



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

**Amanda J. Haste**

London & New York: Routledge, 2023

ISBN 9781032441788

182 Pages 13 B/W Illustrations

<https://www.routledge.com/Music-and-Identity-in-Twenty-First-Century-Monasticism/Haste/p/book/9781032441788>

**Review by Jasmine Hazel Shadrack. Review was first published online 9 April 2024 and will appear in Volume 11 of *The Independent Scholar*.**

In this book, musicologist Amanda Haste explores the role of music in Catholic, Anglican/Episcopalian and neo-monastic communities in Britain and North America. She points out that twenty-first-century monastic communities represent unique social environments in which music plays an integral part, and engages closely with communities of practice to produce an expertly researched book.

Each chapter moves seamlessly into the next, taking us through various aspects of modern contemporary monastic life. While the core theme of the book is the role of music in the negotiation of personal and communal identity, the author also brings out a sub-theme of self-care, thus exploring both the physiological and the psychological dimensions of the musical experience.

Following an Introduction in which the author situates this research within the literature and

explains essential monastic and musical terminology, Chapter 1 explores the considerable agency of music in monastic life, both historically and in contemporary communities, including its role as a vector of both conflict and reparation. Chapter 2 then explores the encoding of monastic identity through musical composition, drawing on case studies of several monastic composers.

Numerous musical examples and clear explanations demonstrate the different ways in which they use notation (including specialist chant notation software) to express their awareness of and connection to two millennia of monastic history, while creating new music in different genres.

Chapter 3 tackles the negotiation of identity through instrumental music, and through the music that monks and nuns play and listen to just for pleasure, while Chapter 4, "Dancing my Prayer, Dancing My

Self" extends into embodied identity using Balanchine's definition of dance as "music made visible" (p. 3).

The author then widens the focus to explore issues closely related to communal and personal music-making. Chapter 5 on the expression of gender identity through words and music is rich in insights from monastics themselves. Creative and procreative metaphors abound, with nuns referring to "giving birth" to musical ideas, and one monk describing how he found he was "just pumping [hymns] out" (p. 81).

Chapter 6 examines the commodification of monastic music, for which the world at large seems to have an insatiable appetite, and offers case studies of several communities for whom their music has provided not only an income stream but also a means of outreach.

Chapter 7 explores the "singing nun" phenomenon, in which a single musically talented member of a monastic community is promoted on the world stage. Through four fascinating studies of the original Singing Nun, "Sister Smile" (whose life ended tragically); the Australian Sister of Mercy Janet Mead (who wrote rock masses); Franciscan friar Br Alessandro ("The Voice of Assisi"); and Sr Cristina (who won the Italian version of "The Voice") the author examines issues of authenticity, naming and identity, and the consequences of leading a double life within their community and in the glare of the spotlight.

The final two chapters offer examples of how music is used in forging a particular denominational and/or

community identity. Chapter 8 looks at the creation of an Anglican musical identity, while the final chapter examines how monastic traditions and more contemporary musical influences have played out in selected established and emerging neo-monastic communities.

The result is a comprehensive and compelling study of the agency of music in the construction and expression of personal and community identity. This is not a book just for university libraries, this is a text for choral composers, for those fascinated by chants and plainsong, and also for those interested in exercises in the ethnography of unusual groups, and how to embed those diatribes and conversations within rigorous academic endeavors.

Overall, this is an exceptional feat of research and ethnography.

**Jasmine Hazel Shadrack, PhD** is a British composer, conductor and performance autoethnographer, and her research areas are psychoanalysis, performance studies, trauma studies, disability and crip theory and extreme metal. She is adjunct professor at the Don Wright Faculty of Music Research and Composition Western University, Canada; visiting lecturer in music at Falmouth University, UK; and a visiting scholar in gender at the University of Central Missouri, USA. <http://nacht-hexe.com>