



**Simon Jackson.** *George Herbert and Early Modern Musical Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2023. xvi + 266 pp. ISBN 9781009098069. \$99.99 hardback.

Music by nature is a communal and communicative artform—one that Simon Jackson shows is integral to the origins, intended purposes, and uses of George Herbert's poetry. In his beautifully composed monograph *George Herbert and Early Modern Musical Culture*, Jackson argues that harmony—the bringing together of disparate parts into resonant relationship, even unity—is a fundamental principle of George Herbert's poetics and theology, and that Herbert and his poetry are best understood not in isolation, but as part of a dynamic community of voices—lyric, musical, and theological. This book not only sheds light on seventeenth-century musical culture, on the tensions and harmonies between Renaissance *musica speculativa* and *musica practica*, but also on Herbert's lyric voices in *The Temple* and on his sacramental poetics—sacramental indeed because of their musical qualities.

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Jackson helpfully begins his “Introduction” by situating Herbert’s life, from his earliest childhood, through his Cambridge years, to his time in Bemerton and Salisbury, and finally to his death, within the rich musical environment of Herbert’s family and home. As his early biographer Isaac Walton recounts, throughout his life Herbert’s “chiefest recreation was Musick” (1), and so it is no surprise that, although this is the first book-length study of Herbert and music, Jackson is by no means the first to examine the subject; a number of critics have identified various ways in which Herbert’s verse is best understood with an ear for its music and musical contexts, and Jackson succinctly reviews this literature in the “Introduction.” What Jackson brings to the critical discussion of Herbert is his ability to bridge the division between theoretical and theological ideas about music and the lived practices of playing, singing, and listening to music.

The first chapter, “Measuring Well: Ethics and Incarnational Music,” focuses first on the theoretical and theological cultural contexts that frame Herbert and his oeuvre. The chapter begins with a brief review of some of the commonly held beliefs about music from the period (26-27), and Jackson makes the critical corrective point that ideas about the metaphysical powers of music that Renaissance thinkers inherited from Classical *musica speculativa* were by no means outdated in Herbert’s day (25-26). This chapter then focuses on a reading of Augustine’s *De musica* and its relationship to Herbert’s poetry and poetics to draw out the connections and tensions between speculative and practical music making for Augustine and for Herbert. Jackson identifies in Herbert a “dialectical model of music as ‘one harmonie’,” a sort of “double motion of embodied practice and transcendent ideal” (29). Ultimately, for Herbert and for Augustine, Christ as human and divine, finite and infinite, becomes a model of how incarnated sounded music might participate in and be connected to the perfect music of God’s great *carmen universitas* (48). Musical activity thus becomes “a kind of *imitatio Christi*” (46) for Augustine and for Herbert, who, as Jackson points out, emblemizes the idea in the second stanza of “Easter”: “The crosse taught all wood to resound his name, / Who bore the same. / His streched sinews taught all strings, what key/Is best to celebrate this most high day” (28).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Herbert, “Easter,” in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. by Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ll. 9-12.

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The second and third chapters focus on the practical application of such ideas and ideals of music and harmony as they relate to the secular music that influenced Herbert's poetics. Chapter 2 examines the musical coterie at Wilton House and its impact on the verse of *The Temple* (50), and Chapter 3 looks to the "rich visual, musical, and dramatic spectacle of the Jacobean court masque" (49) and its relationship to the visual elements of Herbert's poetry. The song culture at Wilton House was, Jackson shows, one of "friendly rivalry" (56) where voices were raised in "competitive intimacy" (72). The readings of poems by George Herbert's relation and patron William Herbert of Wilton House, the third Earl of Pembroke, are fascinating and illuminating as they newly contextualize George Herbert's poetry in this secular and Arcadian milieu. The final two sections of this chapter, which discuss "The Dedication" to *The Temple* in light of this song culture, show how not only is Herbert participating in a tradition of singing competitions and musical striving for excellence, but also how poets and composers after him have responded to the lyrics of *The Temple* in a similar spirit: "from Henry Vaughan, through Gerard Manley Hopkins, to T. S. Eliot; from the musical settings of John Jenkins to Ralph Vaughn Williams, a vast number of poets and composers and performers have taken their cue to respond creatively to verse of *The Temple*" (76-77). This singing competition continues to today with each new musical setting, live performance, or otherwise creative response to Herbert's lyrics.

