Singing from Manuscripts? Fifteenth-Century, English, Secular Songs with Music and their Reading Practices

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'Singing from facsimiles is one important and enjoyable way . . . of understanding the music from the inside', writes Margaret Bent in an essay on editing medieval music.[1] By inviting performers to sing directly from manuscripts, this statement assumes a very particular model of the relationship between written page and performance: that medieval musicians relied on their encounter with the written page so that they could perform, essentially by sight-reading. Thus, it implies that such manuscripts were intended to carry enough information for musicians to perform directly from them and that this was their primary purpose.

This view is seemingly undermined by the deficient state of music in many sources, which frequently contain mistakes or lack important information needed for performance. Bent herself describes such manuscripts as 'crawling with wrong notes' and 'obvious errors'.[2] Even as late as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when music notation had existed in Britain for hundreds of years, key features such as accidentals and the alignment between text and music were only marked sporadically, such that one book on editing states that transcribing medieval music 'involves a certain amount of conjecture'.[3] Bent specifically contests critics who argue that the incomprehensibility of some manuscripts implies that

[2] Bent, 'Early Music Editing', p. 268.
[3] Reinhard Strohm. 'Unwritten and written music'. *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*. Ed. Tess Knighton and David Fallows. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 228-233; Jonathan King. 'Texting Practices in Manuscript Sources of Early Fifteenth-Century Polyphony'. *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 124.1 (1999): pp. 1-24; John Caldwell. *Editing Early Music*. 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. p. 13.

music could not have been performed from them – a proposition she calls 'absurd'.[4] Yet, this leaves no explanation other than scribal carelessness for the apparent inadequacies of many musical manuscripts.

This perspective on the role of manuscripts in performance is widespread in modern musical scholarship. Historical musicologists frequently assume that performance to audiences was the only context in which musical manuscripts were used and that manuscripts, like modern sheet music, were designed to carry sufficient information for musicians to perform to audiences from them. In this way they underplay the possibility that these manuscripts had other uses. This may stem from the remit of historical musicology, which tends to focus on the aural over the written form and hence sees the physical record as a means to the original aural piece: a 'guide' which 'leads to a sounding event'.[5] This prioritisation of aural over written forms, along with the corresponding assumption that all written music was intended to produce aural performance, means that critics often blame scribes for the widespread omissions or errors in the text which prevent access to the lost aural original. They denounce the scribes' work as 'haphazard' and describe ambiguities as 'corruptions' rather than exploring alternative models for the relationship between manuscript and performance, such as seeing them as part of a performance practice whose dependence on oral transmission meant this clarity was not necessarily needed.[6]

Thus, the assumption that physical manuscripts were solely 'performance copies' has been largely unchallenged.[7] A recent exception to this is a volume of essays edited by Deeming and Leach, which calls for more nuanced models of the relationship between page

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[4] Margaret Bent. 'Polyphonic Sources, ca. 1400-1450'. *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music.* Ed. Anna Maria Busse Berger and Jesse Rodin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. p. 633.

[5] Thomas Binkley. 'The work is not the performance'. *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*. Ed. Tess Knighton and David Fallows. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 37.

[6] Elizabeth Leach. 'An introduction to the basics of fourteenth-century French music notation'. 2011. http://diamm.nsms.ox.ac.uk/moodle/course/view.php?id=2. Accessed 09 March 2016. sect. 10a; King, p. 2.

[7] It should be noted that critics have long been aware of the importance of oral transmission and memorisation to fifteenth-century musical culture, but there is little extended discussion of the implications of this for how manuscripts themselves were used. See Strohm, pp. 229-230, 233; John Stevens. *Music & Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. p. 43.

and performance.[8] One essay from this collection identifies the view that performing (essentially sight-reading) from manuscripts was the only way medieval musicians used them as an 'unexamined – indeed, unarticulated – assumption' of much musical scholarship.[9] Indeed, Deeming and Leach suggest this view is pervasive (excluding passing references in some recent criticism) and they suggest it stems from modern academic divisions which mean music historians often pay less attention to codicological approaches.[10]

Deeming and Leach's collection of essays, however, is directed at earlier centuries rather than the fifteenth-century songbooks Bent addresses.[11] The majority of their essays discuss manuscripts from the thirteenth century or earlier (the latest examines a mid-fourteenth-century manuscript), and hence their focus is a period traditionally considered to be more dependent on oral transmission of music than later centuries; this earlier period was thus intuitively less reliant on written manuscripts for performance.[12] The widespread view that fifteenth-century manuscripts were predominantly made as performance-copies remains largely unquestioned. In some ways it makes sense: by the fifteenth century musical notation had become increasingly comprehensive, such that it could record and thereby transmit much longer, more complex works.[13] This corresponded with an increase in musical literacy and in the production of musical manuscripts.[14] Yet, this century also saw increasing professionalization of music-making and the proliferation of different musical genres through religious, courtly and folk spheres, each of which related to the literate, ecclesiastical centres

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[8] Helen Deeming and Elizabeth Leach. 'Songs, Scattered and Gathered'. *Manuscripts and Medieval Song: Inscription, Performance, Context*. Ed. Helen Deeming and Elizabeth Eva Leach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. p. 279.

[9] Sean Curran. 'Writing, Performance, and Devotion in the Thirteenth-century Motet: the 'La Clayette' manuscript'. *Manuscripts and Medieval Song: Inscription, Performance, Context*. Ed. Helen Deeming and Elizabeth Eva Leach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. p. 207.

[10] Deeming and Leach, pp. 279, 283.

