

Katherine R. Larson. *The Matter of Song in Early Modern England: Texts in and of the Air*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xx + 245 pp. + 16 illus. + 14 tracks. \$77. Review by ANNA LEWTON-BRAIN, MCGILL UNIVERSITY AND DAWSON COLLEGE.

Performers of early music tend to rely on musicologists for insight into historical performance practices to inform their attempts at musical reconstructions. In *The Matter of Song in Early Modern England: Texts in and of the Air*, Katherine Larson inverts that paradigm and uses her insights as a musician to expand her musicological, literary, and historical analysis to “animate” (202) early modern song.

Songs are by their “matter” (31) or medium, necessarily inter-media art, but, as Larson outlines in her extensive “Prologue,” they have too often suffered from the limits of disciplinary study (1–31). Literary critics tend to treat early modern songs as poems, or worse, dismiss these lyrics as merely song and therefore not worthy of serious attention (4–5). Similarly, musicologists have tended to focus on “the notational framework of extant scores” (5). Larson argues that what is needed from scholars is to take account of the “singing body” (15) and to approach song as a performance art form. Borrowing the term “drastic” from musicologist Carolyn Abbate, Larson sets out to explore “the ‘wild’ [or “drastic”] elements of song as a product of the human body” (10).

Larson is particularly interested in the female singing body and the fourteen songs that she addresses in the book, which she herself sings on the companion tracks (<https://global.oup.com/booksites/content/9780198843788/>) accompanied by the wonderfully sensitive and musical lutenist Lucas Harris, are all in one way or another connected to women: some have lyrics composed by women, some are from collections dedicated to women, and others are female persona lyrics. In highlighting this repertoire, Larson is redressing a gap in musicological and feminist research. Much has been written on the continental female musicians and composers of the early modern period such as Barbara Strozzi and Francesca Caccini, but since, unlike in Europe, there were not professional female musicians in England, given “the pre-Restoration injunctions against women’s public appearance on the English commercial stage,” there has to date been scant attention

paid to the music-making of early modern English women (24–25).

The “Prologue” ends with an analysis of Robert Jones’s strophic air (or ayre), “My father faine would have mee a take a man that hath a beard,” which was published in 1610 in *The Muses Garden for Delights*, a book of airs dedicated to Mary Wroth (27–31). The song is voiced from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old girl considering the handsome husband chosen for her by her father and has interesting resonances as a comedic lyric that expresses female sexual desire. Larson’s reading of the music and lyrics together is astute and helpfully brings her own personal experience of singing and recording the song into the discussion to highlight the “drastic” elements of vocal production and music-making (31); however, as is often the case in the analysis of such a rich medium as song, there is much left to be explored. Lines like “I must not speak as I do think” and the song’s mockery of the mother’s reticence to let her daughter marry at the age of fourteen reveal the ways in which women’s voices were silenced in the period. Larson has included an image of the printed air (Figure P6), but the lyrics are hard to make out. Of the fourteen tracks recorded and discussed, only one transcription is provided (of “Sweet Echo” by Henry Lawes), and images of the original manuscript or print sources are only provided for five of the songs. One of the central barriers of access to this material for literary scholars is the lack of quality editions of musical settings of lyrics they may be interested in. Larson likely prepared editions for her recording session, and there is already a companion website hosted by Oxford University Press for the musical tracks. A digital appendix with edited scores of the songs would be beneficial to scholars wanting to digest and build on Larson’s argument and perhaps use her recordings pedagogically. Larson’s involvement in the Early Modern Songscapes web platform (<https://ems.digitalscholarship.utoronto.ca/>), which hosts editions and recordings of the previously unedited songs of Henry Lawes’s 1653 *Ayres and Dialogues*, shows she is aware of these issues in the field of song studies and is working to redress them.

