From at least the eighth century and for about a thousand years the repertory of music now known as Gregorian chant, or plainsong, formed the largest body of written music, was the most frequently performed and the most assiduously studied in Western civilization. It lay at the root of all instruction in practical music, and in some sense is at the core of the enormous portion of notated music that survives today.

But plainsong did not follow rigid conventions. It seems increasingly clear that, whatever may have been intended with respect to uniformity and tradition, the practice of plainsong varied considerably within time and place. It is just this variation, this living quality of plainsong, that these essays address. In addition, much new information is made available on the study of local rites and practices, and on the liturgical matrix of important polyphonic repertories.

The contributors have sought information from a wide variety of areas: liturgy, architecture, art history, secular and ecclesiastical history and hagiography, as a step towards reassembling the tesserae of cultural history into the rich mosaic from which they came.
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN PERFORMANCE PRACTICE 2

Plainsong in the age of polyphony
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN PERFORMANCE PRACTICE 2

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Plainsong in
the age of polyphony

Edited by
THOMAS FORREST KELLY
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GENERAL PREFACE

No doubt the claim, heard frequently today, that ‘authentic performance’ is a chimera, and that even the idea of an ‘authentic edition’ cannot be sustained for (most) music before the last century or two, is itself the consequence of too sanguine an expectation raised by performers and scholars alike in the recent past. Both have been understandably concerned to establish that a certain composer ‘intended so-and-so’ or ‘had such-and-such conditions of performance in mind’ or ‘meant it to sound in this way or that’. Scholars are inclined to rule on problems (‘research confirms the following . . .’), performers to make the music a living experience (‘artistry or musicianship suggests the following . . .’). Both are there in order to answer certain questions and establish an authority for what they do; both demonstrate and persuade by the rhetoric of their utterance, whether well-documented research on one hand or convincing artistic performance on the other; and the academic/commercial success of both depends on the effectiveness of that rhetoric. Some musicians even set out to convey authority in both scholarship and performance, recognizing that music is conceptual and perceptual and thus not gainfully divisible into separate, competitive disciplines. In general, if not always, the scholar appears to aim at the firm, affirmative statement, often seeing questions as something to be answered confidently rather than searchingly redefined or refined. In general, with some exceptions, performers have to aim at the confident statement, for their very livelihood hangs on an unhesitating decisiveness in front of audience or microphone. In the process, both sometimes have the effect, perhaps even the intention, of killing the dialectic — of thwarting the progress that comes with further questions and a constant ‘yes, but’ response to what is seen, in the light of changing definitions, as ‘scholarly evidence’ or ‘convincing performance’.

In the belief that the immense activity in prose and sound over the last few decades is now being accompanied by an increasing awareness of the issues arising — a greater knowledge at last enabling the questions to be more closely defined — the Cambridge Studies in Performance Practice will attempt to make regular contributions to this area of study, on the basis of several assumptions. Firstly, at its best, Performance Practice is so difficult a branch of study as to be an almost
impossibly elusive ideal. It cannot be merely a practical way of ‘combining performance and scholarship’, for these two are fundamentally different activities, each able to inform the other only up to a certain point. Secondly, if Performance Practice has moved beyond the questions (now seen to be very dated) that exercised performance groups of the 1950s and 60s, it can widen itself to include any or all music written before the last few years. In this respect, such studies are a musician’s equivalent to the cry of literary studies, ‘Only contextualize!’; and this can serve as a useful starting-point for the historically minded performer or the practically minded scholar. (The Derridaesque paradox that there is no context may have already affected some literary studies, but context is still clearly crucial across the broad field of music, the original Comparative Literature.) Cambridge Studies in Performance Practice will devote volumes to any period in which useful questions can be asked, ranging from at least Gregorian chant to at least Stravinsky.

Thirdly, Performance Practice is not merely about performing, neither 'this is how music was played' nor 'this is how you should play it in a concert or recording today'. (These two statements are as often as not irreconcilable.) In studying all that we can about the practical realization of a piece of music we are studying not so much how it was played but how it was heard, both literally and on a deeper level. How it was conceived by the composer and how it was perceived by the period’s listener are endless questions deserving constant study, for they bring one into intimate contact with the historical art of music as nothing else can. It is the music we fail to understand, not its performance as such, if we do not explore these endless questions. As we know, every basic musical element has had to be found, plucked out of thin air – the notes, their tuning, compass, volume, timbre, pace, timing, tone, combining – and they have constantly changed. In attempting to grasp or describe these elements as they belong to a certain piece of music, it could become clear that any modern re-realization in (public) performance is a quite separate issue. Nevertheless, it is an issue of importance to the wider musical community, as can be seen from the popular success of performers and publications (records, journals, books) concerned with 'authenticity'. In recognizing this practical importance, Cambridge Studies in Performance Practice will frequently call upon authoritative performers to join scholars in the common cause, each offering insights to the process of learning to ask and explore the right questions.

Peter Williams
ABBREVIATIONS

BL British Library
BN Bibliothèque Nationale
CMM Corpus mensurabilis musicae
CSM Corpus scriptorium de musica
GS Martin Gerbert, *Scriptores ecclesiastici de musica sacra potissimum*, 3 vols., St Blasien, 1784, repr. 1963
JAMS *Journal of the American Musicological Society*
LU *Liber usualis*, edited by the Benedictines of Solesmes, Tournai, Desclée, various editions
MGG *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Friedrich Blume, 14 vols. plus supplement, Kassel, 1949–73
MQ *The Musical Quarterly*
RISM Répertoire internationale des sources musicales