

ELIZABETH EVA LEACH RESPONDS:

My research is deeply concerned with late-medieval lyric texts set to music (i.e., songs). These texts—and thus by extension these songs, including their musical element—are usually about desire, often erotic desire. Recent Lacanian psychoanalytical approaches to this poetry, particularly as elaborated in the work of Sarah Kay and Nicolette Zeeman, stress the flexibility of the desire that is depicted in the verbal texts of such songs.<sup>1</sup> Part of the understanding of these texts in Lacanian terms sees them as revealing the Real—that which is beyond the Symbolic order constrained by (and expressed in) language. My engagement with this literary scholarship stems from my perception that it represents an enormous opportunity to understand the role of music—which is not language, despite a huge effort to explain and contain it using linguistic models in music theory—in constructing and projecting desire. It is possible to argue that medieval songs engage with the same issues of desire and subjectivity as the verbal poetry of the courtly literary culture of which they are a part (and whose texts they set), but that its sensuous and enjoyable quality makes it even more obviously a site of anxiety or trauma about the Real's ability to lurk behind the Symbolic order. Those who were anxious about music's ability to depict and/or inspire desire claimed this desire as sexual or erotic because those terms were morally most readily marked as negative and thus clearly offered a moral analysis of such music. By contrast, those who approved of the musical practice gave a positive "natural" explanation, via Aristotelian physics, as David E. Cohen explains in his prize-winning article.<sup>2</sup> In sum, desire in this poetry and its music can be, but does not have to be, sexual.

Fuller asks, "Is it likely that Machaut is pursuing a hidden agenda of 'sexual desire' in his Mass for the Blessed Virgin, an agenda coded in 'directed progressions' as Elizabeth Eva Leach interprets them?" (231). My short answer to this is that Fuller's underlying assumption that a liturgical mass for the Virgin cannot possibly have any trace of desire in it is patently wrong. As Sylvia Huot has explored at length,<sup>3</sup> liturgies of the Virgin are full of sublimated but very clearly present sexual desire, drawing as they often do on the explicit eroticism of the Song of Songs. Medieval reading practices were far more flexible than Fuller's rigid distinction between sacred and sexual allows, as the reverse allegorical reading of Machaut's erotic motets as a spiritual journey by Anne Walters Robertson has also suggested.<sup>4</sup> Arguing for the presence of the erotic in music does not mean implying that people attending and/or conducting the divine service would have been driven to sexual congress in

the aisles or to ejaculate where they stood, although many medieval witnesses admit to the potential of music—*liturgical* music—to generate at least *thoughts* of such behavior, Augustine, John of Salisbury, and Ailred of Rievaulx being only the most well known. What apt translation would Fuller advance for John's claim that "Cum haec quidem modum excesserint, lumborum pruriginem quam devotionem mentis poterunt citius excitare"? (Non-Latinists are invited to put "lumborum pruriginem excitare" into Google-translate to get at least a flavor of the sense here.<sup>5</sup>)

I reject the idea of policing modern readings of medieval texts along modern disciplinary or socio-political lines. Future readers of this musicological debate may well analyze the anxieties in play here as being about defending the professionalism of a particular discipline by refusing to countenance an idea that its materials might have any sexual connotations, because that idea might be thought to cheapen or dirty them. Those noting the geographical provenance of the two sides of the debate might find them to be in harmony with the relative cultural discomfort with matters sexual in the U.S. and Europe (a generalization that can be substantiated by looking, for example, at the different grounds for film classification in the two regions).<sup>6</sup>

My own many published readings of notated music—something that Leach (2006) itself did not allow space for—suggest that there are copious examples in which the music can be read as mirroring, inflecting, or undercutting various kinds of desire expressed in the text. A forthcoming analysis of the song *A discort*, co-authored with Nicolette Zeeman and scheduled to appear in 2013, will explicitly connect the psychoanalytical perspectives of literary scholarship with my reading of medieval counterpoint. Readers—skeptical or sympathetic—are invited to read this and other future analyses of medieval songs and decide for themselves. Free links to many of these texts can be found via <http://eeleach.wordpress.com/publications/>.

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1 See Kay (1999), (2007), and (2008); and Zeeman (2007).

2 Cohen (2001).

3 Huot (1997).

4 Robertson (2002).

5 This statement was quoted in fourteenth-century music theory: it appears in the epilogue of an Oxford Boethius commentary and in an associated text (see Hochadel, ed. [2002]). The first three books were also translated into French in this period (Brucker, ed. [1994]).

6 "The influence of specific factors in deciding a rating varies from country to country. For example, in countries such as the U.S., films with strong sexual content are often restricted to adult viewers, whereas in countries such as France and Germany, sexual content is viewed much more leniently. On the other hand, films with violent content are often subject in countries such as Germany and Finland to high ratings and even censorship, whereas countries such as the U.S. offer more lenient ratings to violent movies." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion\\_picture\\_rating\\_system](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_picture_rating_system) (accessed 17 June 2011).

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