Chapter One: “Airy Forms” is perhaps the most broadly applicable chapter of the book as it lays out “an embodied poetics of song” (33) by attending to the “lexical slipperiness” of song as a genre (34). Looking to Renaissance English literary theorists including Philip

Sidney, William Scott, George Puttenham, and Henry Peacham and Renaissance music theorists such as Thomas Morley and Charles Butler, Larson demonstrates the closeness of the two media, music and poetry, in the period. In particular, she highlights how often literary theorists borrowed language from music theory to explain their art and how poesy was essentially conceived of as a performance-based oral art form (37). She also argues convincingly for a “capacious” and “elastic” understanding of form that allows for multidimensional analysis of song’s many facets—textual, musical, and performance based (34). In a fascinating discussion of style, Larson shows how florid seventeenth-century compositions that used ornamentation, dissonance, and chromaticism to excess were gendered as effeminate by both William Prynne and Charles Butler; Prynne calls such pieces “whorish musicke crowned with flowers” (47). The chapter ends with analysis of two anonymous settings of Mary Sidney Herbert’s translations of Psalms 51 and 130, composed in quite the opposite style to the music that Prynne critiques. These two pieces are this reviewer’s favorite tracks, and Larson rightly calls Psalm 51 an “exquisite setting” (57). Particularly touching is her anecdote about being pregnant when recording Psalm 51 and the resonance she felt with the lyrics of the third verse when the singer imagines her gestation in her mother’s womb, when “as with living heat she cherished [her]” (line 17). It is this sort of immeasurable but deeply meaningful element of singing—the personal investment in the lyrics and intention on the part of the singer at any one performance of a song—that Larson is rightly pointing to as perhaps the most important element of vocal music. It is, she acknowledges, “airy” or unstable and therefore difficult to theorize, but absolutely fundamental to early modern song and to the song genre as a whole.

The second chapter, “Breath of Sirens,” examines the early modern technical understandings of air, breath, and the singing body, particularly the female singing body, and thus the chapter is a resource for scholars working on sound, acoustics, and the history of science. Larson begins with the standard sources for Renaissance understandings of the physics and physiology of sound production: Plato, Aristotle, Galen, and Ficino. It is from Ficino that Larson takes the title of her book, for he likens “the very matter of song” to “a kind of

airy and rational animal” that acts on our *spiritus*, the intermediary substance between soul and body (66). Charles Butler’s remarks in *The Principles of Musik* that “a Singing-man neede never fear the *Astma*, *Peripneumonia*, or *Consumption*: or any other like affections of that vital part: which ar the death of many students,” seems particularly apt advice for the current Coronatide—an incentive perhaps for us all to sing more, even if we are stuck at home (71). The discussion of how to produce a trill or “*tremblement*” that ends with the advice from Bacilly’s *Remarques curieuses*, “il n’y a que la pratique qui les puisse faire comprendre,” resonated particularly with me, as the words of my voice teacher when I asked her how to learn to trill effectively were “you just do it” (75). Larson points to such moments of “vagueness” in singing treatises as registering the “embodied, ‘drastic’ experience of singing on a textual level” (76) and concludes that “as a performance phenomenon, song can only be captured imperfectly on the page; it is more easily felt than explained” (77). Despite the challenges of talking about singing bodies and song performance, Larson uses her experience of recording Charles Coleman’s “Bright Aurelia” and the anonymous air, “Go thy way” to “animate” seventeenth-century debates about ornamentation and style (77–85). The chapter continues with a discussion of rhetorical affect and song that draws on John Milton, John Calvin, Charles Butler, and Baldassare Castiglione, before analyzing two songs of grief: John Bartlet’s air, “If ever hapless woman had a cause to breathe her plaints into the open ayre” and John Danyel’s “Mrs M. E. her funeral teares for the death of her husband” (92–96). That discussion of affect is taken up in the final section of the chapter, which focuses on the prolific writings of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (96–109). Larson describes the female-centric salon-like atmosphere of music-making gatherings at Henry Lawes’s house where two airs by Henry Lawes, recorded by Larson, with lyrics by female poets Katherine Philips (“Come, my Lucatia”) and Lady Mary Dering (“In vain, faire *Cloris*”) might have been sung and recounts how the Duchess herself sang a more simple “Old Ballad” at a musical evening at her house in Antwerp (103). This chapter thus does much to flesh out the singing culture of women in early modern England.

