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Jean-Paul Montagnier, *The Polyphonic Mass in France, 1600-1780: The Evidence of the Printed Choirbooks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xxv + 331pp. Figures, tables, musical examples, bibliography and index. £78.99 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781107177741.

Review by Peter Leech, Cardiff University.

Until the appearance of this book, no comprehensive study of the development of the polyphonic mass in France, from the early seventeenth century up to the eve of revolution, had been undertaken. For that reason alone, it should be lauded as an exceptional contribution to the literature. It broadens extant knowledge significantly by surveying, in considerable detail, works by composers who are not household names (such as Jean de Bournonville, François Cosset, and Jean-Louis Bordier), alongside those of Orlande de Lassus, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, and André Campra. A foreword by John Haijdu Heyer points out some of the obstacles which have evidently prevented scholars from hitherto examining the genre of the polyphonic mass in France to the same degree as the motet, chief amongst which appears to be the physical nature of the repertory itself. The large body of masses produced during the period exist primarily in the form of printed choirbooks with all parts visible on one double-page spread (placed on lecterns, around which musicians would gather), from the workshops of various members of the Ballard dynasty. Montagnier undertook the laborious and time-consuming task of transcribing the music from the choirbooks into scores to facilitate more meaningful examination. To anyone familiar with the tiring demands of creating scores of multi-voice sacred music from choirbooks, Montagnier's study, encompassing more than 110 printed works from more than forty composers, is indeed a monumental achievement. In his introduction the author humbly makes no claim for the exhaustiveness of his study, hoping that further investigations might be undertaken. Indeed, this book will undoubtedly prompt many further enquiries, and generate some debate about various aspects of its arguments.

Comprising eight main chapters, the book deals with the physical nature of printed choirbooks, the musical practices associated with them, important people and networks, liturgy, stylistic observations, and the influence of Lassus, as well as comprising in-depth analyses of "best seller" masses by Cosset (*Missa Gaudeamus omnes*) and Campra (*Missa Ad majorem Dei Gloriam*). The last chapter is devoted to the music and liturgy of the *Missa pro defunctis*. Five detailed appendices are included, which are of immense value to both performers and scholars (as well as those who combine both traits) for information about vocal forces, meticulous chronological data on the Ballard choirbooks from 1607-1767, and handwritten arrangements of masses (originally printed in choirbooks) by the renowned music theorist, composer, and antiquarian Sébastien de Brossard (1655-1730).

Any scholarly survey undertaken on the scale of Montagnier's book, especially when restricted by self-imposed parameters (in this case a focus upon printed choirbooks only), will undoubtedly omit matters which some readers might consider to be of great importance. It would be negligent not to mention a recent review by Thierry Favier,^[1] which takes issue with a few aspects of Montagnier's narrative, chiefly in regard to some of his conclusions about performance practices, as well as his somewhat disparate references to manuscript sources. Favier also questions Montagnier's general assertion that for the whole period, printed masses were typically sung on ordinary Sundays and minor feasts, with instrumentally accompanied masses being reserved only for solemn days, seemingly without having considered differing regional variations and traditions. It would not be appropriate for this review to comment further upon Favier's observations, except to say that some of them are similar to the concerns of the present reviewer.

Montagnier explains that all of the choirbooks under study (with the exception of the Sanlecque choirbook) had ten staves per page and that the pages of Ballard books measure 41 x 27.5 centimeters, evidently "large enough to allow all the available choristers to perform from the same book" (p. 28). In the case of François Cosset's *Missa sex vocum ad imitationem moduli Super flumina Babylonis* (1673), for which Montagnier provides an illustration, this must surely suggest the participation of a small number of boy choristers and adult singers. It is a scenario that does not seem to allow for the possible existence of larger forces which might have been called for on special occasions, and how a larger group might use performing materials. Leaving aside the vexing issue of whether or not basso continuo accompaniment formed part of the ensemble (Ballard's volumes lacked a printed part, but Brossard stated that by the 1640s this practice was common in French sacred music), the chief concern for any modern reconstruction of period performance conditions is visibility. Montagnier claims the practice of groups gathered around a single book is "empirically ascertained by historically aware performers who attempt to sing this repertoire directly from choirbooks" (p. 35), citing Laurent Guillo's assertion that "a person with good eyesight reads well up to two meters away from the book" and that "eight people can be arranged on a quadrant, putting the children in front and the adults behind" (p. 36). Guillo also says that vocal forces can be raised to twelve "on condition they are placed in three rows, or even to have a small platform" and that this "makes a maximum of two to three singers per part for a four voice-mass, and two only for a six-voice mass" (p. 36). Whilst the arguments put forth by Montagnier and Guillo have support elsewhere (for example Jessie Ann Owens has argued that ten to fifteen singers, arranged by height with short singers in front, could read from a single choirbook), there are still questions to answer.