[11] Bent, 'Polyphonic Sources', p. 633.

[12] Strohm, pp. 230-233

[13] Ibid., pp. 230-233

[14] Thomas Schmidt-Beste. 'Polyphonic Sources, ca. 1450-1500'. *CHFM*. pp. 641-642; Strohm, p. 231.

(which still controlled manuscript production) in a variety of ways.[15] These diverse performance contexts invite us to expect a diverse set of performance practices in relation to physical manuscripts, especially those manuscripts which contain music from outside the ecclesiastical sphere.

This essay will explore the possibility that fifteenth-century musical manuscripts were used in more ways than are generally acknowledged by the majority of scholars. Manuscripts containing secular songs offer a particularly good case study for challenging widespread assumptions about the relationship between manuscripts and performance. Secular songs were marginal to ecclesiastical, literary-musical culture, in which performance habits were best documented and through which these secular songs have nevertheless been mediated. Since it is highly possible that their origin was outside the Church, it is likely that the written record of these songs occupied a less codified relationship with performance than liturgical music, for instance, since liturgy implies a relatively-fixed performance context. Thus, they offer this investigation an example of a particularly nebulous relationship between text and performance compared with other fifteenth-century texts – one which challenges modern critical assumptions about the ways texts were used in performance. Limiting the scope of this study to mid-fifteenth-century, English, secular songs from British sources creates a convenient corpus, since only eight complete examples survive, in just two manuscripts, which offer a stark contrast.[16]

Through a case study of these two manuscripts, this essay will question the dominant assumption that musical manuscripts were intended to be sight-read and will explore alternative ways in which the written text related to the performance. In a later essay Bent does briefly acknowledge the possibility of alternative models of performance, suggesting

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[15] Klaus Pietschmann. 'Musical Institutions in the Fifteenth Century and their Political Contexts'. Trans. James Steichen. *CHFM*, pp. 405-409.
[16] David Fallows. 'English Song Repertories of the Mid-Fifteenth Century'. *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 103 (1976-77): p. 62.

that music books were likely used in rehearsal and hence that the final performance involved some combination of memorisation and reliance on the manuscript. Nonetheless, she still argues strongly for the importance of the physical book in performance, attacking opposing views and placing a pronounced emphasis on the importance of reading even in situations where memorisation played a part.[17] In this way she contends that the dominant function of musical manuscripts was to be used in performance. This essay takes this and her original statement as representative of the way that musical scholarship more broadly tends to privilege the view that direct performance was the predominant purpose for which manuscripts were created. In contrast, this essay will argue that the physical evidence of the manuscripts suggests we should approach them with a more flexible and open-minded perception of the relationship between manuscript and performance than is often assumed and furthermore it will seek to expand on the range of ways in which these books could have been used, both within and outside of performance contexts.

Furthermore, Bent's invitation to sing from facsimiles stresses the importance of the original written notation as a means to experience the music 'from the inside': to experience the internal musical features in the same way that original readers would have done.[18] However, this essay will argue that it is also crucial to appreciate this music from the outside, that is, to engage fully with the non-musical, codicological and palaeographical aspects of the physical book, which frequently receive less attention than the music itself, yet which offer crucial insights into how the original readers actually encountered the manuscripts.

This essay will begin firstly by paying close attention to the construction processes behind the manuscripts, arguing that the contexts in which they were produced imply contrasting purposes and hence different ways of relating to performance. The second section will then show that page layout and omissions in the text suggest that there was a range of

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[17] Bent, 'Polyphonic Sources', p. 633.
[18] As Bent clarifies in the expanded quotation: Bent, 'Early Music Editing', p. 270.

different ways in which the manuscript could be used in relation to performance, which correspond with the contemporary circumstances of oral and written musical transmission. By focusing on this codicological and palaeographical evidence, we will discover that a comparison between these manuscripts points away from the performance model in which manuscripts were routinely used for sight-reading and instead indicates a more diverse set of possible relationships between text and performance in the fifteenth century than has previously been suggested. In this way, we will see that attention to the physical page is vital for understanding medieval music.

The Manuscripts' Construction

The view that medieval musicians predominantly sight-read from their manuscripts tacitly assumes a continuity of performance practices across the broad range of performance contexts which we know existed in the fifteenth century. The way that manuscripts were constructed can reveal vital information about the diverse contexts for which they were made and the similarly diverse purposes for which they were created. This section will compare the two extant manuscripts containing mid-fifteenth-century, secular, English songs, examining the number of scribes that worked on each manuscript, their ruling patterns and their quire structures, in order to show that they were created for very different contexts and functions. The physical evidence of the manuscripts offers vital clues as to the original context of the music itself.

Only eight, mid-fifteenth-century, English, secular songs survive, appearing in two manuscripts: Ashmole 191 and Arch. Selden B. 26, both in the Bodleian Library.[19] Ashmole contains six English, secular songs with music and lyrics (ff. 191-197), the first few notes of a seventh song (f. 197v) and then a copy of the *Kalendarium* by Somer (an almanac with

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[19] Fallows, 'English Song Repertories', p. 62. Fallows identifies them as the only complete, extant, English, secular songs from British sources with music from c.1430-1470. Hereafter, references to these manuscripts appear in the body of the text.

astronomical information) in Middle English (ff. 198v-211). In contrast, Selden contains upwards of thirty songs, all with music, from several genres: Latin antiphons, religious carols in Latin and English and two English secular songs. Both manuscripts have been dated to around the middle of the fifteenth century.[20] Apart from this, very little external historical information is known about either. Both are in fact composite manuscripts: the sections containing the music were bound together with other unrelated manuscripts in the sixteenth (Ashmole) and seventeenth (Selden) centuries.[21] (Hence 'Selden', 'Ashmole' or 'manuscript' are used to refer exclusively to the originally-separate sections containing the music: section IV in Ashmole, ff. 191-211v, and section I in Selden, ff. 3-33v.) The scarcity of extant, secular songs suggests that these kinds of songs were not normally written down (except perhaps in more ephemeral contexts) and thus that these instances might not reflect normative performance practices for secular music.[22] Nevertheless, their being written down in the wider context of these manuscripts suggests that looking at the construction and intentions behind the manuscripts in their entirety will offer evidence of possible contexts in which these songs were performed.

