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### **BOOK REVIEW: Martin Renshaw, ABC of a Medieval Church (Syston, Leicestershire, Great Britain: Anchorprint, 2018)**

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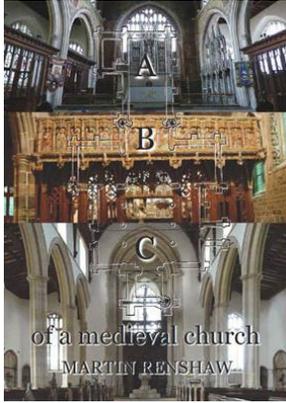
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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**BOOK REVIEW:** Martin Renshaw, *ABC of a Medieval Church* (Syston, Leicestershire, Great Britain: Anchorprint, 2018), pp 134, 68 ills + 8 col, £8 plus £1.50 p & p from [soundsmedieval.org](http://soundsmedieval.org) (pb.), ISBN 9780956710253

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*ABC of a Medieval Church* by Martin Renshaw is an engaging exploration of medieval English churches by a professional organ builder acting as an amateur art historian, in the best sense of the term. The amateur aspect means many terms are undefined, few citations are offered, and the tone varies; but the author's consideration of his topic is still valuable, especially in that it invites us to learn from the joie-de-vivre of a dedicated amateur and convincingly contradicts an accepted conclusion about the role of organ music in parish churches.

Renshaw broadly examines many architectural and ritual aspects of churches, describing his book as a "long essay" whose approach is a "mix of music and social archaeology" (4). The underlying concern is with the former use of churches, "because if we want to preserve a building and adapt it for new purposes it is wise to find out all we can about it and what it contains. It is equally important to appreciate what it no longer contains. ...[E]ach and every stone, every piece of woodwork and glass has an historic community value: they are the capital in the parish's memory-banks" (3-4).

To uncover that capital from its obscurity "by changes, myths and misconceptions" (4), Renshaw joins close architectural observations with his intimate understanding of the spatial and liturgical requirements for organs and vocal music, supplemented by written church wardens' accounts (CWA). His ability to draw from both sources and experience is the best feature of this book. Although the presentation is unpolished, few professional historians have enough knowledge of both architecture and music to offer an entire book, as Renshaw did, in response to the specific question posed by Dr. Peter Williams,

chair of the British Institute of Organ Studies, at a conference in 2008: “How many organs were there in English churches in 1500?” (118)

This is a perceptive question, worthy of treatment. Since organs seem to have been associated with daily sung liturgies and offices prior to the mid-1500s, they appear to have been a casualty of the 1549 Act of Uniformity, which established the Book of Common Prayer and a new emphasis on communal worship, rather than choral worship, in English churches. The organs, which were apparently placed near the altars to assist the choral worship, were in the wrong location to support the shift of focus to the nave. Their gradual disappearance from churches and the destruction of specifically organ music has led music historians to conclude that organs were not much used in English churches. Indeed, the standard survey of organ literature asserts: “English church musicians were more interested in choral music than instrumental music and therefore very small organs satisfied their needs in the church.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Renshaw, the use of organs was more widespread than is generally understood, appearing in “at least half of all churches and chapels in the kingdom” (72), and can be discovered from other sources than the (very scant) extant organ scores, since “the general abandoning of the chancels until the mid C19 has meant that many more physical and discoverable signs of their former use are preserved in England and Wales than anywhere else in western Europe” (3). Renshaw therefore draws his conclusions from signs of former organ placements in the interior and exterior of churches, as well as from CWA that record when things like a halyer (roof tiler) was employed to remove hooks that held the organ steady, indicating the former presence of an organ, its placement in a sort of loft, and a size that would require hooks for steadiness (86).

Renshaw examines more than just organs, and here the book suffers from a less than clear identification of its audience. The title is catchy and memorable, as though for a popular audience, exploring the two basic parts of a medieval church with the separation between them: Altar, Barrier, and Church, meaning “the people’s part,” west of the screens before the altar (7). However, the length of the sections (sixty pages for Altar, seventeen pages for Barrier, fourteen pages for Church) requires that Renshaw go into more technical detail than would be considered fair for a popular audience, detail that presumes a knowledge of terms with no definitions presented: “The back-row stalls are set on a plinth” (14); “[f]or the first few years of our research, we naturally noticed the existence

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<sup>1</sup> Corliss Richard Arnold, *Organ Literature: A Comprehensive Survey* (Metuchen, New Jersey, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973), 39.

of string courses" (45); "[t]hose churches...suggest that iconographical schemes of undisturbed bosses are there..." (100).

If written for an academic audience, then, citations and footnotes would be expected. Instead, throughout the text appear tantalizing photos whose briefest of captions are included in the table of contents rather than with the photos themselves, as well as numerous unsubstantiated statements, such as "[a]nother Archbishop confirmed that 'all other repairs of the chancel and of other things not the object of special custom or agreement, pertain to the Rectors or Vicars" (7) and "[a]nother C19 historian wrote..." (116).

The difficulty of establishing an audience contributes also to an unevenness of tone, especially towards the end, when Renshaw more frequently diverges from historical to contemporary commentary: "Although some of these [rites] have made a gradual come-back in the last half-century, as with almost everything that goes on now in church services the vital and memorable elements of drama have not made a re-appearance, as if we are too frightened to be marked by as well as to mark the inevitable chapters of life and death" (95).

Despite these difficulties, the delight of discovery shines through the work as a whole, while Renshaw's intense care for his subject makes valuable connections between architecture, history, and liturgy, which more specialized academics may be interested to pursue.

Three more books are projected, *Seven Whole Days: Music and Education in the Medieval Church*, which Renshaw proposes as "a detailed work with full documentary support"; "detailed case-studies of selected churches"; and "the history of the organ in England from around 1300 to 1600" (118). Readers who would like more information can visit [www.soundsmedieval.org](http://www.soundsmedieval.org), 🐦