Having myself sung with a vocal group gathered around a choirbook of a similar size to Ballard's prints (in this case a copy of Tomás Luis de Victoria's *Motecta Festorum totius anni* [Rome, 1585], an item which briefly formed part of my private music collection), it was apparent that the situations described above require perfect conditions, such as bright modern light (we sometimes forget about the need for thousands of candles, especially in winter), all boys of equal height in the front row, and no person standing more than two meters away from the music. Reading the choirbook at this distance was certainly challenging, but any further away and the task proved almost impossible. Can we be so sure that everyone's eyesight was of equal strength in the days before the manufacture of precision spectacles? Were all boys necessarily of the same height? Was the light always perfect? Three rows of singers, with no-one more than two meters away from the lectern, necessitates them being placed perfectly (and very closely), being careful not to make any distracting or obstructive physical movements in order to guarantee clear sight lines.

Montagnier admits that the very nature of the Ballard choirbooks imposed an *a cappella* performance condition upon the music, and that on ordinary Sundays this was common practice in French cathedral and collegiate churches. It is a courageous claim indeed, for the whole of the period in question, especially when some of the supporting evidence is not based on the firmest of foundations.

As a prelude to discussing the use of instruments, Montagnier admits that on solemn days the pattern of *a cappella* mass performances may not always have been adhered to. At Le Mans Cathedral in 1633, for example, Mass at the feast of St Cecilia included viols and lutes in support of eight boy choristers, organ, and serpent. He goes on to suggest that elsewhere, choral forces were possibly augmented by cornets and sackbuts in the manner of Italian churches of the period. The principal problem here is the lack of reliable evidence about performance practices in French cathedrals during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where, it should also be noted, local habits and conditions surely played a major part, just as they did in Italian lands. We know, too, that in larger cities such as Rome, Venice, and Naples, performing conditions of course varied between different churches within single municipal areas. A second problem is the extent to which we consider anecdotal and iconographical records to be definitive. Montagnier's choice of an account by Charles Burney of a performance in Milan Cathedral in 1770, in support of choirbook practice in France for a period as broad as 1600–1780, would appear to be a questionable one, both in terms of geography and chronology. His use of Johannes Stradanus's *Encominum musices* engraving (Antwerp, 1590) may well assist the *colla parte* argument, in regard to the early seventeenth-century period in particular, but much depends on how this engraving is interpreted and whether it is necessarily accurate. Montagnier suggests there might be five wind instruments, which may be the case, but the exact number of both vocal and instrumental musicians standing in front of the lectern is unclear. If all of the tops of heads are counted (including those in the background) there might be as many as 24 people, which would certainly challenge the two-meter distance principal. A third problem, as Montagnier points out, is that testimonies from diaries or engravings do not concur with the available printed musical sources, since only sung parts are recorded. Until the various surviving chapter archives of French cathedrals are systematically investigated for payment records and personnel lists for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (an even more daunting task than surveying all the printed choirbooks) we will not yet have a full account of performance practices.

In terms of surviving performance materials providing evidence of instrumental involvement in French cathedral music, the situation for the eighteenth century is considerably more satisfactory, and more intriguing. Although a survey of manuscript sources was beyond the remit of Montagnier's study, a future closer inspection of these items, perhaps in the same way that has been done for the surviving parts from Johann Sebastian Bach's Leipzig cantatas, for example, would undoubtedly shed further light on their use in conjunction with, or directly alongside, printed materials. Another matter discussed by Montagnier, and worthy of even more detailed study, is that of arrangements by eighteenth-century composers of much earlier *a cappella* works. The anonymous re-working of Charles d'Helfer's *Messe de morts* for the funeral of Louis XV (1774), which included independent orchestral parts for oboes and strings, as well as Brossard's imaginative arrangement of the *Missa Gaudeamus omnes* by François Cosset (a work which evidently endured in the repertory of the Royal chapel, in *a cappella* form, until 1768) may, as Montagnier suggests, represent two exceptional circumstances, but they nevertheless challenge some of our assumptions about the "complete work" concept, one which perhaps places a disproportionate value on the purity of the original object. Baroque and classical instrumental

