

From Chantre to Djak: Cantorial Traditions in Canada. Compiled and edited by Robert B. Klymasz. Hull, Québec : Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2000. 185 p., ill. (Mercury series) (Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, paper 73) ISBN 0-660-17834-6 \$24.95

This book seeks to document and analyze aspects of cantorial practice from several religious traditions. It is a collection of material written by different people, from a variety of perspectives. While the emphasis is on East European traditions, others are also included. The introduction attempts to pull all of this information together and offer some historical perspective, but strongly relates the contents of the book to East European traditions.

Some sections of this book are fascinating. All of the people interviewed are devoted to their art, and have strong views on the role of the cantor in their particular tradition. Most of the book is in English, but there are two papers in French which document the practices of Roman Catholic cantors in Québec.

Separately, each contribution is an interesting view of a particular practice. But it is obvious that each has been written by a different person, from a different perspective, and with varying levels of writing ability. Some are badly-documented ramblings which offer little enlightenment on a particular tradition. Others are well-written and concise accounts.

The first chapter, "Becoming a cantor" by Joseph Roll, documents his mostly American experiences of learning to be a cantor, and his career both as a cantor and in teaching others. He states: "The communal expression of liturgy, music, and ritual comes through the local congregation. A cantor is both a member of a congregation and a leading instrument of

this expression" (p. 36). Although he only spent about four years in Canada, Roll's experiences in learning to be a cantor in the Ukrainian Catholic Church likely document the similar experiences of cantors in Canada. But one wonders why this chapter is included when only a tiny portion of it is about Canadian cantorial traditions.

The chapter entitled "Pour la suite de la 'beauté': le parcours de Claude Gosselin, chantre de Québec depuis 1943" by Anne-Marie Poulin, consists mostly of a history of Roman Catholic music in Québec before 1943, and the actual section on Claude Gosselin is only 8 of the 26 pages of the article. It also includes a commentary on the changes that took place after the reforms of Vatican II, which documents the effect of these reforms on Canadian churches.

One of the most interesting and well-written chapters is on cantors of the Ottawa Jewish community, by I. Sheldon Posen. He interviewed six cantors, including one female cantor, and documented the various traditions and duties of the Jewish cantor. While the information he has gathered applies specifically to the people he interviewed, it is easy to see how these cantors fit into a wider tradition. The conversations that he had with them about how they find new music to sing, and fit it in with the old, were especially compelling.

One of the contributors chronicles Gary Robertson's unhappy childhood and personal difficulties in exhaustive detail. He has retreated from the world and lives with his

dog, talking to almost no one and no longer participating in services or acting as a cantor in the Ukrainian Catholic tradition because he can't get along with the priest. At one point, he says "I drank, I've done marijuana, I've done a lot of things in my life, but nothing is as rewarding as the silence and praying or singing and praising God" (p. 59). This account makes one feel sympathy for his problems, but does little to aid the reader's understanding of cantorial traditions.

This book often documents the past, not the present. Albert Mahon was cantor at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Toronto for many years, and set the standard for those who came after him. However, he retired quite a few years ago, and many changes have occurred since, including the introduction of women cantors. Mahon is referred to in the introduction as "Toronto's eminent Anglican cantor," but it is unclear why the authors have bestowed this honour upon him: while he may have been in the past, many have come and gone since he was a practicing cantor. The author of this chapter, Marcia Ostashewski, states that "as we start a new millennium ... it becomes obvious that this cantillation tradition is not dying, but alive" (p. 148). It is difficult to understand how she knows that the tradition is alive when she chose to interview someone whose career as a practicing church cantor ended a quarter of a century ago. It would have been useful to interview more currently practicing cantors, and to document current practice along with the old.

There is no real analysis done by many authors; most are documentation of interviews of particular people, who may or may not speak authoritatively about a tradition. The book is a jumble of information, offering no coherent picture of cantorial tradition in Canada. It might have been more useful for the editor to concentrate on the East European traditions with which he is most familiar, rather than producing an uneven documentation of several traditions. For example, the last page of the book consists of a paragraph on the role of the *muezzin* when there is nothing else about Islamic traditions in the book. Judicious editing of some papers would also not have been out of place.

As part of a collection of works about sacred music traditions, this book would be an interesting addition. Most of this information is not documented elsewhere. However, a great deal of it is personal recollections, not historical fact. As a compilation of research materials, it does its job. It is, however, difficult reading because of the way it skips from one tradition to another, with uneven coverage and no coherent plan for the book. The bibliography is useful for the Eastern Orthodox tradition, but does not cover other Christian traditions or Jewish sources in any detail.

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