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Ellis, Katharine. *The Politics of Plainchant in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. xxiii + 137. ISBN: 978-1-4094-6373-3

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Katharine Ellis's meticulously researched and engagingly written study chronicles a seventeen-year debate over the competing versions of plainchant vying for widespread adoption by Catholic parishes in late nineteenth-century France. It does so by focusing on Auguste Pécoul, a former Benedictine monk and diplomat who worked largely behind the scenes through press campaigns and letters to influential political and religious figures to rally support for a paleographical approach established by Dom Joseph Pothier. The story is a complex one, musicologically and historically—the author calls it a “multiply-connected maze” (xxiii)—and Ellis manages to relate her findings with remarkable clarity, making it easy to grasp the network of influences at play in this battle.

Because it weaves together so many strands of the cultural history of the period, most notably anticlericalism, nationalism, trade unionism, and questions of intellectual property rights, while simultaneously focusing closely on the main “characters” involved in the drama, Ellis's study is of value not only to musicologists, but also to those interested in the cultural history of fin-de-siècle France. The analysis works smoothly outward from Pécoul's story to the history of the Solesmes monastery's paleographical work, to the much broader questions of church and national politics.

The musicological story is the quest, by the producers of various editions of Catholic plainchant, for the right to claim support from the Vatican, thus guaranteeing large print runs and commercial success. At the start of the story, the edition published in Regensburg by Friedrich Pustet earned Vatican approbation. Editions based on Pothier's work at Solesmes superseded Pustet's edition, but Pothier's edition was in turn challenged by the work of Dom André Mocquereau, who led paleographical work at Solesmes starting in 1893. Mocquereau's chief contribution was a set of rhythmic markings that placed more emphasis on the musical line than on the declamatory nature of the chant. Pécoul becomes a major player in this debate by campaigning for Pothier, first against Pustet, and then against Mocquereau.

Ellis's original contribution to this history is drawn from her extensive archival work on the correspondence of Pécoul, a colorful and complex figure: “an ultramontane patriot and nationalist, a high bourgeois with a genuine interest in working-class matters; an antiquarian political strategist; a maverick loner whose network of friends stretched in all directions” (120). Ellis's research led her to a tangled story replete with “pseudonyms, codenames, half-truths and epistolary winks between those in the know” (xxi); the resulting analysis often reads like a detective story as it untangles shifting loyalties, sometimes questionable motivations, and a complex series of attempts to gain influence at the Vatican, in the French government, and with the leadership of French printworkers' unions. Pécoul's articles and letters attempted to rally French bishops to support Pothier's edition, printed in France, rather than Pustet's. This move brought together the Republican cause of trade unionism and the typically conservative domain of the Catholic Church in France, which now saw itself implicated in what was seen in some ways as a nationalist concern: the dominance of a German edition of chant which had received Vatican approbation as the “universal” music of the Church. Also at stake were questions of intellectual property in terms of the work that Dom Pothier, who later moved from Solesmes to Saint-Wandrille, performed while at Solesmes. Pécoul claimed the copyright for Dom Pothier, whereas the Solesmes abbey claimed it for itself. A third claim was extended when French anticlerical legislation pushed the Solesmes community into exile outside France in 1901. At that time, the liquidator of Solesmes' property “would implicitly claim that it belonged to the French Republic” (78). By the end, Ellis returns to the musical and liturgical stakes of the debate, which centered on seeing chant primarily as “pitched declamation” or as “singing” (114), as well as the valuation of chant as part of the French *patrimoine* as it was being

promulgated at the time in conservatories: “the problem for Pécoul is best seen in the context of a long tradition whereby the heritage-value or high-art status of a custom or artifact could ‘trump’ Republican feelings of distaste at its Catholic provenance” (115).

The full story is far too complex to relate in sufficient detail here and Ellis succeeds in presenting it in a lively way that brings the main characters of Pécoul, Pothier, and Mocquereau to life while making a convincing case as to why this episode in the history of plainchant can be seen as a case study about cultural politics in fin-de-siècle France. Her study admirably demonstrates that while there was certainly a musical conflict involved in the chant debates between Pothier and Mocquereau, that debate was not really ever on center stage, given the web of cultural and political questions in which plainchant was enmeshed in this particularly charged moment of French history.