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Review of Yolanda Plumley, *The Grammar of 14th Century Melody: Tonal Organization and Compositional Process in the Chansons of Guillaume de Machaut and the Ars Subtilior*.

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## Reviews

Yolanda Plumley. *The Grammar of 14th Century Melody: Tonal Organization and Compositional Process in the Chansons of Guillaume de Machaut and the Ars Subtilior*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996. xxvi + 335 pp. ISBN 0 8153 2065 5

This book is a revised and retitled version of a doctoral thesis presented to Exeter University in 1991. It appears in the Garland series, Outstanding Dissertations in Music from British Universities. In reviewing it I must acknowledge that I am not a disinterested party. Work of my own from the mid-1980s, which Dr Plumley first encountered in the form of a conference paper read at Southampton University in 1987, and which in modified guise was only just recently published ('Signature-systems and tonal types in the fourteenth-century French chanson', *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 4/2 (1995), pp. 117–47), forms a central point of departure for her work. The resulting volume, which I believe is a highly important contribution to the field, is very much to my taste in terms of the approach to the material, the kinds of questions asked, and the kinds of results that were found.

In the most general terms, Plumley's concern is tonal behaviour in the fourteenth-century French chanson. About half the book (chapters 3–6) is devoted to the monophonic and polyphonic songs of Machaut, with a roughly equal amount of flanking material comprising two introductory chapters on systematic issues and two closing chapters on the ballades of the Chantilly Manuscript. Her approach is two-fold, generating both summaries of data extracted from many works and also looking at individual pieces; the sense of moving back and forth from the general to the particular is characteristic and usually beneficial. The resulting text is dense and demands a close, engaged reading undertaken with patience and with scratch paper and all the necessary published editions of music close at hand.

Plumley's systematic approach to chanson analysis is that of a modern outsider, in the sense that it makes no attempt to read chanson polyphony through fourteenth-century eyes and conceptual frameworks; considerations of

solmisation and hexachord, mensuration, mode and contrapunctus are held firmly at arm's length. Rather, trying to beg as few questions as possible, she begins her examination of the grammar of melody by laying out the fundamental concept of tonal type, which sorts the chansons rather neutrally into categories simply by cantus final, register and signature system. In fact, this sorting system is remarkably successful at grouping together pieces that share behaviours, allowing us to identify the conventional, the unconventional but grammatically permissible, and the anomalous. The vocabulary, methodological framework and issues laid out in chapters 1 and 2 follow Lefferts (1995), but nothing is taken for granted as Plumley insightfully re-examines, amplifies and modifies this earlier work. Emphasis is laid here not on the outer bounds and most adventurous tonal choices made by composers, but on the strongly prevalent norms and most frequently used tonalities, in particular through a lengthy examination of natural-system c pieces and the beta tonal types. (The tonal orientation of the beta types around two focal points, so that ambiguity about the identity of the final becomes a characteristic feature, is a particularly elegant discovery.)

One significant concept elaborated by Plumley is what she calls 'oppositional tones'. It can be demonstrated that for each tonal type there are certain tones that play a central role in opposition to the final. Most typically and consistently these are a pair of cantus goals at interior sectional cadences, but Plumley demonstrates the role of these and one or two other crucial notes in the initial sonority of the song, at initial and cadence points of interior phases (concentrating her demonstration on the ballade, where phrase structures become particularly stereotyped), and as boundary tones of registral outlines traced by cantus and tenor phrases. In a given signature system, the function of some specific pitches seems to be fixed in the gamut. For instance, in the two-flat system, A and D are opposition tones for the tonal types with finals on B-flat and C. However, Plumley demonstrates that other conventional oppositional relationships are what she calls 'spatial', in that they are determined by distance from the final; this important insight is particularly true of the beta tonal types.