The first striking difference between the manuscripts is the number of scribes involved in each, immediately suggesting that they were made in very different environments. This number is hard to know for certain since although we can distinguish between music-hands and text-hands, it is difficult to tell whether the same scribe wrote both text and music.

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[20] Nicholson dates Ashmole to 1445 on the basis that the calendar begins with this year (*EBM*, vol. I, p. xx); David Fallows concurs: *Secular Polyphony 1380-1480*. London: Stainer and Bell. 2014. p. xxxii. Richard Leighton Greene dates Selden to the mid-fifteenth century: *The Early English Carols*. 2nd rev. ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977. p. 314.

[21] On Ashmole's binding, see Steven J. Livesey and Richard H. Rouse. 'Nimrod the Astronomer'. *Traditio* 37 (1981): p. 226. For Selden, see Julia Boffey and A.S.G. Edwards. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer and* 'The Kingis Quair'*: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Arch. Selden. B. 24*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997. pp. 31-32.

[22] Charles Hamm. 'Manuscript Structure in the Dufay Era'. *Acta Musicologica* 34 (1962): pp. 166-84; Nicholas Bell. *Music in Medieval Manuscripts*. London: The British Library, 2001. p. 47.

This is the case for Selden, which contains 10 discernible text-scribes and 9 music-scribes. While many scribes overlap with others, they appear in a roughly sequential order as this table (containing only ff. 3-10) shows:[24]

	Music-hand	**Text-hand**
ff. 3-3v	A	*A*
ff. 3v-4	A	*A*
ff. 4-4v	A	*A*
f.5	B	*B*
ff. 5v-6	B	*C*
f. 6v	C	*D*
f. 7	C	*E* (accompanied); *F* (unaccompanied)
f. 7v	D	*F*
f. 8	D	*F*
ff. 8v-9	D (f.8v, last two staves of f.9); C (first three staves of f.9)	*F*
f. 9v	C	*F*
f. 10	C	*F*

Scribes A, B, *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E* do not reappear, and C, D and *F* are gradually replaced by other scribes. This sequential arrangement may suggest several phases of production since it correlates with an overall shift in generic categories from the first songs (exclusively Latin antiphons) to the later stages of the manuscript which intermix carols and liturgical pieces, leading ultimately to the secular songs at the end. There appears to have been no sustained, generic prescription for inclusion, allowing the generic contents and purposes of the manuscript to evolve as new scribes took over. Padelford, an early commentator on the scribes, suggests that some of the music-scribes were also text-scribes.[25] However, in Selden it is clear from this table that in many instances different people worked on the same song: in

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[24] I am indebted to the scholarship of F.M. Padelford, who originally identified and listed the hands of Selden: F.M. Padelford. 'English Songs in Manuscript Selden B. 26.'. *Anglia* 36 (1912): pp. 80-81. I have consolidated Padelford's identification of text- and music-hands into one table. In this table the groupings of folios in the left-hand column correspond with distinct pieces of music in order to show the relation between hands and individual songs. This table covers only ff. 3-10 and it is worth noting that the hands later in the manuscript are more consistent: C, D and *F* predominate in ff. 10-25. Greene has corroborated Padelford's identification with one addition later on in the manuscript: Greene, p. 314.

[25] Padelford, p. 82.

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some examples the hand of accompanied and unaccompanied lyrics differs (see also ff. 26-28v).[26] Similarly, particular music-scribes do not always correspond with the same text-scribes: for instance, the music-scribe of the secular songs appears earlier with a different text-scribe (f. 30; the music-scribe's distinctive features, found nowhere else in Selden, are his use of decorative squares and multiple vertical lines to end voice parts and his unique C-clefs). This division of labour and the changes in which scribes were active during the course of the manuscript suggest that Selden was a communal enterprise, possibly intended as a repository of songs which at least ten people contributed to gradually over a period of time.

This contrasts with Ashmole, in which the palaeographical evidence suggests that the whole manuscript was the work of a single individual. The musical lyrics are all written by one scribe in the same hand as the copy of the *Kalendarium*.[27] Unlike in Selden, in Ashmole we have evidence that the text- and music-scribe *were* the same person. Folio 195v contains three lines of music that have then been crossed out. Since these lines appear as the first three lines of the song on the previous page, the incomplete, crossed-out version offers a window into what a half-written piece of music looked like for this scribe. In its half-written state, the text beneath is present for the first two lines and half of the third line. Rather than the text and music being written by different people, this suggests that one scribe wrote the first few lines of music, then went back to do the text and then halfway through the third text-line noticed a mistake (a comparison with the full version reveals a few missing notes in the first line of music) and crossed the whole thing out.[28] Thus, it seems likely that the entirety of Ashmole was produced by one individual. Already this points away from the performance practice of polyphony which requires several singers and towards the kind of reading practice that

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[26] 'Accompanied lyrics' refers to the lyrics which are written directly beneath the musical notation (typically just the first verse); 'unaccompanied lyrics' refers to the lyrics which are written elsewhere on the page without music (typically the subsequent verses).

