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Jeanice Brooks, *Courtly Song in Late Sixteenth-Century France*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. xvi + 560 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$80.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-226-07587-7.

Review by David Buisseret, The University of Texas at Arlington/The Newberry Library, Chicago.

This book “aims to use music to illustrate what it meant to be a courtier in early modern France” (p. xiii), during the period from 1560 to 1589. The six chapters work this theme out methodically, using a set of musical examples at the end of each chapter. The first, “The court and the *Air de Cour*,” sets the scene by explaining the size and nature of the royal courts, which became remarkably large in the time of Catherine de Medici. Her Italian background meant that she was immensely knowledgeable in matters of music and, indeed, in matters of general culture. There is a delightful quotation from Brantôme in which the future Henri IV is speculating with the maréchal de Biron, about how he too would like to form a court as “luxuriant and beautiful” as Catherine’s. In that case, replied the maréchal, you will one day have to resurrect the queen mother (p. 40); clearly hers was the animating spirit.

The second chapter, “Paying court,” concerns the conditions of employment among the musicians. The musical dynasties were as remarkable as those of the painters, architects and other artists and craftsmen, and leading members of the courtly music-makers could expect to be richly rewarded, sometimes by “ecclesiastical spoils such as priories and abbeys” (p. 104). The third chapter addresses the tricky problem of the relationship between arms and letters. Music shared a certain moral quality with the virtue of the warrior; indeed, was it not Castiglione who remarked that a man of war would seem all the fiercer if he were also schooled in the arts of peace? Still, this would not be a renaissance court if there were not a caveat to the musical performance; the noble ought not to be too accomplished a musician, since that would smack of midnight oil and too much practice. Music, like every other virtuous activity, ought to come by nature to the truly virtuous soul.

Chapter four takes on the tricky subject of “Women’s voices;” tricky, because “for most writers of conduct books the concept of feminine virtue was particularly bound up with the ideal of silence” (p. 191). A certain “soft delicacy” might be permitted, but “courtly discourse surrounding women and song was ... simultaneously enabling and constraining” (p. 244), and it was with difficulty that women at court found places to sing. Chapters five and six deal with less contentious matter: “Dialogues with Italy” and “Pastoral Utopias.” Clearly, with a Tuscan queen-mother, Italian influences would be powerful, even if most of the musicians in fact came from Naples and Rome. As yet, there were none of the counter-blasts from the North, which would be so powerful in the succeeding reign. The notion of pastoral utopias was also part of the humanist vision deriving from Italy; we have not yet reached the days of the stunningly

repetitive plot of the *Astrée*, but the influence of the Italian shepherds and shepherdesses was inescapable.

For a court based ultimately on neoplatonic ideas, mediated through writers like Castiglione, music was bound to play an important role, since it was indeed “the wordly manifestation of universal harmony with a unique capacity to inspire virtue in human souls” (p. 153). Catherine and her sons - Charles IX and Henri III both loved to sing - evidently presided over a court in which music was probably the most important performed art. Jeanice Brooks offers a sharp and well-focussed perspective on this musical court, illuminating on the way many other aspects of sixteenth-century noble life.

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