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.

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Helen Abbott's *Baudelaire in Song* is so brimming with erudition and experimental energy that summarizing the book is not an easy task. The most complete summary is probably the one given on the back of the dust jacket. Other summaries can be found in the preface, the conclusion, and on the affiliated website, The Baudelaire Song Project (http://www.baudelairesong.org), but the dust jacket has the advantage of clarifying the fact that this project is divided into two parts. The first part involves the articulation of a "model" that would enable highly precise description of what happens when words are set to music. The second part contains "case studies" that test the model in relationship to settings of Baudelaire's poetry: "The case studies focus on Baudelaire song sets by European composers between 1880 and 1930, specifically Maurice Rollinat, Gustave Charpentier, Alexander Gretchaninov, Louis Vierne, and Alban Berg."

From the outset, Abbott is determined to question the judgment that Baudelaire's poetry is somehow resistant to musical adaptation. She quotes two influential opinions on the topic, French opera composer Camille Erlanger and German philosopher Theodor Adorno (pp. 3-4), both of whom lend their prestige to the view that Baudelaire is not suited to musical settings. For Erlanger the issue is the poetry's self-sufficiency, the idea that it carries its music within itself. For Adorno the problem lies in Baudelaire's dialectical poetics, which musical renderings apparently cannot reproduce. (Why Adorno would think that music cannot be dialectical is a subject worth exploring in its own right.) Against these judgments, Abbott places a large body of empirical evidence, including settings of the poetry in popular song by Léo Ferré, Serge Gainsbourg, and Juliette Noureddine. Abbott argues that the overinvestment in a few, indisputably successful, classical settings—Duparc's *Invitation au voyage* or Debussy's *Le Jet d'eau*—has obscured critical awareness of a vast musical reception in "extraordinarily diverse forms ranging from the modest salon song to highbrow French *mélodie*, via avant-garde settings in translation and parallel language versions, and acknowledging the poet's reach through to cutting-edge electronics and mainstream gothic rock. It is this concept of the poet's 'reach' which invites us to look back at the source material to interrogate what might be within it to inspire so many musicians, songwriters, and composers" (p. 4).

The first chapter, "Baudelaire's Musical Contexts," gives an informative review of scholarship on Baudelaire's relationship to music, as well as of work on the connection between words and music in general. Abbott quotes critics like Joseph Acquisto and Peter Dayan, who point to the fact that Baudelaire (and later artists involved in intermedial activity) used the terms "poetry" and "music" interchangeably, treating one art as if it were another in a situation that can lead to the groundless production of analogy (p. 17).[1] As Abbott moves towards devising her own methodology, her goal is to approach a degree of scientific rigor that would avoid the trap of analogy. This was Leonard Bernstein's goal when, inspired by Noam Chomsky, he proposed the idea of a comparative grammar of

music and language (p. 20).[2] Abbott is even more impressed with the work of Aniruddh Patel and others in the field of cognitive neuroscience.[3] Brain imaging holds out the promise of grounding unstable analogies in empirical reality. While the neuroscientific investigation of the word/language connection is still a work in progress, the current state of research suggests that although language and music are structurally represented in different posterior areas of the brain, they are processed syntactically in shared frontal brain areas. "Patel's research indicates, therefore, that we need to think in terms more of shared resource networks than of cognate structural systems, and this should influence the critical language we deploy to describe what is going on in relationships between music and language" (p. 22).

After this preliminary discussion, Abbott presents her own methodology in chapter two, "Baudelaire's Assemblage: A New Model for Analysing Poetry-as-Song." Somewhat surprisingly, she changes her scientific model from neuroscience to the chemistry of adhesion science in order to think the bonds between language and music in more flexible, less prescriptive ways. This is necessary to account for the fact that the same poem can be set to different music, and the same music can be sung with different words. Abbott sometimes acknowledges that her recourse to the sciences remains metaphorical ("shared resource networks" and "adhesive bonds" may be useful terms to describe the mysterious phenomenon of song, but they are still metaphors). Nevertheless, the hope is that these metaphors will lead to quantifiable insights, the production of what could be called data. These metaphors allow for the reception of value-neutral information. They imply, for example, no hierarchy between language and music, despite the fact that poetry exists before music in the case of song settings. Value judgments impede scientific investigation since they prevent empirical reality from coming into view, as Abbott shows in her comments on Erlanger and Adorno.

Abbott's new model has two stages. Stage one, or the adhesion strength test, is shown in Figure 2.1 on page 39. The figure gives a succinct presentation of the procedure Abbott will follow (and invites her collaborators to follow) for the rest of the book. It begins by insisting on "parallel" analysis with this advice: "[A]lways start with both the song score and the poem text, rather than looking only at the stand-alone poem first" (p.39). The analysis proceeds through five annotation layers: metre/prosody, form/structure, sound properties/repetition, semantics/word painting, and live performance options. The researcher notes instances of tension/mismatch/disruption between poem and song and formulates these as percentages of adhesion. The results are presented in a visual table (*barème* scale) that enables the assessment of overall adhesion strength.

