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H-France Review Vol. 19 (April 2019), No. 60

Helen Abbott, *Baudelaire in Song 1880-1930*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiii + 197 pp. \$72.00 U.S. (hb). Figures, tables, bibliography, and index. ISBN 978-0-19-879469-1.

Review by Joseph Acquisto, University of Vermont.

While the poetry of Charles Baudelaire was often set to music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by far the most famous of those settings, and consequentially the only ones many in our own time have encountered, are those by Henri Duparc and Claude Debussy. Helen Abbott's study seeks to expand our knowledge of other composers of French *mélodies* in that period who also set Baudelaire's poetry to music, while enumerating a new methodology for empirical analysis of composers' and performers' decisions about word-music relationships in song settings. Abbott eschews consideration of Duparc and Debussy in favor of sets of Baudelaire songs by French composers Maurice Rollinat, Gustave Charpentier, and Louis Vierne, as well as Russian composer Alexander Gretchaninov and Alban Berg of the Second Viennese School. The analysis considers settings of around thirty poems in all; it offers explicit consideration of the varied approaches that each of the composers took to music-making generally, and song composition in particular, with elegant expositions and clear enumerations of the supporting detail.

The book stems from Abbott's groundbreaking work on the Baudelaire Song Project internet database, which assembles and analyses settings and adaptations of Baudelaire's poetry across the full spectrum of styles of music and periods. One major thrust of the book, beyond the exposure of lesser-known composers of Baudelaire song sets, is the elaboration, especially in chapter two, of an analytical method applicable not only to the case studies considered here but also more widely to any musical setting of a text. This method involves the consideration of fourteen parameters across the following categories: meter/prosody, form/structure, sound properties/repetition, semantics/word-painting, and live performance options. These parameters include considerations such as "syllable tension" (i.e., moments where musical and metrical accent do not comfortably coincide), note per syllable count, number of breaths for the singer, the handling of enjambments, and repeated or omitted words of the poem. Each of the main chapters begins by providing helpful information about the composers and their song settings in the larger context of their oeuvre. The chapters then proceed to quasi-structuralist empirical analysis of the song settings via a method that borrows some concepts and terminology from adhesion science, including "adhesion strength tests" and "accretion/dilution tests" that account for the ways in which the composers establish "a temporary, sometimes strong and sometimes weak, set of bonds" via which text and music are "brought together into a discernible but not exclusive or finite whole" (p. 30).

The Baudelaire Song Project is still in progress, and in some ways *Baudelaire in Song* is preliminary in that it provides interesting examples of the kind of empirical analysis the project has the potential to demonstrate in terms of a "new, testable model for working with song" (p. 27) across a wide range of musical styles. Indeed, the *chanson* is, as Abbott notes, a "hybrid, flexible form" crossing between serious and popular traditions, and the first chapter considers the way the *chanson* was being transformed in the period in which Baudelaire was writing, including the transformation into the highbrow form known as *mélodie*. The analysis works to demonstrate that "the conflictual and fluctuating definitions of song—as

both text and music, as silent and performative—shape, and are shaped by, Baudelaire’s own poetry throughout the 1840s–60s, informing a larger nexus of aesthetic questions which are also addressed in Baudelaire’s wider writings” (p. 15). In the chapters that follow, these larger framing questions give way to narrower analysis of the song sets. Given that scores and recordings are not always readily available for the songs considered in this study, it is a bit regrettable that there are not more numerous musical examples in the book than the judicious few in each chapter.

Abbott is quick to point out that while empirical analysis of the songs can yield important insight about text setting, effective analysis of the songs will always require more than the data alone can reveal. Indeed, the criteria for classifying a song—according to her categories—as “accretive, neutral, or dilutive” according to the strength of the bonds it features “may remain to a large extent subjective” (p. 44). Abbott often underscores the importance of the several variables that can change according to the decisions of individual performers of the songs: the works are not completely fixed or determined by their musical scores, and the extent to which there is room for variation in individual performance according to the indications of the score is one of her points of consideration.

Chapter three offers a short history of Baudelaire song settings. Abbott briefly revisits Duparc and Debussy and considers the ways in which song settings may be considered translations, before providing fuller details on the parameters of analysis of the songs in the chapters that follow. Chapter four considers Maurice Rollinat, who performed his settings in cabarets while accompanying himself at the piano. His scores are thus “more like a set of guidelines” (p. 75) than a faithful transcription of those performances, and the music reflects experimentation at a time when the distinction between art song and popular song is not as firmly established as it would go on to be. The relatively high degree of musical repetition in his songs means that “musical design takes precedence over that of the poem” (p. 87).

