Nicholas Saunders enjoys a guide for explorers of not-so-distant times

Mirrors that reveal our past selves

Richard Parncutt
Interval makes the show

Pitch intervals in Western music may be represented as frequency ratios (2:1 for the octave, 3:2 for the fifth or major third), measured in cents (1/100 of a semitone). A major third (C to E) can be tuned either 5:4 (just) or pure intonation, 386 cents) or 8:5 (Pythagorean intonation; four fifths minus two octaves, 408 cents). Since Bach, keyboards have been tuned to equal temperament, in which all semitones are 1200/1200 cents. Ross Duffin explains the theory and gives an informative and readable historical account of its history. He focuses on the main players — composers, performers and theorists from the 5th to 20th centuries. The result is a useful resource for academics and a good read for music lovers.

How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (And Why You Should Care)
By Ross W. Duffin
W. W. Norton, 196pp
£17.99 ISBN 0 393 06227 9

The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology
Edited by Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry
Cambridge University Press, 404pp, £45.00
ISBN 0 521 85375 3 and 0 521 85376 1

The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology — the melding of archaeological techniques, historical methods and documentary sources — is developing rapidly. In one sense, as archaeology carves out an ever-wider remit for itself, so new kinds of archaeological investigation come into being, borrowing from other disciplines, redrawing the boundaries of intellectual inquiry and redefining what we believe we can recapture of the past.

Given our fascination with the recent past and our increasingly interdisciplinary attempts to investigate it, historical archaeology is in need of a user-friendly overview for the burgeoning number of students and public who find themselves encountering the “archaeology of recent ancestors”. In The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology, Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry have produced exactly what is needed.

In showcasing historical archaeology’s excitement and complexity, the editors have opened up a whole new area for discussion. In presenting the differences between documentary and historical archaeology, they start by reminding us of the changing definitions of “archaeology” in our own time, as where to look for ourselves. In this book shows us how as well as where to look for ourselves.

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