[27] Fallows, *Secular Polyphony*, p. 231.

[28] That the crossed-out version appears after the full version could suggest that the scribe was not working through the manuscript in a linear order.

Deeming and Leach mention in passing: a visual encounter with the page by someone who is musically literate, leading to a silent, internal 'listening' to the music.[29] This of course remains speculative. Nevertheless, the individualistic production of the manuscript does suggest personal use rather than public performance.

Alongside this contrast between individual and corporate contexts, the ruling patterns of the two manuscripts offer evidence of the contrasting intentions behind their creation. Ashmole appears to have been collected together with some expectation of how much space would be needed: the ruling for staves stops before the end of the quire (it stops on ff. 196v-197; the final leaf of the quire is f. 201v) leaving un-ruled pages for the *Kalendarium*. The scribe seems to have altered the ruling throughout as if to suit particular songs (ff. 191v-196 are ruled for six staves, whereas f. 191 is ruled for five staves and f. 196v-197 for seven though the song is unfinished), suggesting advance knowledge of which songs would be written. However, he did not always anticipate how many staves he would need correctly (f. 191 only has four staves of music with lyrics written over the final stave). This contrasts with the ruling of Selden, which suggests open-ended intentions for the manuscript's contents. All the pages are ruled for 9 staves, which suits the three-part Latin antiphons (ff. 3-3v) of the first few pages (since three lines of three would fit the page), but after this the songs written by other scribes do not fit this ruling, resulting in lyrics being written over staves (ff. 14v, 16, 23), staves being erased to make space for lyrics (ff. 15, 22, 24v-25v, 27v-28) and staves being left blank (ff. 9, 14, 21v, 26). There are even instances where a scribe has written out three parts separately rather than concurrently, even when the page would have suited writing all three parts together in parallel as a score. The intentions behind Selden therefore seem to have evolved during its creation. The ruling of a full quire which was not then filled immediately by the original scribes suggests that the manuscript was intended as an open-

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[29] Deeming and Leach, p. 279.

ended communal songbook and was therefore ruled throughout for 9 staves, but that any original intentions behind this layout were not necessarily communicated to subsequent scribes. In contrast, the construction of Ashmole implies a single individual who chose particular songs in advance and had other intentions for the manuscript besides music.

These different contexts and purposes raise the possibility that the functions of the manuscripts in relation to performance differed from one another, but their quire structures suggest that both manuscripts may actually have been intended for archival function rather than primarily for performance. Hamm has suggested that music was more often performed from smaller, ephemeral fascicles rather than books, raising the possibility that quires in our manuscripts originally circulated separately.[30] However, this does not seem to have been the case for Ashmole and Selden. The quire structure of Ashmole is: I^6 (wants 8, after f. 200v), II^4, leaf of parchment (for volvelle). The *Kalendarium* begins on the reverse of the last page ruled with staves and goes across the quire break, suggesting that once the *Kalendarium* had been written these quires became a single unit. In the cases where a piece of music takes up two pages, these pages are always separate leaves, making it impossible that any of the songs circulated independently on a single sheet. In the case of Selden, the quire structure is: I-III^4, IV^4 (wants 3, after f. 28). These quires do not correspond with any clear shift in the contents: indeed, though no music runs across quire breaks, particular scribes and genres are found across quires. In both cases it is therefore likely that neither of the manuscripts' quires originally circulated separately: both were intended as more permanent books from the outset. This raises the possibility that the manuscripts were both intended as archives to store songs, gathering texts of personal interest in Ashmole and songs for a community in Selden.

Given this information about the construction and planning of the manuscripts, what can we deduce about the possible contexts for which these manuscripts were created? A wide

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[30] Hamm, p. 47.

range of genres could have been sung in liturgical contexts (including antiphons and carols), but secular songs must have existed outside of the context of liturgical performance. They may have originated from folk culture (of which we know very little).[31] However, these written instances suggest a context in which there were trained musically-literate scribes: the university, the court or the Church. For one song (ff. 195v-196), the Ashmole scribe switches from black notation (used for all previous songs) to white notation (which uses void rather than filled-in notes), but in the first two lines he still uses a filled-in clef before switching to a void one on line three. This is perhaps a musical equivalent of the process of 'working in'.[32] This demonstrates his awareness of different kinds of musical notation which points to a musically-literate context. Furthermore, the scribes would have needed access to exemplars (unless they wrote them from memory, which seems unlikely in a manuscript of Selden's quality but is possible for Ashmole) though we might question whether exemplars existed for secular songs which were apparently written down less frequently.[33] Nevertheless, for the scribes to be able to write and read music at all they must have had access to written music.

