

Review

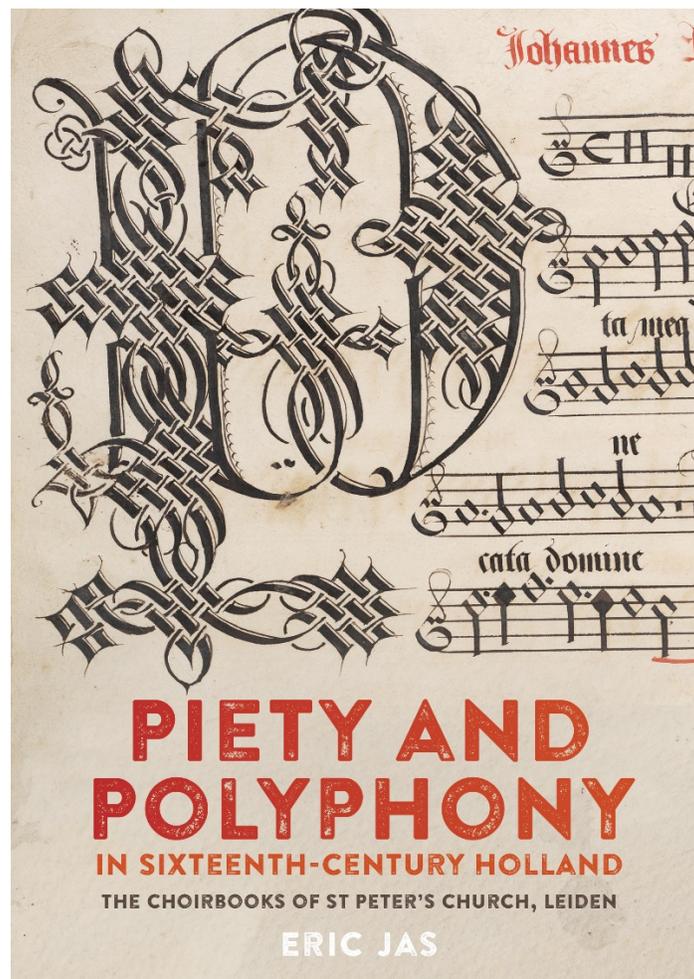
Eric Jas:

***Piety and polyphony in sixteenth-century Holland:
The choirbooks of St. Peter's Church, Leiden***

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Reviewed by Graham Freeman



An example of the vibrant early modern ecclesiastical musical culture in the Low Countries is embodied by the Leiden choirbooks of St. Peter's Church ('*Pieterskerk*'), established in 1121 and the largest and oldest of the churches in Leiden, which was an important municipal centre. Experiencing an extraordinary resurgence over the last decade, the choirbooks have been recorded in a six-volume set by the Egidius Kwartet and Egidius College on the Etcetera Records label and they are digitized on the website of the *Erfgoed Leiden en omstreken* ('municipal archives of Leiden and environs'). This is remarkable considering the books spent almost three hundred years hidden from public view. After the Reformation in 1572, the books remained available for use by the musicians of Leiden until 1597, at which point they were placed in a large wooden chest for safekeeping in city hall. There they remained until the late 19th century, when the first study of the books was undertaken by Jan Pieter Nicolaas Land. Despite this, musicologists did not dedicate any serious attention to these remarkable sources until Eric Jas's *Piety and polyphony in sixteenth-century Holland: The choirbooks of St. Peter's Church, Leiden*.

The choirbooks provide valuable material for studying the musical, liturgical, and spiritual life of Leiden prior to the Reformation. In addition to having been the source of several works by Flemish composer Johannes Flamingus, they testify to the presence of a rich polyphonic tradition in Leiden. The books contain a number of unusual items, including the only complete setting of a polyphonic *Nunc dimittis* from the Renaissance, polyphonic responses to the officiating priest in the mass settings, and unique anonymous works with no concordances in other sources (142). Further, the choirbooks are remarkable for having survived at all. As Jas points out, this set of six choirbooks was almost certainly a set of at least eight, prior to the Reformation. Jas explores some of the prevailing theories behind the disappearance of two volumes from this collection, but their loss remains, at the moment, a mystery. While the title might suggest a book that is of interest primarily to musicologists, *Piety and polyphony in sixteenth-century Holland* is a work that should appeal to anyone working in Renaissance history. Jas provides enough stylistic analysis of the music to satisfy musicologists without alienating historians with no musical training, opting instead for a deep overview of the background and context of the choirbooks and their place in the cultural and liturgical life of Leiden.

The book begins by introducing the *zeven-getijdencolleges* ('colleges of the seven canonical hours'). These organizations operated within the churches to celebrate the divine office, which had fallen into neglect in many of the liturgical institutions. Wealthy residents could create endowments for the singers of the *zeven-getijdencolleges* to sing the offices, in chant or polyphony, for deceased loved ones. *Zeven-getijdencolleges* were founded throughout the Low Countries,

particularly in the north, where economic prosperity was likely more favourable for maintaining them. From at least the 1430s to the Reformation, the *zeven-getijdencolleges* were a vital element of the spiritual life throughout the region, providing regular observances of the divine office and rich polyphonic music to the community. According to Jas, the *zeven-getijdencolleges* put so much emphasis on music that lay singers eventually outnumbered priests, and it was for the choir of the college at St. Peter's that the choirbooks were originally commissioned. A minor but very interesting detail provided by Jas concerns the name of the college referring to seven office hours and not eight, as one might expect. The symbolic nature of the number seven was important enough to combine *matins and lauds* ('night and dawn prayers') into one service to ensure that this symbolism was incorporated into the administrative structure of the *zeven-getijdencolleges* (12).