Jackson's discussion of "The Visual Music of the Masque" (98-103) in Chapter 3 is in a way itself a creative response to *The Temple*, for his thinking here, which connects the proportions and movements of the dances of Jacobean courtly entertainments to the visual elements of Herbert's shape poetry, is creative and astute. Jackson calls us to re-evaluate Herbert's shape poems not as static images but as dramatic, moving, and even dancing performance pieces (102). Jackson's observations on the relationship between playing and pleasure in this chapter are also illuminating. He shows how, for Herbert, play allows us to step outside of the mundane order and temporality of everyday life, and gives us "a valuable new perspective of humanity's place in God's creation" (109). Ultimately, both Chapters 2 and 3 argue that playing music offers for Herbert a communal and "positive mode in which the talents of the individual Christian can be transformed from a humble and imperfect offering and attuned to the music of Christ's suffering on the cross" (77).

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Herbert's emphasis in his poetry on the dissonances of music making, or the strife and suffering that is part of the harmony of the Christian song, is contrasted in the fourth chapter with his elder brother's account of a more unified, concordant harmonic vision. Here Jackson shows the importance of music and musical ideas in the life and works of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, especially illustrating how ideas of musical harmony are at the heart of Cherbury's philosophical convictions as expressed in *De veritate* (written in 1617 and published in 1624). Jackson also contextualizes Cherbury's extant musical compositions, and suggests that these may "represent a kind of philosophical music embodied in practice—an attempt, literally, to play the music of the spheres" (124). The chapter closes with a discussion of Cherbury's echo songs, in which the echoing voice acts as a source or revealer of truth, in connection to George Herbert's "Echo in a Church" (133-134), "Paradise" (135-136) and "Heaven" (137-139). Here Jackson attends to the multiple voices within Herbert's verse and shows how, through the striving of those voices, Herbert's poetry creates a kind of harmonious music that relies on "the resonant voice of God's Word revealed in scripture" (138).

In the final two chapters of the book, Jackson turns to the sacred music of Herbert's day, looking first at the relationship between Herbert and the various forms of choral polyphony he would have heard in church (Chapter 5), and then to the more straightforward (though not less powerful) psalmody that was not only sung during services but that also constituted an important part of the everyday lives of the English people at this time (Chapter 6). Chapter 5, "Double Motion: Attending to Church Music," covers an impressive amount of material: it reviews, for example, the controversies over text-setting in pre- and post-reformation musical compositions (148-151) and reads Herbert's lyrics in the context of works of the greatest composers of early modern English sacred music: Thomas Tallis, Orlando Gibbons, and William Byrd, demonstrating how the polyphonic texture of church anthems correspond to Herbert's poetics. Jackson's discussion of the little-known genre of "dialogue anthem" is especially intriguing as it foregrounds a dramatic element of liturgical music and Herbert's poetry that has largely been forgotten (159-166). It is not an easy thing to write about music for a multidisciplinary audience, but Jackson, perhaps because of his expertise as a choral conductor, who must communicate ideas quickly and effectively to his choristers in rehearsal, demonstrates in this chapter a broad and deep command of this material, and

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an impressive capacity to discuss complex musical and poetic forms clearly and insightfully.

While in Chapter 5 Jackson imagines Herbert as an auditor of church music, in Chapter 6 Herbert himself becomes the singer, and Jackson turns his attention from forms of meditative and attentive listening to early modern practices of psalm singing and their influence on and connection to Herbert's poetics. Jackson shows the intersections between Herbert's translation of Psalm 23 and the numerous translations and adaptations of that text from the period. This chapter hearkens back to themes from throughout the book and harmonizes them beautifully, emphasizing the relationship between the individual voice and its place in "the communal, corporate body of sound" in a singing congregation (201). Jackson points up the resonances "between the sacramental acts of Communion and expressive poetic and musical acts of communication," which, he argues, are both "synecdochic" (202).

Before the well-organized Bibliography and Index, Jackson closes his book with an "Epilogue" (204-208) in which he connects his argument to broader theoretical work on the role of sound and orality in culture, citing Jean-Luc Nancy on the relationship between listening and subjectivity. As Nancy suggests, it is through opening ourselves to the sounds around us that our inner worlds are born (206), and thus we can find ourselves through our connections to our communities. Jackson does not say it explicitly, but one feels it at the end of the book—that by reading George Herbert, by allowing his language and his music to penetrate us, and by responding to it, we too, as literary critics, can find ourselves and join in a community of voices striving towards truth, individually and collectively. Jackson's contribution to the singing contest of scholarly criticism surrounding George Herbert, early modern musical culture, and theology is astute, learned, creative, and amongst the best books on George Herbert or music and poetry that this critic has read.

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