Therefore, the scribes were musically-literate (and therefore probably musicians) and had access to musical texts. Institutions (such as the Church, courts of the nobility or universities) played a pivotal role in music-making in the fifteenth-century and polyphony's requirement of multiple performers suggests association with a social context like an institution.[34] Selden appears to have been written in an institutional context such as a monastery or cathedral (Greene suggests Worcester) as indicated by its religious content

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[31] David Fallows. 'The Most Popular Songs of the Fifteenth century'. *CHFM*. p. 787.
[32] 'Working in' refers to the process by which scribes changing between scripts often take some time to fully switch over to a new set of letter forms, such that features of the old script percolate through the new script for several lines or pages before disappearing.
[33] Anna Maria Busse Berger suggests the fifteenth century saw an overlapping of orality and literacy which permitted musical transcription from memory: 'How Did Oswald von Wolkenstein Make his Contrafacta?'. *CHFM*. pp. 178-179.
[34] Pietschmann, pp. 403-426.

which includes music performed in services but probably not elsewhere.[35] Its construction suggests it was put together as a songbook in which several people would record songs in succession over a period of time. Though they were added last, there is no problem with imagining secular songs in the context of such a community, even if they were not part of church ritual. Ashmole, in contrast, was almost certainly the work of a single individual and the eclectic combination of texts suggests an idiosyncratic usage and the possibility that the scribe produced the manuscript for himself. The use of paper, which has been associated with a rising middle-class readership, is also consistent with private usage.[36] While performing polyphonic songs is inherently social, Ashmole seems more likely to have been owned by one person. They might have kept the manuscript as a record, but it is possible they also performed these songs alongside others (with or without the manuscript). The fact of the scribe needing to read and write music suggests he was attached to some kind of institutional context where he could have learnt musical notation. The *Kalendarium*, which originated in Oxford University, and which Mooney suggests was possibly spread through the royal court, may suggest a courtly or university context.[37] Equally, since the author of the *Kalendarium* was a Franciscan monk, this manuscript could have been written by someone from an ecclesiastical environment.[38]

These codicological and palaeographical features demonstrate that the manuscripts were likely constructed for very different contexts and functions, which challenges the assumption that both manuscripts were used in a similar way in performance. In addition to this, in both instances the construction of quires also suggests that they were more permanent texts than the independently-circulating fascicles designed for performance which Hamm

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[35] Greene, p. 314.

[36] Kwakkel suggests that paper books were particularly associated with individual rather than institutional readership: Eric Kwakkel. 'A New Type of Book for a New Type of Reader: the Emergence of Paper in Vernacular Book Production'. *Library*. 7th ser., 4 (2003): p. 219.

[37] Linne Mooney. Ed. *The Kalendarium of John Somer*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998. pp. 8-12, 25-27.

[38] Mooney, p. 2.

postulates.[39] The next section will examine in more depth how the physical evidence of the manuscripts enables us to consider the ways in which medieval musicians may have used these texts.

Performance Contexts

Deeming and Leach suggest several possible alternative models for the relationship between page and performance. Performers could have sight-read from manuscripts, used them to rehearse and learn music rather than perform to audiences from, used them as a memory-aid during or before performances or alternatively the manuscripts could have been primarily archival. If manuscripts were used in performance, they might have only been visible to some performers or none or even to listening audiences.[40] Curran adds a further possibility that musical manuscripts were teaching tools, seen by one person only who used them to teach others.[41] This section will suggest that omissions and incompleteness in the manuscripts provide evidence for questioning the view that manuscripts were always created primarily for performance, but at the same time it will show that the same manuscript may suggest several different kinds of reading practice, raising the possibility that manuscripts' uses were not restricted to just one of these models but rather that they occupied a flexible relationship with performances.

There are a number of factors which offer evidence for one or other of the models which Deeming and Leach raise. In a study on a thirteenth-century manuscript, Norwood identifies clear layout and large size as factors which suggest frequent performance from the manuscript.[42] These are features Bent herself suggests music scholars have hitherto not paid

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[39] Hamm, p. 47.
[40] Deeming and Leach, p. 279.
[41] Curran, p. 208.
[42] Patricia Norwood. 'Performance Manuscripts of the Thirteenth-Century?'. *College Music Symposium* 26 (1986): pp. 92-6.

much attention to and which could shed light on performance practices.[43] Omissions and gaps in the music offer a further clue.[44] Information which is missing and *can* be inferred would suggest that the manuscript is not suited to sight-reading, but to a rehearsal context which allows musicians to work out how to fill the gaps. Equally, gaps and omissions which *cannot* be inferred indicate that reading the manuscripts depended on prior knowledge of the music, either because the scribe himself was the intended reader or because such information was transmitted orally through the context of a musical community like a cathedral or court.

A layout optimised to facilitate efficient reading during performance would suggest a reading model in which a musician sings directly from and depends on a manuscript (like that which Bent's quotation at the start of this essay imagines). Both manuscripts contain features which might suggest this kind of reading. Both treat the two facing pages as a single conceptual unit, which Bent elsewhere has suggested implies that several people could stand around the book and sing from it without turning the page.[45] None of the songs in Ashmole would require a singer to turn the page; however, some songs in Selden would require page-turns midway through singing, which is not ideal for performance but would not have made it impossible. Most surprisingly, this feature is found in one of the Latin antiphons (ff. 3-3v) and another liturgical piece (ff. 4-4v) right at the start of the manuscript: the songs most associated with circumscribed ceremonial performance contexts. This seems surprising if they were intended to be performed from, especially by sight-reading. Another song, an English religious carol (ff. 18-18v), also requires a page-turn. Most of the pieces are specifically arranged to avoid this, including the secular songs. Nevertheless, the requirement to turn pages for some songs, particularly the liturgical ones, suggests that, from the start, Selden was not totally optimised for this model of performance.

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[43] Bent, 'Early Music Editing', p. 256.
[44] Deeming and Leach also discuss different kinds of musical omissions, pp. 273-5.
[45] Bent, 'Polyphonic Sources', p. 617.

