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Daniel Trocmé-Latter, *The Singing of the Strasbourg Protestants, 1523-1541*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015. 414 pp. Tables, illustrations, music examples, notes, bibliography, and index. \$154.95 U.S. (hb.). ISBN 978-1-4724-3206-3.

Review by Kate van Orden, Harvard University.

Strasbourg is so culturally distinct that it seems to have escaped the attention it deserves. Situated near France's border with Germany, it is one of the few places in "l'hexagone" where German is such a given that a Strasbourgeois colleague of mine once described a friend as "une française francophone," a qualification almost incomprehensible anywhere else in the country. While this creolized heritage and borderland geography has made Strasbourg the perfect location for the seat of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, it has remained remarkably marginal in other respects, so much so that the fast rail line from Paris, the TGV Est, has yet to reach the city.

Given Strasbourg's peripheral status, French historians have been quite inclusive, even for the period before Louis XIV annexed the Free Imperial City from the Holy Roman Empire in 1683. The city's importance as a center of printing and an early center of the Reformation have rightly drawn the attention of French bibliographers and scholars, most notably Charles Schmidt, François Ritter, and Josef Benzing and Jean Muller, who studied the first century of printing in Alsace; and Alfred Erichson, François Wendel, and René Bornert, all with books on Strasbourg during the Reformation, to cite just a few major studies in French.[1] Christian Meyer's catalogue of Protestant melodies printed in Strasbourg from 1524-1547 gave scholars bibliographic control of the musical repertory in 1987.[2]

Thus the new book of Daniel Trocmé-Latter joins a healthy literature on these key years in the city, during which Martin Bucer spearheaded a unique series of religious reforms. Theologically, Strasbourg tracked the positions reformers took in Zurich, at least initially, yet one great difference between Bucer's reforms and those of Ulrich Zwingli was the role imagined for music in the new church. Trocmé-Latter shows how Strasbourg quickly became a site of congregational singing thanks to Bucer's love of hymnody, and in so doing, he counters the deeply entrenched misperception that only faraway, in Luther's Wittenberg, was music embraced as an instrument of the Reformation. The commonplaces that Jean Calvin objected to instrumental music and polyphony and that Ulrich Zwingli was entirely anti-musical have had a deadening effect on study of music in the reforms that bordered France. Strasbourg emerges here as a significant exception to textbook music histories, one that illustrates the multiple and local origins of the German Reformation and the creativity with which Catholic materials and practices were refashioned to serve the new faith. Trocmé-Latter's study stands as a call to investigate the complexities of music in reformation Geneva, Basel, and Zurich as well, to move beyond the often blunt dicta of early reformers to recapture a history of devotional music on the ground, as it were, in the streets, in schools, in homes, in civic ceremonial, and in churches during the paraliturgical services of guilds and confraternities.

One reason books of this sort have been so long in coming relates to the fundamental difficulties posed by studying music-making in early modern Europe. The text-oriented basis of most historical scholarship

has always been a problem for music, which is, in essence, something sung or played and heard. The notated pieces that come down to us are merely scripts for performances, and many kinds of music required no textual apparatus whatsoever to be performed. Certainly hymns, psalms, and vernacular songs fit into this category. Nonetheless, musicologists privilege the “score,” gravitating toward notated “works” by known composers, especially those exhibiting polyphonic complexities, which can be engaging to unravel. Trocmé-Latter, by contrast, mobilizes a much greater variety of sources in his study, including printed broadsheets sporting political songs (see Table 4.1), German hymnals and psalters with notated tunes (pp. 77-86, 96-102), liturgical books in manuscript and print, letters, and theological tracts.

Digging deeply into the practices that these books were meant to support, Trocmé-Latter’s study is designed as a cultural prehistory of the conditions leading up to the production of Bucer’s magnificent *Gesangbuch* (Strasbourg: Köpfel & Messerschmidt, 1541), the endpoint of the study. Organized according to a rough chronology, the book begins with chapters on the attitudes of reformers in Strasbourg toward church music (chapter one) and the abolition of the mass in 1525 (chapter two), which entailed a scramble for new forms of devotional music (chapters two and three). It continues with a rich chapter on popular song, including polemical songs and those with religious lyrics (chapter four), and it wraps up with a chapter on Bucer’s *Gesangbuch* and the influence of the Strasbourg reforms outside the city (chapter five).

A significant player throughout the book is the Dominican friar-turned-reformer, Martin Bucer, who emerges as a major proponent of congregational singing and an individual who should henceforth be included with Luther in discussions of music in the German Reformation. Already in his *Grund und Ursach* of 1524, Bucer argued the biblical precedents for congregational singing, and the ethical benefits of spiritual song was a *fil conducteur* throughout his proposed reforms. The *Gesangbuch* of 1541 thus stands as the culmination of nearly two decades of effort, the coming together of a repertoire of spiritual song designed for the faithful to sing together in city churches, rural parishes, and schools both Latin and German (p. 207). It contained a compendium of “psalms, spiritual songs, and choral songs” (*Psalmen, Geistliche Lieder, und Chorgeseng*) from Wittenberg and Strasbourg, and was prefaced by a tract on spiritual songs (and against lascivious music) authored by Bucer himself.

