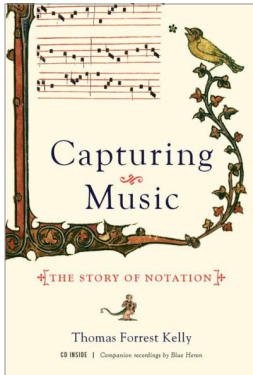


Book Reviews

Andrew Crow, editor



*Capturing Music:
The Story of Notation*
Thomas Forrest Kelly
W.W. Norton & Company,
2015
238 pages (plus compact
disc), \$45.00, hardcover
ISBN: 978-0-393-06496-4

As the choral field examines current and historical practice regarding the representation of cultures, traditions, and matters of inclusion within the artform, investing time in the potentially esoteric field of notation as it evolved in Medieval Europe may seem trivial. However, this provocative volume invites deep questions and provides unsuspected insights specifically relevant to present questions. If we consider notated music a signifier of the Western or European tradition, examining the period when music left the realm of oral transmission for the legacy of literacy focuses attention on a moment that separated one path from another. Thomas Forrest Kelly leads the reader methodically through pivotal moments and manuscripts in the development of notation, but opens the door to wider philosophical pondering.

As Kelly reveals the first steps toward capturing sound in symbol, he also enumerates some facets of music that were lost in the process. His language sounds quite current when he writes that the emergent system of notation “chooses

to privilege” some aspects of music and “literally marginalize[s] others” (3–4). For example, since timbre was not included in the notation, the character of the desired sound is not recorded. However, Kelly points out that some earlier systems of notation were designed to show “how to sing the song, not what the song is” (12).

In addition to a vivid presentation of the historical narrative, Kelly offers a fascinating philosophical approach, citing figures such as St. Isidore of Seville and St. Augustine. The latter is quoted in a detailed description of time perception that mirrors my own experience of time on the conductor’s podium. Elsewhere, Kelly muses that “the magic of music, in a way, is in its ephemeral quality: if you’re not here, you can’t hear it” (10). Connecting the fourteenth century with our own, Kelly notes,

It is fitting in a way that the century of plague, schism, and war should bring about something so lasting in the service of art. It is perhaps in times of stress that the arts and sciences have their strongest effect...Both Machaut and Vitry were diplomats, politicians, clergymen, poets, and composers. Perhaps if more politicians were to practice the arts of lyric poetry and music, we might create a more beautiful world (175).

THE
CHORAL SCHOLAR
& AMERICAN CHORAL REVIEW

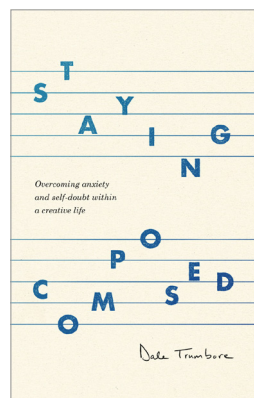
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The book's core traces first the development of notation conventions for pitch and then the more arduous path for a codified system to indicate rhythm. Along the way, we learn about music's relationship to mathematics, medieval philosophy, and the development of the motet. The journey is accompanied by interesting sidebars and gorgeous reproductions of relevant manuscripts. By way of confession, I normally gloss over such insertions, but Kelly even managed to get this reviewer to examine the plates with genuine interest and to listen to them performed; the accompanying compact disc features customized examples recorded by the vocal ensemble Blue Heron. Indeed, the book itself is a pleasing, sensuous experience with high quality paper, vibrant images, and thoughtful design. At some level, the book seems to target a lay audience, though one would imagine that there is a slim market for this content. Yet Kelly does not patronize that potential audience. For any conductor who rarely gives professional attention to music before Josquin, Kelly's patient and relevant descriptions of terminology and genres provided a welcome refresher and, perhaps, clarifies some esoteric terms and historical figures from the dusty past of an undergraduate music history survey.