Gustave Charpentier is the subject of chapter five; his “approach to music-making is characterized by a particular kind of social conscience which privileges the idea of making music available to all” (p. 92). His music was performed not only in traditional concert halls but also in open-air concerts, and he founded a *conservatoire populaire* for working-class women in 1902. His song settings include some for mini-chorus along with the soloist. This chapter in particular highlights both the advantages and limitations of the empirical method that Abbott develops in this project more generally, as she herself admits. “The detailed micropoetic analysis I have conducted reveals just how carefully Charpentier handles the Baudelaire text by giving significant weighting to the delivery of the text in relation to, but not always in service to, the musical idea or melodic contour. Yet [...] [o]nly by including in our analysis a deeper understanding of Charpentier’s bold mixture of different aesthetic approaches to song is it possible to shape a more nuanced evaluation of his song output. Charpentier’s developments in text-setting, alongside his expansive aesthetic agenda, inform a new [...] vision of song in France at the turn of the twentieth century” (p. 113). At points such as these, readers may hope for a more sustained discussion of the synthesis of the micropoetic analysis and the broader aesthetic implications than can be offered in this study, where the emphasis is on breaking new ground in terms of that micropoetics. Ultimately, the payoff of the method elaborated in this study will be in the way it helps us link the micro and macro levels of song analysis in ways we would otherwise be unable to articulate.

The sixth chapter explores songs by Alexander Gretchaninov, who set Baudelaire’s original French poems with sing-able Russian translations also provided in the score. Analysis confirms that Gretchaninov’s treatment of French prosody is “seemingly erratic” and “suggests either that he is unaware of how to set the French metrical line or that his musical idea and/or the demands of the Russian text-setting take precedence over the constraints of French prosody” (p. 121). Hence Gretchaninov is an example of a composer who, in contrast to someone like Rollinat, “privileges his musical design over any textual or semantic demands” as he allows the music to play a primary role and thus eschews frequent word painting.

The chapter on Louis Vierne allows us to see the composer in a new light by focusing on an aspect of his repertoire which is far less known than his compositions for organ. Abbott resists the temptation to interpret his music or his choice of texts to set in light of the often tragic aspects of his biography. In contrast to Gretchaninov, “Vierne’s musical language is intensely text-driven, in a way that goes beyond thematic content” (p. 134); the resulting songs allow for “different opportunities to explore how to negotiate the relationship between the piano and the vocal lines in response to the textual fabric” (p. 135).

Alban Berg is the focus of chapter eight, which recounts the interesting story of the discovery, in 1976, of the “hidden” or secret setting of Stefan George’s translation of Baudelaire’s poem “De profundis clamavi” in the sixth movement of the *Lyric Suite* (1927), via a vocal line that was ultimately not included in the work. The remainder of the chapter considers the song set *Der Wein*. Here, as in the other chapters, the details of the analysis will be of significant interest to those studying and performing the songs. Taking a step back, the conclusions drawn from the analysis can tend toward the general: “The presence of multiple possible ways of evaluating Berg’s setting of Baudelaire in *Der Wein* [...] points towards the intensity of his engagement with Baudelaire, across a rich canvas of music and text with its broad and colourful orchestral palette” (p. 171).

The conclusion, likewise, offers general observations, including a well-supported argument against those who would claim that, unlike the poetry of Paul Verlaine, for instance, Baudelaire’s “is resistant or unpliant when it comes to setting it to music” (p. 173). Rather, Abbott offers the well-founded conclusion from her analysis that “Baudelaire’s poetry is well able to withstand and interconnect with music on many different levels” (p. 173); by extension, she notes, “there is no one parameter which governs [composers’] decisions, nor is there one right or wrong way to set Baudelaire to music” (p. 174). This accounts for the variety of approaches among the composers featured in the book. The conclusion also points the way toward future analysis, indicating that “not enough is yet known about how the shared cognitive resources of words and music can be deployed in the analysis and performance of song settings of poetry, particularly in terms of the relationship between the competing expectations of poetic and musical emphases or cadences” (p. 176). For now, the analysis provided here gives helpful empirical insight into the particulars of “how composers need to make a certain number of decisions to ‘fix’ the poetry to the music, or the music to the poetry,” knowing that “not all of these ‘fixings’ are rigid or unmovable” (p. 175). Beyond the advance in the methodology of word/music analysis that this study represents, the visibility that it affords to composers whose Baudelaire settings are very rarely heard in our time will, one hopes, generate renewed interest in studying and performing these works and thus move us toward a more complete understanding of the development of *mélodie* in France and beyond.

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