

Reviews Written by Eddie Konczal (Monroe Township, NJ USA) for Amazon.com

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Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe, 1400-1600 (Norton Introduction to Music History)

★★★★☆ **Idiosyncratic, iconoclastic text is alternately brilliant and frustrating**, January 2, 2006

I am of two minds about Dr. Allan Atlas' iconoclastic text, "Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe, 1400-1600." On the one hand, I enjoyed Atlas' personal and eminently readable prose. He infuses the tome with witty observations, thought-provoking opinions, and offbeat vocabulary. How many textbooks have you read that use adjectives like "country-bumpkinish" or "huggable"?

On the other hand, I believe that Atlas has boxed himself into a corner with his adamant effort to avoid the "great composers" approach. As a result, his organization becomes idiosyncratic and occasionally haphazard. Atlas invariably begins focusing on a particular composer while discussing a genre, and then finds himself forced to summarize the composer's life (sometimes as an afterthought). He interrupts the text proper with historical interludes (Intermedios) and chapters on translation, but their presence can be distracting rather than illuminating. Just as he seems ready to make a relevant point or observation, he switches subjects or just stops altogether (the analysis of Dufay's belongings at the time of his death is one example).

This textbook almost requires the purchase of the companion anthology, "Anthology of Renaissance Music (Norton Introduction to Music History)." Atlas frequently cites works presented in the anthology; without it, the reader may become lost. When Atlas does present a score in the text rather than the anthology, he usually presents only excerpts (as he does with Josquin's "Nymphes des bois" or Willaert's "Aspro core e selvaggio e cruda voglia"). This can make it difficult to follow the score while listening to the music, unless the reader has impeccable timing.

Finally, Atlas' presentation of instrumental music suffers in comparison to his comprehensive discussion of vocal works. He almost completely ignores lute music, admitting he discusses it "only in passing" at one point - even though other scholars estimate that lute music accounted for a majority of 16th century instrumental scores.

Despite these considerable complaints, "Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe" is a worthwhile and much-needed addition to the Renaissance music literature. An astute professor (like the one I had for a recent course in "Music of the Renaissance") should be able to cherry-pick Atlas' text for the highlights and take advantage of this sporadically brilliant volume.



Codex Faenza: Instrumental Music of the Early 15th Century

★★★★☆ **An academic exercise well worth studying**, March 12, 2006

Upon first listen, you might think that "Codex Faenza: Instrumental Music of the Early 15th Century" is wrongly named. These works were composed by 14th Century composers, such as Machaut and Landini, and several songs appear as vocal arrangements without instrumentation.

That's where the "Codex Faenza" comes in. This tome was an early 15th century book of instrumental arrangements of 14th century music. The Unicorn Ensemble performs several works from the Codex Faenza, sometimes preceding the instrumental version with the original vocal arrangement for comparison. The last two tracks, the anonymous compositions "Kyrie" and "Ave maris stella," feature alternating sections of plainchant and organ music.

In many cases, the busy melodies gain something in the translation. The top lines have an improvisatory quality that can seem odd when sung, but sound more natural when played instrumentally. The Unicorn Ensemble has mastered late medieval/early Renaissance instrumentation, and their performances effectively evoke the spirit of past times.

I was somewhat critical of The Unicorn Ensemble's version of Dufay's "Chansons" for making Guillaume Dufay's music sound more conservative than it really was. Here, the group does the opposite: they update the sound of Ars Nova composers and demonstrate how their achievements foreshadowed the continued musical advances of the early Renaissance. It's an academic exercise in many ways, but one well worth studying.



Falstaff Chimes At Midnight [Import]
DVD ~ Orson Welles

★★★★★ **The search for Welles' late masterpiece just got a little easier**, May 12, 2006

The search for Orson Welles' late masterpiece "Chimes at Midnight" just got a little easier. A Brazilian DVD import takes the Welles classic into the digital age and offers an alternative to the out-of-print Arthur Cantor VHS release.

"Chimes at Midnight" is one of the great Shakespearean adaptations and a true 'lost classic'. It's also the last masterpiece that Orson Welles directed in his lifetime, and with 'Citizen Kane,' 'Magnificent Ambersons' and 'Touch of Evil' comprises a quartet of major cinematic works by Welles. Though rarely seen, "Chimes at Midnight" has influenced modern filmmakers. Mel Gibson, for example, admitted the famous "Battle of Shrewesbury" scene influenced his own "Braveheart."

The film is an inventive re-editing and condensation of Shakespeare's plays, spanning from the end of Richard II to the beginning of Henry V. The film shifts the focus from the titular English kings to the character of Jack Falstaff, played by Welles himself in a virtuoso performance. Falstaff's relationship with young Prince Hal (later Henry V) is explored, and uncannily parallels Welles' own experience with the young talents of Hollywood.

There are several great performances, by John Gielgud as Henry IV, Keith Baxter as Hal, Kenneth Branagh look-alike Norman Rodway as Hotspur, Welles regular Jeanne Moreau as Doll Tearsheet, and the great Dame Margaret Rutherford (of "Miss Marple" fame) as Mistress Quickly.

"Chimes at Midnight" can be a jarring experience due to inconsistent film quality, low budget sets and Welles' flair for shock cuts. Once you adapt to the style and limitations, it's a truly rewarding experience. Welles has found a deeply moving story between the lines of Shakespeare's histories.

