

[Allen, Aaron S.](#) Review of Music in Renaissance Cities and Courts, for *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXXIII/4 (Spring 2003): 609-611.

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Music and Musicians in Renaissance Cities and Towns. Edited by Fiona Kisby (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001) 188 pp. \$59.95
It is high time that historians and musicologists (a.k.a. “music historians”) start sharing ideas in an accessible language free of complex terminology and disciplinary jargon, while still providing keen insights into historical material. *Music and Musicians in Renaissance Cities and Towns*, which includes contributions by fourteen scholars from various fields, is a good step in that direction. Historians in music departments with interests in the early modern period are sure to benefit from the urban-history methods in it. (Doing so would not be unusual since musicologists have always drawn from disciplines such as history, literature, art history, and, in more recent times, sociology, psychology, and critical studies.) Historians in history departments, as well as interdisciplinary scholars from many other fields, however, would also appreciate the volume, which has much to say about the cultural/artistic milieus of the times, places, and peoples of traditional historical inquiry.

Kisby’s introduction seeks to justify the project of uniting urban history and musicology, which could have been done without her occasionally argumentative tone. Her criticism of the *Consolidated Bibliography of Urban History* is convincing enough to justify the project. Only about 6 percent of the c. 20,000 entries in it deal with “culture,” and “virtually none concerns music in towns and cities in pre-industrial Europe or indeed that of any time or place” (5).¹ Urban historians have tended to focus on the origins of, and activities in, cities as well as the social consequences of urban living. Musicologists, meanwhile, have explored the history of music in specific geographical/political centers.² Urban history offers musicology a more contextual approach, as opposed to the “fetishising [of] genres or institutions” that Kisby laments in the typical one-place model of musicology (6). Therefore, in selecting and editing her authors’ contributions, Kisby has espoused the general scope and a few of the methods of urban history and applied them to musicological studies with the hope of offering some “culture” to urban historians and some new contextual methods to musicologists.

1 Richard Roger (ed.), *A Consolidated Bibliography of Urban History* (Aldershot, 1996).

2 To cite only three of many such studies, see Lewis Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara, 1400–1505* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); Reinhard Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (New York, 1985); Martha Feldman, *City Culture and the Madrigal at Venice* (Berkeley, 1995).

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The introduction sets the stage for the ensuing articles, but the message is better gleaned from reading the thirteen chapters that comprise the rest of the book. Each of the articles could be read separately, although reading in this way would miss the connections between them. Some of the common themes first appear in the opening article by Strohm, who examines the musical relationships between the institutions of the Austrian cities of Balzano, Innsbruck, and Vienna. Strohm recognizes and acknowledges the assumptions and prejudices of modern scholars: This “perspective ... refrains from conjecturing institutional and social parameters across all those spaces where transmission has simply denied us the details of life and thought. We really do not know what originally filled those spaces” (14). These two topics—institutional interrelatedness and the recognition of modern biases—recur in many of the later studies.

Various sub-themes appear throughout other articles. The topic of the Reformation arises in studies of cathedral music and politics in Dublin and of church music in north German towns during the sixteenth century. Because the latter study deals extensively with historiographical issues, it provides an approach that differs from the largely archival makeup of the other chapters. The professional lives of musicians are illuminated in an article about singers and scribes in Brussels’ secular churches and in an excellent article on cathedral choirmen in England, from 1558 to 1649. Smaller-scale communities are the subject of studies on English parishes, the guilds of the small town of Louth, England, and the academic colleges and town of Oxford. A further chapter examines the silence of the archives regarding music in the burgh of Haddington, Scotland; another makes a comparison between three southern French cities (Montpellier, Toulouse, and Avignon) and their respective civic patronage. “Civic image” is the topic of a study that examines music and ceremonial space in Venice; the impact of the imperial court on Spanish cities is the subject of yet another. Rounding out the book is a fascinating chapter about music in Spanish America, 1530 to 1650, that left me wishing for more on the topic.

Although the topics are interesting and diverse, Kisby did not collect the most balanced array of scholars and articles, possibly hindering the reception of the work across disciplinary boundaries. Eleven of the fourteen authors are musicologists; two are historians; and one is a scholar of English drama. Eleven of the authors comprise a decidedly Anglophone bent (six from England and Wales, three from the United States, and one each from Ireland and Scotland). Authors from Columbia, Spain, and Germany complete the list of contributors. Moreover, six of the articles deal with topical areas in the British Isles. Unlike in many Renaissance studies, Italian topics do not dominate (there is only one such article), and the contribution on music making in colonial Latin America is particularly welcome. But to complain about the balance is a minor point; Kisby explicitly writes that the volume is meant to be an “offering to ... urban historians,” as well as to musicologists (13).

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The language in the volume is generally accessible, with only a handful of unexplained music-specific terms. Some of the literature cited may be unfamiliar to those outside of musicology, and the composers named are not always the most famous, though, in context, their appeal may be broader (for example, Soterraña Aguirre Rincón discusses known works of Josquin des Prez and Nicolas Gombert, two popular composers of the Renaissance who could be used to illuminate the court of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V).

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