

Elizabeth Eva Leach. *Sung Birds: Music, Nature and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. xiii + 345 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4491-3.



Reviewed by Nicola McLelland (Department of German Studies, University of Nottingham)

Published on H-German (September, 2007)

Is Birdsong Music?

The answer to this question for medieval thinkers is, it turns out, a definite “no.” With this intriguing book, Elizabeth Eva Leach invites us into the world of musical theory and practice of the European Middle Ages, with a particular emphasis on fourteenth-century music. Her rigorous, wide-ranging study combines examination of key theoretical texts, analysis of music and songs, and discussion of the significance of all of this for musicology today. It is a beguiling read for anyone, and although readers with musical expertise will appreciate the central chapters of musical analysis most, anyone can keep up, as Leach is careful to explain terms. As the title suggests, Leach’s linking theme throughout is birdsong, and how it is discussed, imitated, and incorporated into musical theory and music-making.

To begin, we are asked to reconsider what music is. The modern-day habit of listening to recorded music has taught us to think of music primarily in terms of the sounds that we hear. But as chapter 1, “Rational Song,” explains, for Boethius (sixth century), there are three types of music: *musica mundana* (the music of the spheres), *musica humana* (the harmonious working

of the human body, soul, and reason), and *musica instrumentalis*. Only this last is even audible at all. Central to music instead of sound in medieval thinking is rationality—music is based on intervals that can be expressed as ratios. That is why birdsong, though it may be pleasing to the ear and even worthy of imitation, cannot be music. Music is like language: unique to humans, and rational. Music theory even shares key technical terms with grammar when music is notated: the basic units—the notes—are referred to by letters (A, B, C, and so on); pitches are *voces* identified by syllables (the solfa scale); and the intervals are *consonantiae*. Just as language is meaningful, writeable, and rational, so too should music be. This viewpoint is fine as long as we are dealing with human singing with words, but interestingly it leaves songs without words and instrumental music out in the cold. These were, indeed, long viewed as second-class.

In chapter 2, “Birdsong and Human Singing,” Leach considers how the familiar question of attitudes to nature and art in the medieval period is reflected in musical theory. Nature (including birdsong) is God’s creation, and

therefore, perhaps, rational and good. Yet the music of human art is a testimony to God-given, rational skill, so surely superior? While acceptance of the human art of music as superior dominates, Leach does find instances of a competing aesthetic, according to which the human voice is likened positively to birdsong (especially that of the nightingale), even if “it is necessary to read slightly against the grain of certain texts” (p. 70) to do so.

Chapter 3, “Birds Sung,” turns from musical theory to medieval music-making and composition, as Leach looks at medieval songs that include birdcalls. A recurrent theme here is the important shift towards an increasingly visual culture in the later Middle Ages. Scores move from being a record of notes to remind the singers of the music, to being composed *before* performance, and may now even incorporate complexities that cannot be appreciated in performance, but only *seen* on the page. Here and in chapter 4, Leach gives examples that seem to reflect the before and after of this shift. Chapter 4 deals with the canon, dependent on the new written form; here in chapter 3, Leach argues that virtuosic singing imitating warbling birdcalls, where the bird’s song is represented by especially small “sub-minim values,” reflects the old primacy of the performer. Since the minim was the smallest value that could ordinarily be represented in the period’s notational system, a way of recording these super-rapid birdsong notes had to be improvised after the event, for example, by the addition of a flag of a different colored ink on the note. The singer sings, the notation has to catch up, “pushing the boundaries of the system” (p. 146). Another theme in this chapter is the growing appreciation, from the later thirteenth century onwards, of instrumental music—dismissed in earlier theory as music-making by mere habit, without intellectual understanding, so no better than birdsong.

Chapter 4, “Silent Birds,” concentrates on songs in the form of the “musical chase.” If the imitation of birdcalls is a performance improvisation that is only later notated, then the canon (a round, where each part repeats the same melody, but staggered) is a form that depends on the prior written, visual form. The resulting musical harmony can be so confusing for the listeners that we are drawn back to the written text for clarification of this “prior worked-out compositional technique” (p. 177). In some songs, this musical chase is set to texts that reflect another courtly chase, the hunt, which can in turn stand for the pursuit of love. The musical form of the *caccia* or *chace* (p. 177) will often imitate nature too. We do not hear birdsong, since birds of prey are silent (and so the

link to the birds in the title of the book is here rather tenuous!), but instead the barks of the hunting dogs are often expressed musically in *hocket*, “in which the voices exchange alternate bursts of sound and silence as if hiccuping” (p. 176). Now, hunting was viewed in princely advice literature as morally dubious. For some commentators it was a frivolous vice; for others, the best that could be said of it was that it distracted the young from vice. Leach shows an interesting parallel here to the musical chase. Music too could be justified as diverting young minds from worse things, but too much *hocket* could have a “worryingly exhilarating” effect (p. 185)—and was actually forbidden by papal decree until 1914!

In chapter 5, Leach continues her exploration of how music was linked to morality as she looks at the rhetorical overlap between the feminine (or effeminate), the bestial, the sexual, and sin. The epitome of these equivalences in music is the figure of the siren, the woman-bird with a beguiling but fatal song. Commentators remind us that music can be superficially sweet but harmful, making the falsehoods of the words appear palatable. The notion of sweet but dangerous music can also stand for the music of flatterers’ blandishments. Another danger is to the singers themselves: singing high (as in falsetto), not out of the chest, is unmanly, effeminate and so by extension immoral.

Leach’s final chapter goes the extra mile, to show how the themes that have emerged from her analysis of the medieval period can inform our understanding of music and musicology today. Leach argues that the medieval conviction about the rationality of music has given way to a view that emphasizes the effect of music ironically as a result of rationalism that privileges the empirical and therefore the sensory. She also sees a parallel between the technological innovation of writing down music in the medieval period and the more recent but equally radical shift brought about by the ability to record and replay music, which has led, amongst other things, to a focus on the *sound* of music as its essence.

This is a dense and rich book. A particular pleasure are the very attentive readings of both individual theoretical texts and musical pieces, uncovering layers of meaning, and always embedded in the wider cultural context, and to which I have not even attempted to do justice here. Mention should also be made of the many interesting illustrations, and the useful appendices that help us trace some of Leach’s close readings. Clearly aimed at musicologists too, this book is in fact a fascinating and important read for anyone with an interest in the history of ideas.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Nicola McLelland. Review of Leach, Elizabeth Eva, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13604>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.