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Review – The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism (*Music & Letters*)

Alexander Kolassa (*The Open University*)

The annually published collection of essays, *Studies in Medievalism*, begins each edition with a quotation from Lord Acton, stating, with a grandiloquence typical of his nineteenth-century milieu, that ‘two great principles divide the world, and contend for the master, antiquity and the middle ages’.¹ Not coincidentally, this quotation appears early on in the history of a movement known as ‘medievalism’,² which is to say, as Kirstin Yri and Stephen C. Meyer only very briefly define it at the start of *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism*, the ‘retrospective immersion in the images, sounds, narratives and ideologies of the European Middle Ages’ (p. 1). Given what this ‘immersion in the Middle Ages’ would come to mean in the context of Romanticism and the Gothic Revival, there is a hint (or pre-echo), not unsurprisingly, in Lord Acton’s rumination of what Nietzsche would later theorise in his Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic. If antiquity is seen to represent a sealed-off and perfect order to which we, in the West, have historically aspired, it is the ever, and hauntingly, present medieval that is a threatening and temporally destabilising force.

Yri and Meyer’s 776-page, 33-chapter *Handbook* comes at the perfect time, then. At our own fraught historical juncture with the return of history and its attendant anxieties about the past, it is unsurprising that medievalism, with its own co-existing concern for the reception of a present past, has been thriving. In interdisciplinary academic circles, but also para-academic ones, too, and in popular culture more generally. Relatively little has come out in print broaching the subject from a specifically musicological perspective, however, and even then, the focus is less on medievalism as such, than it is, say, on the popular reception of early music. This *Handbook* will therefore prove instrumental in defining the contours of an emerging field. In its historical and topically sweeping narrative, the volume boldly covers everything from nineteenth-century historical-scientific thought, and grand opera, through twentieth-century compositional technique, early music revivals, representations of medieval women, film (both silent and modern), television, heavy metal, and video game. And, roughly in that order too: which might be a strength, but also, in my estimation, is perhaps the collection’s main weakness.

Medievalism studies, as an interdisciplinary discursive space, has the powerful potential to destabilise mono-temporal or teleological perspectives of history, and, in so doing, elide some of the kinds of dominant binaries that characterise much academic work in music, such as those that separate the ‘high’ and ‘low’ brows, not to mention the *then* and *now*. And this much, it might be said, is recognised by editors of this collection in their introduction (p. 4). That much is not, however, always readily apparent when reading the book, however. Take for example, James Deaville’s chapter (appearing late on) on the tropes of ‘evil medieval’ in film from the 1960s and 1970s. It is a convincing, and enjoyable, study of the ‘semiotic reversal’ of the symbols and practices of Roman Catholic Church, through parody, and into something wholly and recognisably diabolical. To its strength, Deaville’s chapter is at least as much about nineteenth-century opera (the subject of the book’s first section) and literature as it is about film (as well their own contemporaneous politics, that includes Hollywood Satanism and Vatican II), though. Barbara Eichner’s comprehensive account (and even, to some extent, deconstruction) of Wagner’s medievalism, his blurring of pre-history, myth, the medieval, and romanticism, and his promulgations of ‘creative misunderstandings’ (as in the case of the famous Viking horned helmet) does much to complicate any assumed linearity in dramatic—musical—conceptions of time. Indeed, this chapter ends

¹ Published by Boydell & Brewer, *Studies in Medievalism* is on its 29th volume.

² There are antiquarian precedents, and any precise origin of ‘medievalism’ is no doubt contestable. David Matthews, nevertheless, situates its emergence, and high-water mark, in the 1840s. See David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015), x.

with some thoughts on the score for *Lord of the Rings*, and, even, the Wagnerian-lite marketing of a Peppa Pig toy(!). In some ways, this chapter's mantle, then, is taken up again by Stephen C. Meyer *back* in the final section. That chapter explores the 'twin dialectics' of enchantment and disenchantment, and history and myth too, not simply in Howard Shore's Wagnerian (*qua* leitmotivic) scoring for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, but also in the film's commercial branding. This paradox, of it being both numinous myth and commercial product, is best typified for Meyer by the first film's extensive prologue and credits sequence.