Substantial size is another factor which has been taken to indicate a model in which several singers needed to have visual access to the manuscript simultaneously during performance.[46] In this respect, Selden measures 259mm x 177mm (it has been trimmed but the sizeable margins suggest the manuscript was not much larger) and Ashmole is smaller at 213mm x 145mm, making both manuscripts smaller than other songbooks of the century which could measure over 500mm in height.[47] Bent has argued against the view that the small size of manuscripts should be taken as a sign that they were not used for performance and, in fairness, both manuscripts are of an adequate size that several performers could have sung from them at the same time.[48] Nevertheless, the fact that larger songbooks from the fifteenth-century exist does add support to the view that the reading practices associated with these manuscripts were different, especially in the case of Selden where the lavish decoration hints that the producers could have afforded to make the manuscript larger if they wanted to. Again, this challenges the model of performance in which several performers sing or sight-read from a manuscript.

Alternative models of performance are suggested by omissions in the manuscripts which require performers to improvise or to rely on partial or total memorisation, either from rehearsing with the manuscript or from orally transmitted knowledge.[49] Musicians would thus be less dependent on the manuscript during the performance, perhaps not using it at all. Imprecise texting offers one example of such an omission. 'Texting' refers to the alignment on the page between syllables of words and musical notes. It is one of the few aspects of musical manuscript production for which contemporary commentary exists, in eighteen lines

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[46] See for example Albert Derolez, 'The Codicology of Late Medieval Music Manuscripts: Some Preliminary Observations'. *The Calligraphy of Medieval Music*. Ed. John Haines. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011. p. 25; Norwood, p. 93; Bell, p. 45; Schmidt-Beste, p. 648.

[47] Schmidt-Beste, p. 648. Selden's trimming is evident from flaps at page-edges preserving marginal text (ff. 12, 16) and decorative flourishes being cut off (f. 20v).

[48] Bent, 'Early Music Editing', p. 270.

[49] For studies on memorisation, improvisation and performance see Philippe Canguilhem. 'Improvisation as Concept and Musical Practice in the Fifteenth Century'. *CHFM*. pp. 154-155; Anna Maria Busse Berger. *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

from a mid-fifteenth-century Venetian manuscript.[50] This brief text stresses the importance of placing a syllable directly beneath and 'in the middle' of the first note with which it will be sung, instructing the performer to 'go on singing all the other notes until that note where the next syllable is placed'.[51] This suggests that unclear texting causes problems when musicians rely on the physical manuscript to perform, especially for polyphonic music which requires singing in unison. Hence, texting which is unclear but which can be worked out during a rehearsal suggests an expected performance practice in which musicians depend on knowledge gained through prior rehearsal with the manuscript, such that they could either use the manuscript as a memory-aid during or before performance or perform from memory. Absent texting on the other hand means the relationship between words and music has to be approximated (since musical notes outnumber syllables in all our examples). Untexted tenor parts were relatively common, and critics differ on the implications of this: Fallows argues that they could easily be inferred (though this seems unlikely in a sight-reading context), whereas Deeming has interpreted them as evidence for the manuscript serving archival or rehearsal function.[52] It has also been suggested that absent texting reflects a musical culture which invited creative interpretations from readers.[53] In any case, these absences point away from a context in which singers depended on the physical manuscript during performance and suggest that the scribes expected readers to have some prior knowledge of the music, either from rehearsal or oral transmission.

Both Selden and Ashmole contain examples of texting which is unclear or absent entirely. Both manuscripts also contain more precise texting: in Selden the Latin antiphons

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[50] Don Harrán. *Word-Tone Relations in Musical Thought*. Newhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler-Verlag, 1986. pp. 67-68.

[51] Translations from Harrán, p. 69.

[52] Fallows, 'The Most Popular Songs of the Fifteenth Century', p. 800; Helen Deeming. 'Preserving and Recycling: Functional Multiplicity and Shifting Priorities in the Compilation and Continued Use of London, British Library, Egerton 274'. *Manuscripts and Medieval Song: Inscription, Performance, Context*. Ed. Helen Deeming and Elizabeth Eva Leach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. p. 147. See also King, p. 1; Bent, 'Polyphonic Sources', p. 628.

[53] As argued in King, p. 2.

are particularly clear (ff. 3-4v), with syllables separated out and placed directly beneath notes at the start of long melismatic sections; in Ashmole some attempt has been made to align syllables with notes (as on f. 195v where the final 'ce' of 'repentaunce' is placed far from the rest of the word at the end of a long melisma). However, there are also instances in both manuscripts where the texting is entirely absent, with no words written under the music at all. In Ashmole the tenor and contratenor voice part for 'Go hert hurt' (ff. 192v-193) lack text altogether. In 'Love wil I with variance' (ff. 195v-196) the words differ for the upper voice. It lacks the phrase 'y drede' which is present in the tenor voice and the manuscript is not clear on which notes the upper voice should sing these words to or whether the upper voice is supposed to sing them at all (unlike in Selden ff. 32v-33 where rests in the actual musical notation indicate when a voice drops out for a few words).

