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Wilde, Cornelia, and Wolfram R. Keller, eds.

Perfect Harmony and Melting Strains: Transformations of Music in Early Modern Culture between Sensibility and Abstraction.

Transformationen der Antike 34. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021. Pp. vi, 156 +12 b/w ill. ISBN 9783110426373 (hardcover) €79.95.

Perfect Harmony and Melting Strains is a collection of six essays treating late medieval and early modern perspectives on the position occupied by music “between mathematical abstraction and sensual experience” (1). The starting point is Boethius’s threefold division of music into *musica mundana* (harmony of the spheres or celestial harmony), *musica humana* (harmony of the human body and soul), and *musica instrumentalis* (everyday music making). This division, a central feature of European knowledge throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, entails speculation on music’s power to affect the human psyche in terms of emotion, character, or health. Individual chapters in the present volume variously examine how aspects of these ideas were received, transformed, and promulgated by writers from the late fourteenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries. Consequently, the historical range of *Perfect Harmony and Melting Strains* is very broad, as are the kinds of writings discussed at various points in the book—poetry, chant books, music theory, and music medicine, as well as more general philosophy and theology.

In terms of their generality, the essays fall into two camps. Chapters 1, 2, and 6 discuss specific texts, so, despite some necessary introductory information for the general reader, they are quite sharply focused. In chapter 1, Wolfram R. Keller examines references to celestial harmony and its opposite, disharmony, in two dream poems, *House of Fame* and *Parliament of Fowls*, by Geoffrey Chaucer. Chapter 2 by Barbara Swanson compares chant setting in Catholic Italy and Protestant England in the second half of the sixteenth century. In both post-Tridentine Italy and post-Reformation England, clarity of words in liturgical singing was paramount. Swanson concentrates on the chant books of the Italian chant editor Giovanni Guidetti, particularly his adoption of Hebrew cantillation and his emotive settings of chants for Holy Week. In chapter 6, Cornelia Wilde provides an analysis of two poetic odes to Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, by the late seventeenth-century poet and aesthete Joseph Addison. Wilde argues that although Addison saw music as “a principle harmoniously ordering the created word,” it is “appropriate only if it supports

the meaning of the text” (149–50). Thus, the viewpoint that music should be subservient to the written word is noted in both Swanson’s and Wilde’s essays.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are more general and expository, and, at the same time, as a trio, cluster somewhat around the subject of music medicine. Chapter 3 by Jacomien Prins treats the critical reception of Marsilio Ficino’s astrological writing by two writers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Francesco Patrizi and Marin Mersenne. Prins documents the gradual transition over about 200 years from belief in natural magic to the emergence of the empirical scientific method. In chapter 4, Katherine Butler relates two instances of music’s curative powers commonly discussed in the early modern period: the biblical story of the expulsion of an evil spirit by David’s harp, and the relief from the tarantula spider’s bite obtained by dancing. Chapter 5 by Penelope Gouk is even more wide-ranging, providing a broad overview of English writings on the ethical and medicinal powers of music from the late sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century.

Among the six essays there are some fine individual scholarly contributions. However, as may be gleaned from the foregoing summary, the huge compass of centuries, the different scholarly approaches of the writers, and the varied levels of generality do create an overall lack of unity in the current volume. The editors have worked hard to tie the six essays together, both by outlining the main themes in their introduction and by inserting occasional footnotes in the text that highlight links between chapters. Unfortunately, they are only partially successful in this ambitious task. Music’s mathematical and sensual bases, and its concomitant affective power, are highly complex tropes that evolve throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Tackling such an expansive topic may be likened to mapping a large country: the terrain is varied and widely separated in space, although the inhabitants are connected by some commonality of custom or belief. Imagine, then, the problems that would ensue if one employed only six cartographers to do this mapping, and, moreover, some of these mapmakers concentrated on just a few square miles, while others covered whole regions. In fact, *Perfect Harmony and Melting Strains* reads like the selected proceedings of a larger and more loosely organized conference—with all the diversity that such an occasion would invite—but the editors do not mention this possibility as the origin story for the collection. The estimable scholarship found in individual essays makes them recommendable, but more to readers who have specialized interests

in particular topics rather than to those attracted by the general themes announced in the book's title.

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