Although Bucer and Messerschmidt pitched the *Gesangbuch* to a broad audience, only the wealthiest schools and churches could have afforded it. Printed on extra large sheets of paper in red and black ink using a double-impression method for its monophonic melodies, in sheer splendor it outshone even the most monumental books of polyphony of the age (surviving copies measure approximately 33 x 48.5 cm, larger than the magnificent folio editions of Palestrina’s masses printed in Rome by Valerio Dorico later in the century). Naturally, this splendid book has attracted much attention, with a facsimile having come out already in 1953 and a couple of subsequent dissertations and articles devoted to it.^[3] Far less well studied are the little riff-raff books and broadsides that probably did reach a large public and that comprise the bulk of materials consulted by Trocmé-Latter, pamphlets like the four-folio *Der .li. Psalm Davids* (Strasbourg: Schwan, 1525) or *Ein schoner kurtzer begriff des vatter unsers Un[nd] Ave maria, Glauben, Zehe[n] gebotte[n] Nützlich zü singen unnd zü betrachten* (Strasbourg: Schwan, 1525) (“A nice brief version of the Pater Noster, Ave Maria, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments...”). In its attention to ephemera of all sorts, with and without printed musical notation, Trocmé-Latter’s book thus essays a true cultural history of music. Building on a remarkable array of materials, it pairs analysis of theological positions, liturgical reforms, and sermons (the conventional sources for Reformation history) with concentrated consideration of the popular songs and hymns that coexisted with them but were not necessarily officially sanctioned.

Of course the further one forges from the centers of power and authorities such as Bucer and Wolfgang Capito (the other principal voice channeled in this study), the murkier their reforms become and the more blurred the distinctions between the old and the new. Indeed, the very task of deciding what to include and what to exclude becomes challenging. German psalters were staple devotional texts well before the Reformation, as were vernacular versions of the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, and Credo, which the

faithful doubtless knew by heart in Latin from saying their rosaries. In this light, the litany-like rendering of the Pater Noster in *Ein schöner kurtzer begriff des vatter unsers Un[nd] Ave maria...* (transcribed on p. 276) seems not so far from the German and mixed-language prayers that preceded it, a good reminder that a psalter or Book of Hours might often be the only book a family owned in the years around 1500, when catechistic texts served as primers for literacy.

Given these continuities, the next avenue of research might be a close study of the singing of German Catholics that aims to discover the extent to which reformers directed established practices of devotional song toward new ends. Given its subject and chronological scope, *The Singing of the Strasbourg Protestants* explores this moment of change only from the perspective of reformers, with the result that the spiritual lives of Catholic laity seem empty, their voices silenced. While it is true, as Trocmé-Latter says, that “ecclesiastical music had previously been a professional activity,” (p. 2), not enough research is presented here to conclude that “singing to God and to the saints had been done on behalf of the common people by a choir or by the clergy, and in Latin, which made it incomprehensible to the majority” (p. 2). The swiftness with which congregational singing caught on, the retention of major portions of the mass in Latin, and the long pre-history of contrafacta all suggest the devotional lives of Catholics as a fruitful avenue for study. Such research might investigate the sites of home devotion (dinner table, bedside, and home altars decorated with small statues and paintings of the Virgin). It might reimagine the simplest motet settings of common prayers as a quasi-popular repertoire for home and school, and it might study confraternities and catechism classes as sites of lay singing in the years before the reform. The mirror provided by such investigations would add a comparative dimension to the fine research published here. Thanks to the painstaking documentation of Trocmé-Latter’s excellent study, scholars will be playing catch-up for some time to come.

NOTES

[1] On the first century of printing in Strasbourg, see Charles Schmidt, *Répertoire bibliographique strasbourgeois jusque vers 1530...*, 8 vols (Strasbourg: J.H.E. Heitz, 1893-96); François Ritter, *Histoire de l'imprimerie alsacienne aux XVe et XVIe siècles.*, (Strasbourg: Le Roux, 1955); and Josef Benzing and Jean Muller, *Bibliographie strasbourgeoise: bibliographie des ouvrages imprimés à Strasbourg (Bas-Rhin) au XVIe siècle*, 3 vols. (Baden-Baden: V. Koerner, 1981-1986). For studies of the Reformation in Strasbourg, see Alfred Erichson, *L'Église française de Strasbourg au seizième siècle d'après des documents inédits* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1886), François Wendel, *L'église de Strasbourg, sa constitution et son organisation, 1532-1535* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1942), and René Bornert, *La réforme protestante du culte à Strasbourg au XVIe siècle (1523-1598): approche sociologique et interprétation théologique* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

[2] Christian Meyer, *Les mélodies des églises protestantes de langue allemande: catalogue descriptif des sources et édition critique des mélodies*, I. *Les mélodies publiées à Strasbourg (1524-1547)* (Baden-Baden: V. Koerner, 1987).

[3] The facsimile edition is *Gesangbuch darinn begriffen sind die aller fürnemisten und besten Psalmen, geistliche Lieder und Chorgeseng aus dem Wittenbergischen, Strasburgischen und anderer Kirchen Gesangbüchlin zusammen bracht und mit besonderem Fleis corrigiert und gedrucket, für Stett und Dorff Kirchen lateinische und deudsche Schülen, Strasburg, 1541* [Stuttgart : Vom Evangelischen Verlagswerk, 1953]. For dissertations see Allen Mullinax, “Martin Bucer and the ‘Strasbourg Song Book,’ 1541” (Master of Church Music dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1985), and Christine Anne Hancock Dempsey, “Geistliche Gesangbuch, geistreiche Gesangbuch: The development of confessional unity in the evangelical hymnbook, 1524-1587” (Ph.D dissertation, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 2003). Also see Johannes Ficker, “[Das größte Prachtwerk des Straßburger Buchdrucks: Zur Geschichte und Gestaltung des großen Straßburger Gesangbuches 1541.](#),” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte - Archive for Reformation History*, 38 (1941): 198-230.

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