"Chimes at Midnight" was Welles' final attempt to popularize Shakespeare for the masses. With any luck, this film will eventually reach the wider audiences that Welles failed to achieve in his lifetime.



The Best of the Renaissance

★★★★☆ Or, "Best Sacred Vocal Music of the 16th Century", June 14, 2006

My only major complaint with the Tallis Scholars' impressive compilation "The Best of the Renaissance" is its name. The 2-CD set only includes sacred vocal polyphony from the High Renaissance (16th century). That means you get no chansons, no madrigals, no instrumental music of any sort. Perhaps even worse, composers before Josquin are ignored: there's no Dufay, no Binchois, no Ockeghem - nobody who worked primarily in the 15th century. These omissions suggest that the Tallis Scholars probably consider the pre-Josquin period as late Medieval, rather than early Renaissance.

Once you accept "The Best of the Renaissance" for what it is - "Best Sacred Vocal Music of the 16th Century" - you can better enjoy its remarkable assemblage of High Renaissance polyphony. The first disc in particular is quite astonishing. The Scholars lead off with their signature performance of Allegri's "Miserere" - actually a Baroque-era composition in Renaissance "learned style." The Scholars brilliantly convey the "call-and-response" effect of dual choirs through exquisitely crafted acoustics. Turn this one up, turn off the lights, close your eyes, and you're in the Sistine Chapel!

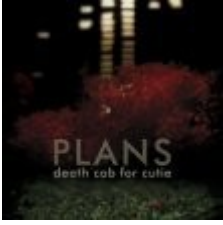
The Scholars follow "Miserere" with an equally impressive performance of a work by their namesake Thomas Tallis - the 40-voice motet "Spem in alium." If "Miserere" hasn't overwhelmed your senses, this one will.

Two virtuoso Mass cycles follow: William Byrd's "Mass for Five Voices" and Josquin's "Missa Pange lingua." The former conveys a sublime, otherworldly beauty, while the latter is a superior example of the style of pervasive imitation that Josquin and his contemporaries pioneered.

The selections on Disc One are so impressive that Disc Two disappoints by comparison. The second set is dominated by two composers I never quite warmed to: Carlo Gesualdo and Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina. Gesualdo was better known for his chromatic, genre-busting madrigals. His "Tenebrae Responses for Holy Thursday" are by contrast quite pleasing, but it's odd to hear sacred music written by a man who killed his wife and her lover. Palestrina's music achieves a sort of static beauty, but lacks forward motion. His "Missa Papae Marcelli" allegedly "saved" sacred polyphony, but arguably watered down the genre in its attempt to appease papal demands for simpler music.

The highlight of Disc 2 is Josquin's lovely "Ave Maria," a motet that provides yet another example of the Franco-Flemish composer's mastery of canonic forms.

"The Best of the Renaissance" expertly compiles the Tallis Scholars' best performances. Those looking for a comprehensive overview of the music of the Renaissance should be aware of its limitations, however.



Plans -Death Cab For Cutie

★★★★★ **Beautifully and classically constructed tour de force**, November 13, 2006

Every talented, original, innovative band that achieves success over a number of years inevitably reaches the point where a significant part of its fan base accuses the band of "selling out." This usually occurs when one or more of the following happens:

- the band receives major label backing
- the band gets a new producer and/or access to state-of the art production facilities
- the band members make a great leap forward in terms of musicianship and/or songwriting
- the band achieves commercial success and/or critical acclaim

For Death Cab for Cutie, all of the above occurred with "Plans." Studio gloss has sanded off Death Cab's rough edges, their songs have become tighter and more ambitious, and they have achieved nearly household name status. So naturally, their diehard fans who stuck with them through the lo-fi indie years have accused them of selling out.

While some call it "selling out," I call it "getting better." I have heard, and quite like, Death Cab's earlier work, particularly "We Have the Facts and We're Voting Yes" and "Transatlanticism." "Plans" does for Death Cab what "OK Computer" did for Radiohead: it marks their great leap from rock's best-kept secret to a band that's finally achieving the success they deserve through hard work and persistent innovation.

I began listening to "Plans" at the same time I was studying Baroque music at Rutgers. I was quite astonished at how classically constructed Death Cab's songs are. I won't elevate Ben Gibbard and company to Bach's level just yet, but many of their songs - particularly "Marching Bands of Manhattan" and "What Sarah Said" - exhibit the "motoric rhythm" found in Bach's concertos. These songs drive forward with active bass lines, articulate drumming and intertwining keyboard and guitar ostinatos. Also found in Death Cab's work are terraced dynamics - changes in volume level caused by instruments entering and exiting. A harmonic nod to early music is suggested by "Someday You Will Be Loved," with shifting dominant chord relationships found in Renaissance and Baroque dance music. I don't know if Death Cab for Cutie studied music history, but they have clearly evolved from songwriters into composers, and the result is extremely satisfying on a visceral level.

"Plans" is quite possibly the best rock album of 2005, and I believe its reputation will only grow with time. Death Cab diehards, don't begrudge the band's well-deserved success. Embrace it, and satisfy yourself with the knowledge that you recognized their greatness before the masses did.

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