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Review of Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer.*

Maud Burnett McInerney
Haverford College

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Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 513 pp. ISBN 0804740585.

Reviewed by Maud Burnett McInerney, Haverford College

Bruce W. Holsinger's *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* is an ambitious and original book. It is also something rarer, a genuine pleasure to read; because of the confident way the book moves between literary criticism, iconography and musicology, it will provide most medievalists with glimpses of something outside of their particular field: an obscure or under-read text, an unfamiliar element of musical practice, an unknown aspect of pedagogy in the Middle Ages, a new vision of the medieval body. Holsinger's argument for a "thoroughly embodied musicality" (16) will no doubt disturb some readers, but it is a vigorous and thought-provoking contribution to the field.

The book (and this is an important point) is not really about medieval music or its performance, but rather about how music was imagined and understood by medieval people. The first part consists of two chapters on "Musical Embodiments in Christian Late Antiquity," with an eye back to pagan musical theory in Pythagoras, Plato, Cicero and Ovid. Holsinger elaborates a convincing critique of the traditional Robertsonian reading of a dualistic Christian "New Song" as numerical and abstract, a denial of the body or transcendence of the flesh; he argues instead that the Patristic "New Song" depends upon embodiment, and upon a fundamental distinction between body and flesh. Embodiment, after all, is central to incarnational theology, so that even a rejection of the flesh must include an embracing of the body and, by extension, its musical potential. Music, Holsinger argues, using examples from Ambrose of Milan and Clement of Alexandria, can only emanate from the instrument which is the body; the song of the soul, in fact, requires at the very least an imaginary or metaphorical body through which to express itself. Thus pagan notions of musical torture, such as the flaying of Marsyas by Apollo in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, are easily transposed into Christian notions about martyrdom as a prerequisite for the production of hymns of praise. If the series of analogies Holsinger proposes in his reading of the Marsyas myth, according to which Marsyas becomes first Apollo's lyre (so far so good) and then a prefiguration of the crucified Christ (a transformation unsupported by any real textual or iconographic evidence) is not finally convincing, it is a testimonial to Holsinger's enthusiasm for his argument and to his skill as a writer that he succeeds in making his reader want it to be true.

Holsinger's treatment of Augustine in the second chapter is enormously persuasive. He elaborates a nuanced discussion of Augustine's complex and inconsistent attitudes toward music through close readings of a number of passages spanning a broad range of texts by the bishop of Hippo. Holsinger is particularly good in his demonstration of the degree to which Augustine's ambivalence toward music is related to the complexity of his (also deeply ambivalent) attitude toward the body; Augustine begins by trying to free music from the body but eventually grows out of this somewhat simplistic attitude, just as he works to redeem the body itself from his own youthful Manichean rejection of it. My only complaint concerning this chapter is that I would have enjoyed seeing some treatment of the notion of musical embodiment in the context of *voluntas*, the will, which is for Augustine supposed to dominate and control the body, thus

sanctifying it. Holsinger on the subject of the musical farts evoked in Book 14 of the *City of God*, for instance, would have been worth reading.

Part II, “Liturgies of Desire,” moves the argument to the Middle Ages; this is perhaps the most controversial part of the book and is probably destined to raise objections, particularly from musicologists. Indeed, Chapter 3 is a revision of an earlier article (“The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19.1 [1993] 92-125) which has been both influential and much contested among Hildegard scholars. Holsinger has toned down some of the assertions made in the earlier essay, admitting, for instance, that the “range and melodic vividness” of the “Ave generosa” sequence are “unusual” rather than “unparalleled” (108-9), but there will still be those who object to his interpretation of the music itself as expressing homoerotic desire liberated from the confines of mere genital sex. Other readers like this reviewer, who admits to being rather unmusical, will find the argument less difficult to swallow, given the polymorphous perversity of much of Hildegard’s poetry. The Ursula cycle, for example, which Holsinger does not discuss, imagines a universe powered by an erotics which is consistently anti-heterosexual, like many of the passages concerning human desire for the divine in the *Scivias*. The following chapter, on “Polyphones and Sodomites,” develops an analogous argument about male same-sex desire and the invention of polyphony, grounded in readings of the homoerotic verse of the twelfth-century poet and composer Leoninus and his contemporaries. Holsinger weaves a dense nexus of connections between homoerotic poetry and the anxieties concerning polyphonic music, which was not infrequently represented as intrinsically “perverse” by contemporary writers. The chapter ends, inevitably perhaps but appropriately, with the perverse polyphony of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims, integrating a strikingly original reading of the “musical perversion of the family” in the Reeve’s Tale (186) with a consideration of the most famous sexual deviant of Middle English literature, the Pardoner.

The third part of the book, “Sounds of Suffering,” explores the intimate relationship between pain and musicality, tracing parallels between the vocalizations of the crucified Christ, the *imitatio Christi* of flagellants and other somatic mystics, and manuscript representations of the invention of music in Genesis and the psaltery of David. These metaphorical associations between music and pain become disturbingly literal in medieval treatises on the pedagogy of plainchant, such as the *Antiphoner* of Guido of Arezzo, which recommends solmization (the mnemonic system still familiar to us as “Do, a deer . . .”) as an alternative to the more habitual method of teaching music, which consisted of regular beatings. Holsinger uses these texts to argue that Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale of the little clergeon murdered by Jews operates to “expose the horrific acts that music is capable of provoking, sustaining and . . . aestheticizing for its medieval listeners and modern readers” (291).

Music, Body and Desire draws to a close with a section entitled “Resoundings”; chapter 7, “Orpheus in Parts,” maps the “fragmentation of [the] legend and [the] body” (343) of Orpheus, from its classical origins in Ovid and Vergil through medieval reimaginings in the *Ovide moralisé*, the works of Machaut, Dante and Lydgate, and several English renaissance authors. The problem with the Orpheus myth, according to Holsinger, is that in its most influential version (Ovid’s, from Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*), it tells a tale of desire reconfigured from the heterosexual to the homosexual. Christian texts deal with Orpheus’s prescription of the love

of boys as a remedy for the pain of a lost wife in a variety of ways: through an uncomfortable allegorization which cannot help but represent the desire of the Christian poet/monk for his savior as homoerotic, or by eliminating the homoerotic altogether in the service of a courtly heterosexual ideal, or by turning the homoerotic impulse into a homosocial argument against marriage. For Holsinger, it is precisely the polymorphous musical and sexual potential of the Orpheus myth that ensures its survival. The epilogue makes a plea for what Holsinger terms a “musicology of empathy,” that is, for an attempt on the part of the listener to participate in the “emotive, somatic character of past musical cultures” (348). Given the fractious debates about authenticity in the performance of medieval music—two recordings of the same Hildegardian song by two different groups can sound, to the non-professional modern ear, like two completely different pieces of music—this is a dangerous appeal to make, and Holsinger is aware of the fact. His insistence that language itself can achieve a sort of somatic musical sonority, one that has remained remarkably consistent over two thousand years in its association of music, pain, desire and delight, is, finally, powerfully seductive.

A few small notes of complaint must interject themselves into my praise for this book. While the index and bibliography are impressively comprehensive, the notes are surprisingly difficult to use, since the page heads give only the numbers of the chapters and not titles or page ranges. This is a criticism of the press rather than the author, perhaps. More significant are the occasional mistranslations or dubious renderings of Latin texts—the pronoun *vestra* (“your”), for instance, becomes in translation “our” in a passage from Peter Lombard cited on page 212, while some English renderings of Ovid are painfully ambiguous compared with the clarity of the Latin source. Such lapses are rare, however, and do not detract significantly from the remarkable riches this book has to offer.