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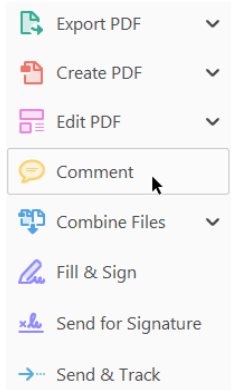
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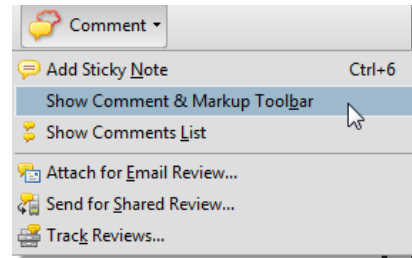
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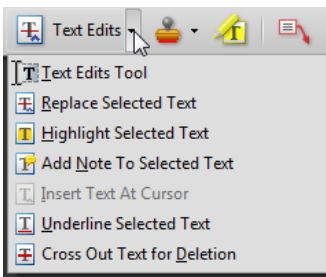


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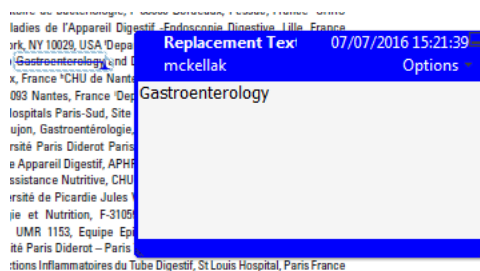
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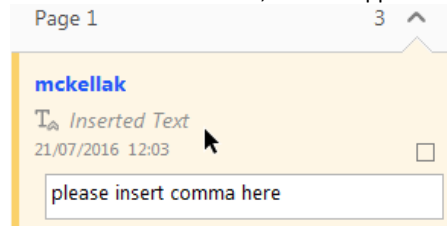


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REVIEW

Instrumentalists and Renaissance Culture, 1420–1600: Players of Function and Fantasy. By Victor Coelho and Keith Polk. pp. xix + 331. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2016. £64.99. ISBN 978-1-107-14580-1.)

In this slim and elegant volume, Victor Coelho and Keith Polk attempt an impressive and long overdue revision of a number of musicological and popular assertions. Reductionist in origin, these notions still afflict our understanding of music's place within its wider cultural context. Their main target is the understandable constraint of reconstructing cultural meaning only via the analysis of materials relevant to one type of production: composed, notated music. Woven through this deeply informative yet approachable text are discussions of the irrelevance of *Urtext* to Renaissance culture; the need for a rich sonic background in order to reach a deep understanding of any single composition; and the myriad functionalities of music and how they relate to their material and economic surroundings. Other threads include the unsustainable gap between aspects of musical production and appreciation both then and now, and a plethora of cautionary or illuminating parallelisms between old and current production methods and states of mind.

As they clearly explain in their prologue, this approach results in the synthesis of 'an array of disparate and diverse topics—patronage, source studies, performance, pedagogy, translation, instruments, improvisation, historiography and the music of both Brueghel's villagers and Fra Angelico's angels—under the umbrella of "instrumental music"' (p. 16). This commendable but daunting undertaking is complicated further by the explicit design of the book as a modular reference work. Chapters are self-contained, and the thirteen case studies that illustrate them function also as separable mini-essays. Furthermore, an ambition to appeal to a wider audience than Renaissance music specialists led the authors to avoid using musical examples. While resulting in a slightly increased level of repetition and internal cross-referencing, this makes the work as a whole didactically useful. It can act as a perfect starting point for anyone wanting to

approach this field, and for specialists interested in widening their horizons. The balance is not always perfect: some discussions require prior knowledge, while others seem to be designed to tickle the fancy of a novice in the field, but the flowing style compensates for both. Occasionally, especially when cross-referencing is not present, the modular construct gets in the way. For example, the reader is introduced to Burgundy as 'the model of power—1400–77' (pp. 18–22, including a case study on instrumental music during the reign of Philip the Good), but will not encounter the hugely relevant 1454 Feast of the Pheasant until some 150 pages later, where it forms the basis of a case study in the context of music in banquets (pp. 174–7). Still, none of these points should tempt the specialist reader to overlook this contribution or dismiss it as populist or lacking in rigour.

Chapter 1 offers a valuable survey of types of instrumental playing examined from the point of view of changing models of patronage, and institutional and economic interests. The concentration on trends and 'models of power' works well in compensating for the obvious inability to provide full coverage. A reader interested in loci not specifically mentioned would still find enough intellectual and geographical affiliations or points of cultural reference to identify a contextual starting point for further study. Similarly, fifteenth-century civic patronage is separated into three geographic affiliations. The concentration on political and economic pressures grounds these overviews, making sense of the different manifestations of interest in the topic. It is good to see that among the inescapable discussions of the changing patterns of court, city, and church patronage, room was found to examine instrumental uptake in the New World (pp. 42–6). It would, perhaps, have been interesting to discuss this in relation to other colonial or commercial exchanges in Africa and Asia.