In Selden the precision of the texting varies considerably and there are many instances of imprecise texting, particularly in the English songs. As in Ashmole, there are instances when the lyrics are not given at all for the tenor part (ff. 8v, 12v, 26v). One of the most spectacularly imprecise examples is for the carol beginning 'Nowel nowel . . .' (f. 14v).[54] This piece begins with a one-line chorus sung by all three voices (l. 1) with lyrics written beneath. It is followed by three parts written in parallel (the first singer sings ll. 2 and 5, the second sings ll. 3 and 6, and the third sings ll. 4 and 7), and the lyrics are written beneath only the lower part (beneath ll. 4 and 7). However, something has gone wrong: the music-scribe has run out of space for the third voice which continues from line 7 onto the line below (l. 8), and the text-scribe follows, placing the final lyrics beneath line 8 even though they also correspond to the final musical notes of lines 5 and 6. Rather than continuing onto the line below with the third voice, the music for the other two voices is visibly squashed to fit into the lines above (ll. 5-6). Although the music itself suggests they are supposed to sing the final

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[54] A facsimile of this page is available online: see *Early Manuscripts at Oxford University: Digital Facsimiles of Complete Manuscripts, Scanned Directly from the Originals*.
http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msarchseldenb26. Accessed 24 March 2016.

phrase 'the belle nowel' which appears beneath line 8, there is no indication of how their final notes align with these words and in fact the compression of the music to fit the page means the texting for the whole line (almost half the song) is thrown off. Interestingly, the scribe(s) of the two secular songs have a more precise texting than these examples. They have written the three voices separately, with lyrics beneath each one. But, even so there are moments when the texting is ambiguous: the word 'And' disappears into a margin and hence does not align with the music (f. 32v). Similarly, in 'Welcome be ye' (f. 33) there is a point when the tenor voice drops out for a few words, signalled by rests in the music, but a few syllables which the tenor voice is supposed to sing continue even beneath the rests and therefore do not align with the right notes.

All eight secular songs have been transcribed by Fallows and *EBM* and, tellingly, in every single case the texting differs.[55] Often the differences are fairly minor, but at other times they result in words being sung for very different lengths. In 'Love wil I with variaunce', Fallows has 'I' lasting for twenty beats compared with eight in *EBM*, whereas *EBM* has 'variaunce' lasting sixty beats compared with thirty-six in Fallows.[56] These differences show that imprecise texting could affect both the performance and the meaning of a song. It is possible that this reflects the way that modern readers lack the knowledge of how to interpret music which was common to the original readers. However, the fact that precise texting exists elsewhere suggests that these manuscripts were not as optimised for performance as they could have been.[57] Thus, the imprecise and absent texting in our manuscripts indicates that the songs in Ashmole and Selden existed in a context in which musicians were less dependent on the physical manuscript due to memorisation in rehearsal, oral transmission of songs and/or improvisation. The fragment from the Venetian manuscript

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[55] Fallows, *Secular Polyphony*, pp. 58-62, 121-122; *EBM,* pp. 66-74, 177-180.
[56] *EBM*'s transcription halves all note-lengths in Ashmole; here they have been doubled for accurate comparison with Fallows' transcription.
[57] King notes that some manuscripts contain more precise texting than others although most have a mixture of precise and imprecise texting: King, pp. 1, 7.

and the examples of very clear texting in the Latin antiphons suggest that precise texting was essential for certain performance contexts. However, rather than blaming the imprecise texting in these manuscripts on scribal carelessness, the manuscripts more likely suggest a rehearsal or archival function, in a context in which the user is likely to have prior knowledge of the music and which therefore did not prioritise the precision of texting.

Both manuscripts also contain other kinds of omissions which indicate an expectation that the reader would rely on memory gained through rehearsal or prior exposure to the music. Ashmole has some disparities between the lyrics given for different voices in the same song: one voice reads 'Because of repentaunce' (f. 195v); the other 'Because y drede of repentance' (f. 196); and in the phrase 'Love wil I with variance', repeated several times during the song, the word 'I' is missing in all instances but one. Fallows supplies these missing lyrics in his transcription.[58] That they are meant to be there is implicit in the lyrics, but their absence would make the music impossible to sight-read. This may reflect an individualised reading practice in which the music is 'performed' silently in the mind of a reader who is able to fill the gaps. The Selden secular songs give complete, consistent lyrics for each voice, however a more major omission is found earlier in the manuscript, revealed by a Latin text which is written over a stave: 'Iste sequens versus repetatur post vnumquemque versum' ('the following verse should be repeated after every single verse') (f. 12v). It appears in a song called 'Ave regina caelorum' which is found in manuscripts from across Europe.[59] The Latin text instructs the reader on how to sing subsequent verses, but Selden does not record any of the subsequent verses that are found in other copies. That the song was so widely spread suggests it was famous enough for the scribe not to have needed to record these verses for performers to sing them. This offers clear evidence that Selden

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[58] Fallows, *Secular Polyphony*, p. 62.
[59] *Cantus Index: Online Catalogue for Chant and Office Music*. http://cantusindex.org. Accessed 22 March 2016. The song is found in Portugal, Braga, Arquivo da Sé MS. 34, pp. 202-203.

anticipates a performance practice that at least for this song depends on memory gained from prior exposure to the music.

These manuscripts could, then, be rehearsal copies in which repeated rehearsal offered a space to decide how to interpret ambiguities. The final piece would likely have been partially, if not fully, memorized and then performed with or without the manuscript. However, in other ways, the manuscripts also suggest purposes beyond performance. Given the context which a drinking song (Selden ff. 32v) generically implies, we might question whether its performance would have required repeated rehearsal. Furthermore, there are ways in which both texts suggest that there were other priorities behind their construction besides facilitating reading the music. Schmidt-Beste suggests that fifteenth-century songbooks intended for performance were pragmatic rather than decorative, but in Selden the aesthetic conventions of the music are at times prioritised over reading clarity.[60] It contains large, illuminated initials which in some instances make the alignment between words and music unnecessarily ambiguous. For example, folios 4 and 9v both contain songs for two voices written in two parallel lines of music, but in each case a large initial protrudes into the stave for one of the voices, meaning that the notation across the two voices does not align with each other or with the words below. This suggests that clear texting was not a priority. Decorative elements are inconsistent (the secular songs are noticeably less decorated; ff. 32v-33), reflecting the apparent shifting purposes of the manuscript during its construction and suggesting both practical and display function. Selden's decorative features suggest some parts of it were intended to be seen, and that this was at times prioritised over its clarity.

