

**Thomas Forrest Kelly. *Early Music: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 144 pages. \$11.95. ISBN 978-0-19-973076-6.**

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Thomas Forrest Kelly's *Early Music: A Very Short Introduction* is true to its name in length, but it contains much more than one might expect in a book of its size. A recent addition to the *Very Short Introduction* series published by Oxford University Press, the book relays the story of early music, particularly its revival through performance, in six chapters. Kelly is more than gracious in admitting that one cannot mention everything related to early music—and yet, there is very little editorializing, a fresh change from some books on early music. There is a substantial “Further Reading” list at the end that directs the reader to treatises, works on instruments and performance, and information about the early music movement. The length of the book itself would likely be attractive to most students, but Kelly's humor and straightforward prose would engage readers regardless, as does his ability to instruct by reviewing main points. There are ten black-and-white images in the text, which seems about right given the length of the book, and all are of good quality with useful captions. Each historiographical period receives comparable attention; the index is fairly comprehensive for a book of its size.

Kelly begins by immediately confronting the definition of “early music.” The chapters that follow give us a practical answer, but Kelly goes further by discussing the people, culture, and performance practices that surround the issue, asking the essential question: why revive old music at all? He then convincingly justifies the need for early music in the modern performing repertoire, mentioning several performance practice treatises along the way.

Chapters 2 through 4, labeled by historiographical eras, are also entitled “repertoires,” as the author explains genres such as chant, mass movements, and operatic arias. Kelly's clear and direct writing educates musicians and non-musicians alike on the primary genres of early music. His wit shines when he mentions that “scholars have long argued, and indeed fought duels” over the ambiguities of rhythm in medieval song (p. 24). His writing on chant

is impeccable, and the lesson on Notre Dame polyphony is one of the best. Kelly takes the complex topic of polyphony out of the quagmire that notoriously confuses music history students and presents it with step-by-step examples that non-musicians could understand. The development of the motet is covered quickly but explained well. Kelly avoids one of the pitfalls of examining early music by reminding us that we will never know if the examples at hand are typical. He impresses upon the reader the importance of dance in medieval music and reminds us to look to cultures outside the West for interpretation, a point that is not often made in other texts.

Chapter 3, entitled “Repertoires: Renaissance,” is equally instructive, as Kelly guides the reader through musical practices like the Mass Ordinary. His discussion of the madrigal is clear, but instrumental music makes up the majority of the chapter. The development of instruments, the importance of improvisation, and the mention of several treatises all make this chapter a worthwhile study.

The following chapter on Baroque music impresses upon the reader the importance of the dramatic in nearly every aspect. Kelly explains in detail how significant dance rhythms are to Baroque music, though he requires the reader to understand concepts like sequence and cadence (providing clear examples of both). The chapter also contains a good description of how *basso continuo* functions for readers who might not be familiar with that type of notation. If a term is used that might be unfamiliar to someone not acquainted with early music (like *chitaronne*), the definition is provided shortly.

Kelly lists many of the influential figures in early seventeenth-century Florence, but makes no mention of the Florentine Camerata. His explanation of the birth of opera is nevertheless both simple and illuminating. In describing arias as having either *ritornello* or *da capo* form, he also uses a text box in which both terms are used interchangeably. There is a lengthy description of Baroque vocal decoration that seems disproportionate given the brevity of other topics. Toward the end of the chapter Kelly includes some interesting “vignettes” (p. 65), which are brief descriptions of musical characteristics or short biographies of composers, but seem out of place, rather like afterthoughts. The chapter ends with a list of composers and genres not reviewed here that provides the reader with opportunities for further research.

The last two chapters of this book detail what Kelly refers to as the early music movement or the early music revival. He first tackles the issue of performance practice, defining it in rather ambiguous terms: “to take a piece of music on its own terms, to perform music in its own way” (p. 69). But the rest of the chapter explains in detail the myriad of questions (and possible answers) that arise regarding performance practice. Kelly diplomatically defends most interpretations but makes us aware of how important it is

simply to want to perform early music. His discussion includes instrument copying and restoration, pitch, and temperament; just tuning is conspicuously absent. He discusses improvisation, accidentals (the word *ficta* is not used), pronunciation, translation, and vibrato, along with the ensuing debates over these topics, then reasonably warns us not to get bogged down in the details of re-creation. Kelly has a disarming approach to the notion of authenticity, writing with a good deal of impartiality on varying interpretations, reprimanding those who look down on interpretations with which they might not agree, and reminding us that it is the musician himself or herself that matters most. Yet he does call out the early music movement for “undoing” its own initiative in order to make early music “pleasant for modern listeners” (p. 89).

The final chapter is a veritable Who’s Who among early music performers and scholars, substantiating the beginning of the revival itself. (If one wishes to have an intelligent, informed conversation about early music, these are the names to drop.) Kelly mentions specific recordings and recording labels—most notably those by Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt—and the names of schools with early-music programs, prominent conference proceedings, and organizations. He places significance on the amateur performer in the early-music revival as he laments their diminishing numbers. He also issues a warning for the future of early music as he sees fewer and fewer musicians wishing to maintain it.

While not necessarily appropriate as a stand-alone text in a music history course, the book could be used successfully as an additional resource. It could also function perhaps most effectively as an additional source for graduate seminars in performance practice or early-music performance since it is not simply a review of the facts and figures of historiographical eras. This book would serve a school or university library well, along with individuals interested in early music, as the chapters are full of topics for additional research.