arrangements have made us aware that musicians were only too happy to “improve” the works of their colleagues or predecessors for the sake of pragmatic, up-to-date circumstances (we need only look at Pisendel’s reworkings of concertos by Fasch and Vivaldi or Salomon’s chamber reductions of Haydn symphonies, amongst many other examples, to strengthen this point). As far as wider eighteenth-century sacred music is concerned, the archival holdings of many European cathedrals and basilicas have yet to be fully explored for the existence of arrangements created along the lines of the Helfer and Cosset examples. It is certainly not easy to find their eighteenth-century equivalents in the archives of Roman churches (where the addition of instrumental parts to much-revered late-Renaissance *a cappella* masses might have been considered highly inappropriate), but we should not rule out the possibility that they may have existed.

In Chapter 7, “Two Best Sellers,” Cosset’s *Missa Gaudeamus omnes* and Campra’s *Missa Ad majorem Dei gloriam* are examined in considerable detail, their respective features being compared and contrasted with the support of numerous and helpful musical examples. The former, which Brossard considered to be “so excellent, that one never gets tired of hearing it,” is portrayed very much as a model of pedagogical excellence, and yet its predominantly homophonic texture, without “any elaborated craftsmanship,” Montagnier argues, might cast some doubt upon Brossard’s enthusiasm. From the perspective of one of my own research areas, Campra’s mass (first printed in 1699 and re-issued in 1700) is altogether more interesting, not only because its title is the Latin motto of the Society of Jesus, but also because there seems to be little exploration as to the title’s relevance or what might have motivated Campra to have chosen it. In view of the mass’s numerous text-related dramatic effects, it could perhaps be considered as the archetypal sacred musical evangelical tool *par excellence*, one with which the Jesuits, the consummate exponents of rhetorical perfection and enigmatic preaching, would have been entirely satisfied as a tool of their Counter-Reformation way of proceeding. In this regard, the Campra *Missa Ad majorem Dei gloriam* might also be reconsidered from a Jesuit pedagogical perspective, since Montagnier’s own comments in regard to Campra’s application of ternary meter, where hemiolas “allow composers to follow closely the metric stresses of Latin” (p. 226), certainly seem to support this suggestion. It surely cannot be merely a coincidence that the work first appeared in print a year after Campra (as has been demonstrated in the work of Marie Demeilliez) was first engaged to compose theatrical music (a prologue and three intermedes in the play *Philiochryse*), for one of the most influential educational establishments in baroque Paris, the Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand, a foundation with which the composer continued to be closely associated for the rest of his life. Indeed, Campra contributed music to four more Louis-le-Grand plays (*Joseph établi vice-roy d’Egypte*, *Abdolomine*, *Maxime Martyr*, and *Crésus*), at the same time as the appearance in print of the *Missa Ad majorem Dei gloriam*. Perhaps the Jesuits had been the sponsors for its publication?

In discussing Campra’s *Missa Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, Montagnier focusses, rightly, upon its popularity, influence, and status as “a classic to be emulated” (p. 233) by other composers. Any additional comments he might have made in regard to the Jesuits, however brief, might, for some scholars, seem unnecessarily tangential. However, we should not forget that the Society of Jesus was one of the leading forces in French education until 1764, and that recent research has revealed the extent of worldwide Jesuit influence in all aspects of the arts and sciences from the late sixteenth century up to the suppression of 1773. The identification of hitherto unknown Jesuit composers, as well as the re-identification of those whose Jesuit status has often been ignored, now forms a substantive part of this research. It would therefore have been helpful to readers with an interest in Jesuit historiography for composers such as Charles d’Ambleville S.J.

and Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy S.J., and the music theorist Antoine Parran S.J., to have at least had their Jesuit status acknowledged by Montagnier, if only in a footnote. Interestingly, at least in terms of the global dissemination of seventeenth-century French polyphonic masses, d'Ambleville and Geoffroy were two of only four composers listed by Montagnier whose works were issued by Ballard as printed partbooks. Rare examples of these items survive today in the Beitang collection in Beijing as greatly treasured remnants of the Jesuit residency in China.

NOTE

[1] *Music and Letters*, Volume 99, Issue 2 (May 2018): pp. 292–294.

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