its primary aim the reconstruction of historical contexts" See Leech-Wilkinson (2002:295n4) and Hume (1999:1–11).
6. See Iggers and von Moltke (1973:ix–x).
7. This essay was originally delivered as a lecture to a German student group in the closing months of World War I. Available in English translation in Weber (1946:129–58).
8. I borrow this image of "problem solving" from Taylor (2002:127).

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