

# *Music and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Monasticism*

Amanda J. Haste, PhD

## Review by Valerie Abrahamsen, ThD

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Many modern Westerners are probably unfamiliar with the Christian phenomenon of monastic practice: the lives of monks and nuns living in their own communities. Those who do have some familiarity with convents and monasteries may base their knowledge or opinions on assumptions deriving from recordings of chant, television shows, books by prominent authors, and the lives of men living near the Pope at the Vatican. Many Westerners recognize the primary vows of Anglican and Roman Catholic Religious: poverty, obedience and chastity. Among the assumptions are that monks and nuns are naive, old-fashioned, uninterested in what goes on in the world, and lead easy, sheltered lives.

Dr. Amanda J. Haste, in *Music and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Monasticism*, undertakes a rich, wide-ranging study of today's monastic lifestyle, framed by the vital role of music in most communities. Using ethnographic, theological and multi-disciplinary evidence, Dr. Haste offers a balanced and fascinating treatment of the lives of women and men who have committed themselves to the monastic lifestyle. Through scholarship and personal experience, Haste delves into the ways that music – plainsong chant, instrumental music and dance – is used to form and enliven monastic communities. She examines gender identity issues of nuns and monks, commercial aspects of monastic music, and the role of music in neo-monastic communities.

Even for those of us who have been involved with religious communities for decades, Dr. Haste's treatment is very illuminating. She immediately points out the countercultural mindset of people who feel called to the religious life: living in community is vastly different from the primarily individualistic lifestyle of most Westerners. Communal living can be quite difficult, at many levels: "one of the hardest lessons is that of giving up their own will and agenda." In contrast to monastic living for many people in earlier times, those who want to join a community today do so voluntarily – consciously and deliberately rejecting other life and career choices – and usually after they have "completed their emotional and sexual formation."

Music, especially plainsong chant which depends heavily on controlled breathing, serves to knit most monastic communities together. However, chant can also be a challenge for the community's leader. Haste humanizes the situation by discussing jealousies and rivalries that can emerge among members and a leader's need to deal with highly competent musicians alongside those who are musically challenged. Haste discovers that "the nature of the music can be a very good guide to the spiritual and corporate health of the community."

A common, perhaps subliminal assumption among outsiders is that those who have taken monastic vows are "sexless – neither male nor female" and thus represent a "third gender." Dr.

Haste examines the “several paradoxes among the Religious” through the lens of music and how composing music is a creative and even procreative enterprise. Interestingly, there does seem to be a masculine/feminine “divide” when it comes to composing: female Religious, many of whom do not enter the convent with musical expertise, compose new pieces with emotive qualities and in collaboration with others, while male composers, who often enter the monastery with a high level of musical education, tend to write music to texts based on a specific need. For any number of reasons, compositions by female Religious have often been undervalued; the issue of music, gender identity and modern religious communities is ripe for further exploration.

The “singing nun” phenomenon has been one way in which the general public has been exposed to life in religious communities. Dr. Haste offers an imaginative and multidisciplinary treatment of the phenomenon of individual Religious who present “their musical gifts to the world and [gain] an international profile for themselves and ... contemporary Religious Life.” Using four case studies – three sisters and one friar – Haste looks at the individual artists’ (sometimes difficult) lives and the evangelistic aspect of their performances and special ministry. Religious who have become “media stars” to some extent have had audiences both question their authenticity and appreciate the mystery of the monastic vocation.

Dr. Haste’s work is of interest not only to monks and nuns themselves (even those who have lived in community for years, as will church historians, will learn something) but also to Christians “in the pews” and “seekers” who want to know how today’s monks and nuns live, to Christians who may feel the call to community life, to church musicians who might want to explore the use of chant to form their own choirs, and to those curious about the authenticity and attractiveness of the religious life.