The following chapter may seem more traditional, being a source-based history. It manages to avoid the pitfalls bedevilling such surveys through its clear sense of purpose: it does not attempt completeness; it insists on material, social, commercial, and intellectual

contextualization; and by choosing not to present musical examples, it avoids analyses of changes in minutiae of style. Quibbles over the choice of sources can always be made—it would, perhaps, have been useful to include a source for embellished cantus firmus compositions such as Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta, MS 1013—but the chapter is nonetheless successful in making the choice of eighteen highlighted sources (or groups of sources) seem cohesive and relevant to the wider discussion.

Chapters 3 and 5 attempt to look at the Renaissance musical scene from the point of view of the player, providing valuable information on the workings of the music industry on the one hand and insights concerning the acquisition, preparation, and dissemination of musical substance on the other. Thus, chapter 3 offers considerations of instrumentalists' social and geographical origins; patterns and levels of remuneration; recruitment; gender politics; the odd nod towards disability and music; and notions of amateurism and professionalism. Chapter 5, which more strictly separates the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century experiences, discusses musical education; unwritten practices and improvisation; the notion of translation as interpretation; and the fluidity inherent in both the notion of 'work' and the relationship between instrumentalist and composer. While containing important assertions essential for understanding music of the Renaissance and of the wider past in general, occasional discomforts do surface. For example, improvisers' actions in real time and the ways they relate to each other remain underdeveloped. Nevertheless, these two chapters are invaluable in countering much of the still prevalent, romanticized view of pure and abstract self-expression as the driving force behind both performance and composition, and of the notion of development or change as being intra-musical and separable from society, economics, and culture in general. They are separated by a chapter presenting locations of instrumental performance for which we have more evidence. While an understanding of terms such as festival, banquet, procession, religious celebration, and even dance within specific host cultures is valuable, I would argue it would have been more practical to place this chapter either closer to the discussion of patronage (as chapter 2 or 3), or after the description of the formation of a rounded musician (i.e. swap chapters 4 and 5).

The book ends with an extended chapter that—after some provisos, limitations, and methodological clarifications—presents a cata-

logue of mostly image-based instrument-specific entries. As is perhaps unavoidable, not all these overviews reach the same level of detail and comprehensiveness. For example, while the entry on the fifteenth-century lute follows recent thinking by challenging the old equation of plectrum-playing with monophony and finger-playing with polyphony, the entry for the harp completely avoids the documented use of metal strings, fingernail plucking, or the use of brae-pins. While this may sound like a pedantic point, the differences in sounding results between the harp types (and therefore musical appropriateness and ensemble-playing possibilities) are much greater than those concerning the lute. Indeed, one can claim that this period sports no singular, pan-European notion of a harp's essence, and that this category should be separated into at least three sub-entries. When attempting to offer a complete survey or to understand the logic and practicalities of the Renaissance sound-world, missing out on two of these three options is a problem.

As a whole, this book achieves some remarkable intellectual feats. Pleasantly and approachably, it tackles problems such as the meaning of 'Renaissance' in music, how we should view and analyse music history and historical practice, and the dangers of trying to separate any aspect of culture from its immediate political, social, and economic contexts. At the same time, it offers a large amount of well-referenced information, exposes a host of still-lingering historiographical problems, and debunks stereotypes and misconceptions by the spadeful. As is inevitable in such undertakings, it has problems. For example, there were many unwritten and marginalized traditions of vocal production that have more in common with instrumental practices than with composed polyphony, but which rarely get a mention. Similarly, the need to draw a line in the sand with regard to chronological relevance creates the occasional missed opportunity. Thus, instrumental enthusiasts such as King John I of Aragon (1350–96) are not included even though he imported much foreign talent and supported the institutionalization of stable courtly ensembles with instruments. Perhaps more importantly, the earlier stages of some processes remain vague. For example, the presentation of composers of polyphony c.1400 as primarily professional singers (p. 189) ignores the fact that this state of affairs is not an ideological given, but a relatively recent development (neither of the 'great' proponents of fourteenth-century French musical culture—Philippe de Vitry or Guillaume de Machaut—employed as professional musicians). On

occasion, a rather broad brush is used. Nonetheless, Coelho and Polk make many important points that have to be stated, and succeed in offering an accessible yet thought-provoking work that deals with complicated interdisciplinary materials in a way that is valuable for students, teachers, practitioners, and researchers. It is

profoundly informative as a complete read, and just as useful as a reference book or a bibliographical guide. I wholeheartedly recommend it.

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