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Schier, Volker, and Corine Schleif, project dirs. Opening the Geese Book

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Schier, Volker, and Corine Schleif, project dirs.

Opening the Geese Book.

Tempe: Arizona State University, 2012. Accessed 18 July 2023.

geesebook.asu.edu.

Medieval and Renaissance manuscript choirbooks were prestige objects, expensive to produce and highly prized. Containing polyphony or plainchant, they were inscribed on vellum and richly decorated, with illuminated capitals marking out major divisions and special feast days. As large objects, designed to be placed on a lectern and sung from by groups of men and boys, they reflected the wealth and status of the church and city for which they were prepared. The chant book (divided into two volumes and now held in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York) at the heart of this project was copied for the church of St. Lorenz in Nuremberg between 1507 and 1510 and reflects that city's self-fashioning during the period immediately before the Reformation. It contains the plainchant proper and ordinary Mass chants for the liturgical year. Decorations include elaborate acanthus patterns and scenes from the Bible. There are also satirical scenes, including an image of seven geese and a fox singing from just such a choirbook, directed by a wolf; this has led to the combined volumes being dubbed the "Geese Book" (*Gänsebuch* in German).

The impressive Opening the Geese Book website is the result of a research project based at Arizona State University, directed by art historian Corine Schleif and musicologist Volker Schier, and involving a number of other institutions and collaborators. Funding was provided by a variety of sponsors including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the hosting university, the Archdiocese of Bamberg, and a couple of Nuremberg banks. The website was completed in 2012, after 10 years of work, and seems not to have been updated since then. It is easy to navigate, with the first tab giving access to a full page-by-page facsimile, providing drop-down menus to allow quick retrieval of particular pages and feast days. An on/off tab highlights those pages containing chants that were recorded as part of the project (see below). Other tabs give access to a detailed codicological description, as well as to 14 extended video lectures (using Vimeo) dealing with different aspects of the book's gestation and the process of copying and decorating it; transcripts of the texts of these videos are included separately. The book's colophons name

many of those responsible for its commissioning and preparation, and these names have been followed up in some painstaking research, which has yielded a mine of information, all detailed in these videos. Two presentations further contextualize the book with views of its original home in medieval Nuremberg and, by filming a ceremonial opening of the book, of its present home in the Morgan Library and Museum (formerly the Pierpont Morgan Library). The latter is introduced by a recording of Frank Sinatra's hit song "New York, New York," which somewhat incongruously morphs into a piece of chant from the book and back again; this could be heard as a none-too-subtle indication of cultural appropriation, but that is a discussion for another place.

Three of the videos deal in greater detail with two of the Mass propers as case studies: that of the Holy Lance (unique to this source and connected with an important imperial relic held in medieval Nuremberg), and that of St. Monica (mother of the Church Father St. Augustine). The feast of the Holy Lance is contextualized within recent scholarship on gendering, while a detailed analysis of its sequence, *Hodiernae festum lucis* (This day's feast of light), demonstrates how the tessitura and intervallic content of the music was used to accentuate the description of the stabbing of Christ's side in the text. Similarly, the melody of the offertory of the Monica liturgy is shown to relate closely to its text. These two studies are good examples of the sort of detailed research and analysis that the publication of the book makes possible—and that could fruitfully be extended to other feasts.

On the musical side, a representative sample of the chants has been recorded by the Schola Hungarica of Budapest, directed by László Dobszay and Janka Szendrei, providing a total of 23 tracks (also available as a CD) taken from across a range of proper chants (though of the ordinary settings). On the website, each track has a link to the appropriate page of the facsimile, though some (tracks 5, 7, 14, and 18) do not currently land on the correct page, something that could easily be fixed. A more fundamental issue is a lack of alignment between recorded chant and book page, caused by the fact that almost all of these chants are spread over at least two pages, often starting low down on one page and continuing onto the next. There is no automatic page turn built into the system, and although the page can be turned manually, this interrupts the recording, and one must recommence listening from the top. Such page turns are already an integral part of other websites and would much improve the listening experience here. There is, in fact, only one case

where the whole chant appears on one page and corresponds in its entirety to the recording: appropriately, this is the introit for the feast of St. Laurence, patron of the church for which the book was commissioned. Transcriptions and translations of the Latin texts are provided in English and German. There are no transcriptions of the music, which would make another useful addition.

From a musicological perspective, the website—whose stated mission is to demonstrate a critical model for reintegrating the arts and recontextualizing them historically—proves rather disappointing. While there is detailed discussion of the artistic, political, and cultural contexts of the choirbook, there is little or nothing on how the music was obtained or copied. In an extended series of bibliographies purporting to deal with all aspects of the book, nothing refers to music. One academic paper by musicologist Volker Schier is cited in the “goals” section (under the “project” tab), but its contents—dealing with tropes in these choirbooks and their relationship with the Rite of the Diocese of Bamberg (in which Nuremberg lay)—have not found their way onto the website. There is no information about sources for the chant melodies or how they might have related to other liturgies, whether in the diocese of Bamberg or elsewhere. While the recorded performances by the Schola Hungarica are convincing artistically, it would have been good to have included some discussion about performance practice and how particular interpretations of the musical notation were arrived at. The codicological description correctly describes the notation as being in “*Hufnagelschrift* on five lines, *Patrem* melodies (275r–286v) in semi-mensural notation.” No further explanation is given, however, nor is there any discussion about why the *Patrem* (i.e., Credo) settings should have been so singled out (none of the Credo settings are included among the recorded tracks). The four sequences recorded here are sung in a semi-mensural manner (which is, in fact, a sensible approach for these rhyming poetic texts), but the rationale for this is not explained.

These criticisms aside, Opening the Geese Book is a very laudable project that has opened up an important source to scholars of various disciplines as well as to broader audiences. The experience of listening to these chants while following the source and admiring its illustrations is extremely worthwhile, as are the detailed explanatory videos. It seems a pity, therefore, that a “forum” tab, which invites discussion of the Geese Book and related topics, leads to a blank page that shows no sign of having been activated. As indicated above, much

could still be added; it would certainly be good if the site were to remain an active, rather than a historical, one.

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