The second stage, which Abbott calls the "accretion/dilution test," takes its name from the world of finance. This is the stage where evaluation takes place, but the hope again is to make the evaluation process as objective as possible. "Accretion" and "dilution" are terms used to evaluate business mergers, and quantitative criteria are of course involved. In practice, Abbott's evaluation of the success of the poetry/music merger involves two criteria, applied somewhat inconsistently in the case studies and with a certain lack of conviction. Sometimes the criterion is fidelity to the source text (which should not be a criterion given Abbott's disapproval of methods that privilege text over music), sometimes it is memorability, measured in frequency of performance and/or recordings.

The preceding comments should clarify the fact that much of Abbott's ambition is to pioneer a field for the digital humanities using Baudelaire song settings as a point of departure. If this is not clear in readers' minds, they will be disappointed by the book's distance from the phenomenality of both poetry and music. The book is not designed to take us back to the poetry with renewed appreciation for its power and subtleties, nor do we have easy access to the songs that Abbott examines since she has made her selection among lesser-known works. Berg's 1930 setting of Baudelaire's wine poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* is the most performed and recorded of the group, but even then, as Abbott writes, "*Der Wein* could hardly be called a concert staple, and it remains an interesting but not common work to programme" (p. 170). While Abbott includes the idea of performance among her annotated layers, and

her observations draw on her own experience as a singer (leading to comments in the case studies that would be valuable for performers), for the reader who cannot hear anything, the performance of the songs becomes an abstract idea. Performance also functions as a kind of fudge factor in many of the analyses, since Abbott insists that performance can change an unsuccessful song into a successful one and vice versa. Performance can also invalidate analysis of the language/music relation. In the case of a 1985 recording of Gretchaninov by tenor Konstantin Pluzhnikov "the singer's thick Russian accent when singing in French affects the comprehensibility of the diction. This may give an indication of the kind of performance Gretchanivov envisioned (which retains a strong Russian quality to the overall song design), but it also reveals how any apparent issues identified in my analysis of how Gretchanivov handles the metrical and prosodic properties of the French text are not significant" (p. 131).

Chapter three, "Repackaging Baudelaire," and the five subsequent chapters are nevertheless filled with material that should interest readers in the conventional humanities. Chapter three gives a history of song settings of Baudelaire from the earliest documented piece in 1863 and an overview of the case studies. Each case study begins with an illuminating biography of the composer and a discussion of the Baudelaire settings within a larger corpus. As Abbott discusses the annotated layers with respect to each composer, she supplies an abundance of intriguing detail that is generally engaging. I wondered, for example, whether Rollinat's frequent switching between major and minor keys might have been a musical attempt at dialecticity (p. 78). Perhaps Charpentier's use of a mini-chorus for the space of seven bars, which makes his songs awkward to perform, points towards his composing (unknowingly?) for sound recordings and not for the concert hall (p. 95). Abbott's erudition and expertise are very much in evidence in these chapters, whose conventional humanistic content would make a worthy book in its own right.

My main criticism of *Baudelaire in Song* is that the book does not synthesize into a coherent whole. This is true on more than one level. It is not clear, for example, how the attractive radar chart in the conclusion, which gives a visual summary of adhesion percentages for all five composers, helps answer Abbott's original question: what is it about Baudelaire's poetry that has inspired so many musicians? The annotative layers that Abbott examines can be found in most poetry from Baudelaire's period. In her recoil from value judgments, Abbott can dismiss her own conclusions, or reverse them. For example, Rollinat's music dominates over Baudelaire's poetry, and then it doesn't, depending on which layer is considered. The details of the analysis constantly prevent conclusive findings. The *barèmes* aren't always consistent, unless I am misreading them. Why does a 4-7% range of tension in the handling of the mute "e" rank as high adhesion for Gretchaninov, and moderate adhesion for Rollinat? The tables do not contain uniform information throughout the different case studies, e.g., poetic themes are included for Rollinat and Charpentier, but not for the other composers. These incoherencies detract from Abbott's otherwise evident accomplishments. Her book deserves patient reading as an extensive experiment in new ways of reading.

NOTES

[1] See Joseph Acquisto, *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) and Peter Dayan, *Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art, from Whistler to Stravinsky and Beyond* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

[2] Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[3] Aniruddh Patel, "Language, Music, and the Brain: A Resource-sharing Framework," in *Language and Music as Cognitive Systems*, ed. P. Rebuschat, M. Rohrmeier, J. Hawkins, and I. Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 204-223.

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