Although it lacks the aesthetic features of Selden, Ashmole also shows that optimisation for performance was not the highest priority. If we accept Hamm's argument that music was frequently performed from fascicles which were more portable than larger

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[60] Schmidt-Beste, p. 648.

manuscripts, then the presence of Somer's *Kalendarium* beginning at the end of the quire containing the secular songs suggests that Ashmole was not used in performance.[61] Since the author had access to paper, which was cheaper than parchment, it is likely that he could have kept the texts separate and thus it seems improbable that he would choose to write the *Kalendarium* in a volume used in rehearsals.[62] To carry the *Kalendarium* to every performance would be impractical, and it is hard to imagine any context other than a private, personal one which would require these six songs and the *Kalendarium*.

This analysis shows both manuscripts offer evidence for a range of possible purposes, which at times appear to contradict each other. The act of writing music down presupposes that one can read it and perform from it: '[a]ll manners of musical inscription can figure performance'.[63] At the same time, omissions indicate problems with the view that this music was intended to be sight-read from or that one could perform the music without rehearsal or prior knowledge of the music. Complicating matters further, Selden's prioritisation of the aesthetic over the functional demonstrates that the manuscript's value was not rooted solely in its capacity to facilitate smooth performance. Rather, this array of factors attests to the multiple uses to which these manuscripts could apparently be put. Ashmole reflects the idiosyncratic purpose of an individual and thus it seems likely that it functioned as a personal archive, yet with enough detail to permit usage in performance or even to act as an exemplar. Selden similarly seems to have been a repository but with communal function. Greene suggests it could have been used for recording new songs performed by visitors.[64] The diverse genres, different kinds of layout, varying precision of texting and different degrees to which the aesthetic features were prioritised over functional ones suggest a range of intentions over how it might be used in relation to performance: it could have been a display manuscript or

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[61] Hamm, p. 47.
[62] Strohm, p. 231.
[63] Deeming and Leach, p. 279.
[64] Greene, p. 315.

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one used practically, it could have been used in performance for some songs, and in rehearsal or as a memory-aid for others. Both manuscripts, unique in their own ways, thus indicate the lack of a conventionalised, singular performance practice for written music, demonstrating that it is important for us to be aware of a range of possible practices of reading and using musical manuscripts. Rather, they are written in such a way that is suggestive of several different modes of reading, reflecting a musical culture in which there existed a flexible and pluralistic relationship between page and performance.

Bent attacks the view that medieval musicians 'could not have performed from the manuscripts', continuing, 'no plausible alternative explanation for these huge efforts in copying has been forthcoming'.[65] These criticisms misconstrue the arguments of critics such as Hamm (whom she cites), who never suggests musicians were actually incapable of performing from written music. Though many fifteenth-century musicians were no doubt highly competent, this does not necessarily mean that they did perform from their manuscripts. Moreover, manuscripts *do* suggest a range of alternative uses which justify their creation and which correspond more fully with our historical understanding of oral transmission and illustrations of musicians performing without music as well as offering a reason for imprecision and omissions in manuscripts that avoids blaming scribes.[66] Selden and Ashmole both show evidence that points away from a model in which musicians depend on the manuscript in performance, however the evidence does not align clearly with solely one alternative reading practice such as archival, personal or rehearsal usage. Furthermore, alongside each of these non-performance uses, the manuscripts may or may not have also been used in performance as a memory-aid. These manuscripts thus suggest a musical culture in which orality and literacy overlapped and in which the very conventions of written music did not necessarily circumscribe users to a single mode of reading. The fact that the evidence

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[65] Bent, 'Polyphonic Sources', p. 633; Bent, 'Early Music Editing', p. 270.
[66] Strohm, p. 230.

of the physical books readily yields all these different possibilities demonstrates the importance for modern scholars to approach medieval musical manuscripts with an open-minded view of the different ways in which the original manuscripts might have been used, without simply assuming that they were only used in performance.

Ultimately Bent is to be commended for encouraging students to engage with the actual manuscripts rather than relying on modern transcriptions. However, this must be accompanied with due focus on not only the aural piece of music, but on all the evidence that the physical artefact offers. Singing from facsimiles may help us to understand music 'from the inside', but we must also acknowledge that manuscripts offer a perspective which is external to the original, aural music and thereby suggest a range of possibilities for how they related to performance practices and contexts.[67] We must also use the written page to appreciate medieval music from the outside.

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[67] Bent, 'Early Music Editing', p. 270.

Abbreviations

Ashmole   Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 191, part IV. ff. 191-211v. Manuscript.

CHFM   Busse Berger, Anna Maria and Jesse Rodin. Ed. *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Print.

EBM   Stainer, Sir John. Ed. *Early Bodleian Music: Sacred & Secular Songs, together with the other MS. compositions in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, ranging from about A.D. 1185 to about A.D. 1505*. With an introduction by E.W.B. Nicholson and musical transcriptions by J.F.R. Stainer and C. Stainer, 2 vols. London: Novello and Company, 1901. Print.

Selden   Oxford, Bodleian Library, Arch. Selden B. 26, part I. ff. 3-33v. Manuscript.

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