A second significant area of innovation by Plumley concerns the identification of standard melodic and contrapuntal progressions common to a tonal type or class of types. A graphic, reductive analysis is used here. By these means we are shown first of all how the composing out of a basic tonal framework could be approached in a variety of ways. Moreover, whether within a single chanson, or approached comparatively over a series of works, we are shown how much more standardized melodic progressions are in the cantus than in the tenor and how composers may create differing tenor responses to the same common linear structure in the cantus – revisiting these larger shapes to do the same work another way. Here is further evidence for the priority of the cantus rather than of the tenor in the chanson, a central observation that had been first convincingly demonstrated in the analysis of cantus and tenor pitches at major cadential points. Just exactly what this priority amounts to in the compositional process is a difficult question that Plumley addresses many times from first one angle,

then another, using comments on each new pertinent example to provide a nuanced, undogmatic appraisal of the issue. The dichotomy 'successive/simultaneous' proves to be too limiting, since facts about tonal precedence need not imply full melodic precedence, and she finds evidence for the interaction of linear and contrapuntal structures. Ultimately, 'speculation must step in as to how precisely the composer put together a song' (p. 117).

This book is not free of small flaws that the copy-editing services of an academic press would have picked up. One occasionally stumbles over the odd word that seems out of place measured against the general level of the prose (e.g., complexification, syntagmatic). The tables of data, while generously provided, handsomely designed and skilfully integrated into the text layout, can be underexplained and difficult to interpret. In at least one case (p. 155) the order of two music examples has been reversed. The usefulness of alphabetical indices of chansons with page numbers, and of appendices of the chansons of Machaut and Chantilly listed in the order number of their editions in the series *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century*, is mitigated by the lack of cross-referencing between these tools. And it is always appropriate to voice the desire for footnotes rather than endnotes.

More substantially, I see a consistent rhetorical problem when analytical language and insights generated through a synoptic overview of a work are presented as a scenario for composition or attentive listening. This can be illustrated by the case of the cantus pitches that begin and end the first phrase of a ballade. As listeners, at any rate, we do not know at this point what the final is. How can we then feel the oppositional character of pitches at these locations, or recognize an ambiguity concerning the identity of the final? (For a particularly clear example, see Plumley's discussion of two sister ballades from the *Voir dit* (Machaut ballades 32 and 33), one of them a natural-system c piece and the other in natural-system d (pp. 159–60). Each begins on cantus c and cadences at the end of the first phrase to d. How do we know that in one case this gesture introduces ambiguity and in the other not? This question really requires a retrospective answer, not one based on immediate experience of the unfolding song.) A related issue involves the stance of analytical omniscience, a familiar rhetorical ploy in which Plumley is merely following our profession's convention, where we write that 'the piece does this or that'. Such prose not only blurs the distinction between how a piece is experienced as it unfolds versus one's later, reflective grasp of its totality, but too often also fails to distinguish between what we might propose to claim as the author's intentions, on the one hand (however fraught with danger that exercise might be), and the insights of the analyst-observer on the other. Plumley is aware of these distinctions, but rigorously maintaining the highest level of self-consciousness about them could only help to sharpen the impact of her observations about melodic grammar.

Upon its publication this book has become the central work of scholarship in its field. Although to absorb its methodology and observations requires an initially steep learning curve, this is an effort that will open rather than close

doors to future research, inviting participation in a rich stock of problems that forms an exciting research agenda for scholars and teaching seminars. Plumley's work should help us to explore in even greater depth the evolution of the tonal behaviour of chanson polyphony in the fourteenth century and the continuation of this idiom into the fifteenth; to examine the cantus–tenor duet in other tonal types with a sharpened eye for recurring melodic and contrapuntal schema; to investigate categories of works not central to the present study such as the later fourteenth-century rondeau and virelai; and to revisit those few most tonally adventurous works that lie at the margins of the system and push on its boundaries. At the same time, we are better prepared for the evaluation of competing explanatory models for tonal behaviour – better prepared to ask whether the consistent tonal behaviours that Plumley has demonstrated can be understood in light of the constraints of modal theory's pentachords and tetrachords, or perhaps can be seen alternatively as operating under bounds defined by hexachordal structures and conventional solmisations. Finally, issues surrounding such discomfiting observations as that tonal types of the same class (e.g., the alpha-majors with finals on B-flat, F, C and G) are not simple transpositions of one another with respect to tonal behaviour, invite fascinating speculation about how composers imagined, and chose to notate, their songs.

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