St. Peter's was the site of the first of the *zeven-getijdencolleges*, and as such it is the focal point for the abundant musical and liturgical life in Leiden between 1440 and 1572. In the second chapter, Jas provides a richly detailed examination of St. Peter's, including particulars on the roles and responsibilities of those few personalities whose names appear in the official records of the church. This includes those who served in the role of *zangmeesters* ('song masters' or 'musical directors'). None of the job contracts of anyone who served in this role in any of the *zeven-getijdencolleges* have survived, which makes the scope of their responsibilities somewhat mysterious, but the records do contain both their names and some entertaining details about their lives. One dubious character named Claudin Patoulet, who was also known by his Latin name Claudius Potoletus, was warned to avoid conversing with choirboys at "improper places" and to do his best to resist "bad direction, drinking too much and coming to the lectern fuddled with drink" (73).

In chapters three and four, Jas begins his examination of the choirbooks by introducing the reader to two characters whose importance to the musical life of Leiden contrasts sharply with the amount of attention they have received from musicologists. The first is Anthonius de Blauwe. De Blauwe supplemented his career as a schoolteacher in Leiden with work as a scribe. Though there are no records to tell us how De Blauwe learned the skills of copying music, he produced at a minimum three of the six surviving choirbooks at St. Peter's: MSS 1438, 1439, and 1440. Jas's analysis of the handwriting in MSS 1441, 1442, and 1443 reveals that De Blauwe had a hand in copying at least some of the material in these books as well. De Blauwe was evidently a trusted copyist for the *zeven-getijdencolleges*, as Jas provides evidence that he likely copied at least six other volumes, now lost, between 1550-1559. Jas's examination of De Blauwe's career provides some fascinating insights into the life of a Renaissance music scribe. In particular, Jas

describes how the *getijdenmeesters* ('senior administrators') of the *zeven-getijdencolleges* very well may have provided De Blauwe with exemplars of the music they wanted copied into the commissioned volume. De Blauwe, being, as Jas reveals, a particularly shrewd businessman, he likely kept these exemplars to build a repository of music he could copy again to produce books for other customers. Further, Jas demonstrates that for at least one of the manuscripts, the list of items provided to De Blauwe by the *getijdenmeesters* does not include any mention of the exemplars, leading Jas to conclude that De Blauwe might have been tasked with selecting the repertoire, or at least obtaining the exemplars, himself (93). If true, this is a fascinating example of the scribe's scope expanding from copyist to one of what we might think of as a managing editor, which testifies to the immense trust the *getijdenmeesters* must have placed in De Blauwe's skills.

The second important character is Johannes Flamingus, *zangmeester* for St. Peter's in the mid-1560s. Flamingus might be more familiar to musicologists from a 2002 edition of his *Opusculum cantionum* of 1571 edited by Ole Kongsted. Flamingus took the opportunity provided by his position to add several of his own works to the St. Peter's choirbooks. In fact, Flamingus is the most frequently represented composer in the collection with sixty-two works compared to forty-one for Clemens non Papa and thirty-six for Thomas Crecquillon. Jas provides an insightful, though not extensive, stylistic analysis of Flamingus's works in the St. Peter's collection, which should be sufficiently appetizing to inspire future work on this under-studied but interesting composer. The 328 different compositions in the St. Peter's choirbooks represent both the local and international tastes of the *zeven-getijdencolleges*, with works by composers like Josquin des Prez, Clemens non Papa, and Thomas Crecquillon sitting alongside lesser-known regional composers like Claudius Potoletus and Michiel Smeekers.

Were there to be any quibbles at all about this fine book, it might be that there is a tendency to leap suddenly through time in the middle of the narrative, which occasionally produces a jarring impact on the reader. For example, after a description of Johannes Flamingus's activities in Leiden in the 1560s, Jas refers to complaints received by the city authorities about substandard performance practices among the singers at St. Peter's in 1458 (77). The fact that more than a century separated these two events is slightly disorienting for the reader's sense of chronology and context, suggesting a general inclination by Jas to treat the entire period under discussion as a homogeneous whole in order to maintain the narrative cohesiveness of the book. Still, these are simply the types of decisions an author makes to convey the relevant information while ensuring they tell a good story, which makes this a very minor complaint in an overall magnificent book.

As Jas describes, the St. Peter's choirbooks are all that remain of what surely was a rich musical and liturgical life in Leiden prior to the Reformation. Other *zeven-getijdencolleges*, such as one in nearby Haarlem, also had extensive collections of choirbooks, but these were lost due to neglect or obsolescence as a consequence of liturgical reform, making the St. Peter's collection particularly important. Indeed, the fact that the books were protected from the seizure of church property during the Reformation testifies to the important place these books had in the spiritual life of Leiden. More than half of *Piety and polyphony in sixteenth-century Holland* consists of Jas's extensive and meticulous appendices that provide rich detail concerning the descriptions, inventories, concordances, as well as musical incipits, of the choirbooks. As Jas states in his introduction, the musical life of Leiden almost certainly has many more secrets to yield to scholarly investigation, and musicologists and historians could do nothing better to prepare themselves for that journey than spending time with this admirable and impressive study.

About the reviewer

Graham Freeman is a writer and musician. He earned his Ph.D. in musicology and ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto (Canada) and has published articles in journals such as *Music & Letters*, *Knowledge Organization*, and *Folk Music Journal*, as well as chapters in several musicology collections. He teaches at Queen's University (Kingston, Canada) and George Brown College (Toronto, Canada).