Chapter Three: “Voicing Lyric” focuses on the writings of Mary Wroth, “an accomplished musician whose writings abound with

musical lyrics and allusions to song performance” (112) and builds an argument for the musical qualities of the manuscript collection of her writings now housed at the Folger Shakespeare Library (V.a.104), and the significance of the songs in *Urania*. Larson’s discussion of “fainting” in the chapter is particularly interesting as it raises debates about vocal range and color in historical performance practice. Larson makes a feminist case for the “potency of women’s songs in Wroth’s romance” (138) and concludes the chapter with a reflection on her experience of recording Alfonso Ferrabosco’s setting of Wroth’s lyric, “Was I to blame” (136–137).

At this point, the book moves farther from traditional musicological and literary study of lyric poetry and music to address the traces of music in the theatrical genres of early modern women’s household (or “closet”) dramas (Chapter Four: “Household Songs”), and masques (Chapter Five: “Sweet Echo”). Larson argues for the performability of plays by Jane Lumley, Mary Sidney, Elizabeth Cary, Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley, Mary Wroth, and Margaret Cavendish that have traditionally been treated as “closet” dramas, meant to be read (139) and demonstrates the acoustic permeability of the closet in the early modern household, suggesting that “musical and sonic isolation was more fantasy than reality” (148). The fourth chapter draws on three recent productions of such household texts—the Rose Company’s 2013–14 UK tour of Jane Lumley’s manuscript translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (c. 1554); stagings by the Toronto Masque Theatre in 2012 and the New Perspectives Theatre Company in 2014 of Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure* (pub. 1668); and Shakespeare’s Globe’s Read Not Dead 2014 production of Mary Wroth’s *Love’s Victory* (c. 1620)—to argue that these texts have been “undervalued as viable performance texts” (142). One highlight of this chapter is the discussion of an epistle to the reader prefacing *The Worlds Olio* in which Margaret Cavendish worries over the power of vocal delivery to either mar or make her work: “Writings, though they are not so, yet they sound good or bad according to the Readers, and not according to their Authors” (160). This gets to the heart of a challenge with performance studies: that listening to a performance of a song or poem rather than just reading the lyrics and imagining their sonorous effects in one’s mind can make it difficult to evaluate a piece of

art since the success or ability of the song to create its emotional and cognitive effects in an auditor is reliant on the particular aptitude of a particular performer in a particular moment in time.

The fifth chapter addresses a particular performance, by a particular singer, at a particular moment in time: The Lady's song, "Sweet Echo" by Henry Lawes in Milton's *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle (Comus)* performed in 1634 by Alice Egerton, then fourteen years old (181). Larson fleshes out the context of Egerton's performance—she was Henry Lawes's student and the air was written for her to show her skill as a performer and to dramatize virtuous action. In this final chapter Larson builds on and draws in elements from previous chapters to weave together a compelling argument about the potency of this performance.

*The Matter of Song* is a substantial contribution to early modern literary studies, musicology, and gender studies on multiple levels. It helpfully theorizes how to talk about the slippery and multifaceted genre of song, it is full of relevant contextualizing early modern sources on air, poetry, acoustics, and singing bodies, and it does not shy away from the most "drastic" and also the most fundamental element of song as performance. The one element that Larson could attend more to is the auditor and his or her role in listening actively and creating meaning. Larson recounts, "playing physically to the empty seats in the studio with amplified facial expressions and gestures" during her recording session (29). The impact of an audience's presence on a musical performance has never before been so obvious as now, during this global pandemic, when musicians, if they are allowed to make music at all, are playing to empty houses, and as any singer will tell you, it is not the same to sing a song alone to oneself as to sing to an audience, especially a willing and attentive and active one. On a technical note, Larson's prose style is direct and fluid, the copy editing is flawless, the book is thoroughly indexed (238–245), and the Bibliography is usefully divided into Primary and Secondary Sources (209–235).