The temporal, trans-medial, criss-crossing of subject matter in chapters just mentioned is exciting. But for all the wealth of perspectives here, I felt, as a reader confronted with a series of subsections ordered chronologically, somewhat discouraged from recognising the ways in which these subjects interleave. Take for instance, the somewhat arbitrary distinction in sections 1 and 3 of the book, titled 'Romanticising the medieval: the longing for the medieval in the nineteenth century' and 'Medievalism and compositional practice in the twentieth century' respectively. These titles paint epochal clichés that are not strictly borne out in the content of the chapters themselves: a nineteenth century of nationalistic nostalgia and melancholy, and a modern repertoire of dry procedural practice. Balázs Mikusi's early chapter on 'Liszt's medievalist modernism' for example, has much to say in concert with those on modern music, especially in Liszt's own 'modernist' treatment of chant (its discussion of Gypsy music too—the imaginative slippage from folk music to medieval—likewise chimes with section 5's investigation of 'folk, rock, and metal'). Whilst Deborah Heckert's negotiation of British early twentieth-century modernism, the use of medievalism to 'walk a tight line between a conservative backward glance[...] and the forward-looking demands of contemporary music' (p. 337), likewise complements the first section's chapters on nineteenth-century French regionalism (Elinor Olin), German nationalism (Michael S. Richardson and Marie Sumner Lott on Schumann and Brahms respectively), and more, in ways more instructive to what the study of medievalism might offer than the collection's linear organisation might suggest. Lisa Colton and Ann Stone's chapters also explore contemporary repertoire with little recourse to 'compositional process' per se. Colton, for example, rightly explores, in the work of Margaret Lucy Wilkins, how so much dynamic music in the years between 1960 and 2000 drew on early music, and makes illuminating connections to nineteenth-century thinking too, and especially Ruskin's theorisation of the Gothic in architecture. Stone too enriches her analysis of George Benjamin's opera *Written on Skin* through the metaphor of the palimpsest, the recycled manuscript page that contains layers of work, past and present co-existing.

The subject of race, and, by extension, the tricky relationship that images of medievalism share with reactionary (and neo-reactionary) movements, of racism and white supremacy, threatens to become something of the elephant in the room in this collection. Indeed, such topics are mentioned, but only passingly, in otherwise excellent chapters on doom metal, Viking metal, and pagan folk music (Ross Hagen, Simon Trafford, and Scott R. Troyer)—all three of which will serve, nevertheless, as cogent and valuable introductions to the topics for those uninitiated in these most esoteric corners of the popular music subcultural landscape. Kirsten Yri's contribution also skilfully employs medievalism to exculpatory ends in the context of Carl Orff's Nazi associations, seeing his 'unvarnished' medievalism as a 'corrective' to its 'official' form with 'concomitant ties to glorifying bureaucracy and imperialism' (p.274). And whilst there is nothing inherently wrong here, it is a utopic (or rose-tinted) form of medievalism that prevails throughout. Medievalism Studies has recently been recognising the need to redress these significant and pertinent issues (especially in light of the discipline's recognised whiteness).³ Some meaningful consideration of medievalism's negative connotations is pressing indeed and would have been both timely and important if included here. It is surprising, perhaps, that the chapter that deals best with the subject of race is Jacob Sagrens' account of the invented tradition of the

³ See the work on *The Public Medievalist* blog (<https://www.publicmedievalist.com/>), and Andrew B.R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriate the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

Christmas Lessons and Carols in the context of the so-called English Renaissance. The vexed question of performance authenticity and timbral ‘purity’ in the singing voice (with all its attendant associations of whiteness) is a welcome inclusion to this volume’s discursive panorama.

Perhaps, then, tucked away at the end of the book, it is in the final sixth section (somewhat reductively titled ‘Medievalism of the screen’) that the collection hits its temporally topsy-turvy stride. And though ostensibly packaged as if for a ‘screen’ music niche, discussions of scores (already mentioned) for film, in addition to television and video game (James Cook and Karen Cook), invariably draw widely on musics from nineteenth-century opera through to progressive rock. The discussions themselves are varied and nuanced too: Alexis Luko’s chapter about Ingmar Bergman (and the films *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*), for example, deals as much with silence (heralded, in fact, in the *Book of Revelations* and realised apophatically by Bergman) as it does with music itself. Medievalism, for Bergman, becomes as much about articulating the lack of a God, as well as the uncanny reality of an unglorified brutal past. Meanwhile, John Haines’ contribution—part anti-Disney polemic, part celebration of that most prominent ‘purveyor of medievalism’ (which is to say, Disney as well)—draws instructive parallels between the developments of both medievalism and the origins of capitalism itself.

This handbook, then, is a must read for anyone interested in a growing field intersecting the academic study of music with that of medievalism (or the Middle Ages’ afterlives). That I have not had the room to discuss a good number of its contributions, on, among other things, representations of women and of performance practice is testament to the ambition and wealth of ideas contained within. But even if your interest is limited to only one of this large collection’s many subjects, its diverse encounters with other periods and places is hugely valuable. However, in its rather rigid conception, modernity’s linear chronologies remain mostly intact. If the Dionysian Medieval has the potential to productively destabilise the present—as I suggested at the start of this review—that energy is (wrongly or rightly) slightly subdued here. That said, this collection, by the editors’ own admission, proposes no comprehensive overview of a subject both paradoxically and by necessity unrestrained by time and place; in this way it will, I hope, be a valuable catalyst for future work.