Kelly concludes with some musings about the durability of this now-familiar notational style compared side-by-side with more recent technologies for recording and transporting sound, from wax cylinders to mp3 files. Even still, he notes our age-old reliance on memory and improvisation. Neither textbook nor encyclopedia, *Capturing Music* offers a rare gift: to consider the current musical moment through the lens of changes that impacted the artform almost a millennium ago.

—Andrew Crow



*Staying Composed:
Overcoming Anxiety
and Self-doubt Within a
Creative Life*

Dale Trumbore

Self-published, Monee,

Illinois, 2019

199 pages, \$16.00

paperback

ISBN: 978-1-09-724864-3

One might expect a book written by an up-and-coming contemporary choral composer to address compositional techniques, or perhaps tips to successfully navigate the world of grants and commissions, but this book applies much more broadly. Its title does not mislead: this book is about overcoming anxiety in the creative arts. In forty-two short chapters averaging from three to five pages each, *Staying Composed* provides an informal summation of the wisdom that Dale Trumbore has accumulated from her research and life experience.

Trumbore's steady stream of sage advice is relevant for composers, conductors, writers, and artists of all types who deal with anxiety and self-doubt. Thus, most artists and musicians could benefit from reading this; it's surely a prudent investment. Trumbore writes in a conversational, familiar style; her honesty, vulnerability, and transparency are refreshing and endearing.

Trumbore candidly discusses her failures in various chapters. For example, she tried duplicating original compositional successes, but the imitations were no longer original. She also addresses her own self-sabotaging propensity to procrastinate. Much of her advice is contextual, and requires a certain amount of discernment to apply. Some things just take time to marinate, such as big projects that cannot be rushed or the quality suffers. Other things you can do right now, and should.

While a few of her suggestions may strike some as touchy-feely, (e.g. “how do I want to feel while in the process of composing this work?” [36 and 151]), much of her advice is eminently practical. This includes proactive steps that one can take when feeling stalled out, or building space around deadlines, leaving time for unexpected events before, and some down-time after completing a major project. Trumbore suggests productive use of non-creative time for other tasks: business emails, reconnecting with choral contacts, or housework.

Some of Trumbore’s advice might apply most specifically to composers. For example, she suggests that one’s best creative work currently may be only a stepping stone, a prototype for even better creative work in the future (44-45). Elsewhere, Trumbore recommends that touching base with works in progress every day, even if only briefly, makes the ice much easier to break than after an extended break in order to keep them in active memory (18-19). But much of her advice can easily be applied to conductors. As artists, we should trust our instincts—if something feels wrong about a commission or project, this is not likely to be the last time we feel that way. (She quotes the Buddhist proverb, “as in the beginning, so in the middle, so at the end”[109]). Careers are built on a consistent body of work. One can mitigate professional jealousy by asking questions that address the root of that insecurity: self-doubt statements such as, “Why does she get so many more performances than I do?” can become, “What can I do to secure more performances for my work?” and “Their website looks so much better than mine” turns into

“What concrete improvements to my website could I complete this weekend?” And finally, “don’t ever save good ideas for later—trust that your creative spring will continue to flow; you will continue to produce new ideas in the future.”

Trumbore’s advice is sometimes pithy but never trite. The best solutions are often the simplest. Know yourself, listen to your own body, and be familiar with your own creative process. Be kind, and forgiving to yourself: “You don’t need to deserve a break in order to take one,” she writes, “but after you’ve completed a big project, you’ve definitely earned one” (164–165). And finally, an insight with which conductors can definitely resonate: a single composition [or concert], however great, is not a success—you are the success, in that you get to share your inner vision and creative inspirations with the world, doing what you love to create beauty and art that will potentially have unforeseen and long-lasting ripple effects.

While no one can write a book wherein all of the content will apply to every NCCO reader, Trumbore’s precepts are applicable to anyone working in the creative arts, not just composers specifically. Conductors also can benefit from her excellent advice. Trumbore should be commended for this contribution to artists’ mental health in an important field too frequently left unaddressed.

—*Vaughn Roste*