

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 22 (January 2022), No. 16

Paul Rodmell, *French Music in Britain, 1830–1914*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. xii + 238 pp. Figures, tables, notes, appendix, and index. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367219390; \$44.05 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780429268861.

Review by Paul Watt, University of Adelaide.

It is hard to believe that a book on this topic is only now being published. As Paul Rodmell notes in the introduction, France is arguably the most “complex of Britain’s international relationships,” which underlies why a study such as this is so important and long overdue (p. 1). Studies of nineteenth-century British musical culture that focus on international musical exchange have tended to be preoccupied with Italian and German (including Austrian) influence. The pervasive presence of Italian opera and vocal culture in the period is well known. British composers ventured by the dozen to study in Austria and Germany, and their achievements and influences back home in Britain are well studied. The influence of Wagner saturates the history of European and British music from the nineteenth century onwards. A study of French music in Britain, however, is a road much less travelled.

French opera in Britain is the author’s principal focus. This is a good choice, for two reasons. First, opera involves a host of people (not just musicians) and the politics of performance and its business operation tell us a lot about the consumption and reception of the genre. Second, Rodmell’s previous book on opera in the British Isles illustrates the author’s deep knowledge of British opera in the period.<sup>[1]</sup> This new book covers some well-known operas, such as Bizet’s *Carmen*, but there are a host of other lesser-known works that provide illuminating detail on this grand genre and its place in British musical life. Rodmell’s study is, by design, a one-way endeavor. It charts the presence of French music in Britain, not British music in France. Such an undertaking would require the writing of another book. And the book does not include a consideration of popular music, which, as the author notes, would make the scope of the volume unmanageable. Settling on art music is therefore a pragmatic and sensible choice.

The attention to detail on the political forces underpinning the presence of French music in Britain is one of the book’s highlights. The first chapter is a close analysis of Franco-British cultural relations from 1660 through 1830. It examines a number of episodes or sites of cultural transfer between France and Britain, and the formation of British attitudes to French music. It concentrates mainly on the fetishization of things French by the British, but Rodmell also gives space to Francophobia. Each chapter begins with a broad overview of French and British politics. A particularly good example is in chapter two, in which the operas of Auber and Meyerbeer are set against a backdrop of contemporary politics. The introduction sets the scene with reference

to the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty, French protectionism, and the Great Exhibition. These events help make sense of the ways British perceptions of pre-Waterloo France had changed significantly, indirectly paving the way for Auber's work to be so well received in London after many French operas had been less successful. Auber--the man as well as the music--was liked by the British: his "light and graceful" operas were of particular appeal to one critic (p. 39). If Auber was successful, Meyerbeer provided a "more profound impression," though opinions were polarized at first (p. 41). Some felt the work was too long for the attention span of the average Briton, but others raised questions in the press, not only about French opera, but about consumption of French music (there was a view that it was inferior to the German product), censorship and operatic adaptations. The final chapter, "French music in Britain, 1901-14," provides one of the best and most succinct accounts of the complexities of the Entente Cordiale anywhere.

Rodmell traces the fortunes of certain composers over several chapters, including Hector Berlioz. The critical reception of Berlioz in England is complicated and fascinating. Rodmell maps changing attitudes to Berlioz in the press from the time of his first visit to London in the 1840s. He discusses articles about Berlioz in the French press that may have swayed British opinion about the composer before he had even arrived in Britain. Rodmell analyses the reception given by the critics to Berlioz as a conductor, and explains why critics felt that some of Berlioz's works, such as *Benvenuto Cellini*, were not well liked by the British public. Much later, in the 1870s, Rodmell describes the reception of another of Berlioz's works, *Harold en Italie*, conducted by Charles Hallé (in Manchester) and August Manns (in London). The contrast of reactions to this work in two different locations, and from two different audiences, illustrates some common threads in taste and musical consumption--and some differences--between the nation's capital and provinces.

Though opera is the key focus of the book, other genres and musicians are discussed at various points. At the end of chapter three, "From Faust to Carmen, 1863-78," a few pages are devoted to the presence of French organ music in Britain, especially in the 1860s. The author argues that the organ recital was a rich site in which French music was put before audiences, especially in town hall concerts in London and provincial cities. French organ design was an important point of reference for local organ builders, and French liturgical practice influenced the organ's use by British congregations of many denominations. Arrangements and transcriptions of orchestral work for the organ provided audiences with a repertory they may not have encountered before, or may have only encountered rarely. Organists who travelled to Britain included Saint-Saëns in the 1870s and Guilmant in the 1890s.

Rodmell's book is useful for the quantity of lesser-known composers given attention amongst the good and the great. One example is Florimond Ronger, known also as Hervé, who was the composer of two successful works in Britain, *Chilpéric* (1870-1) and *Le petit Faust* (1870-3). Ronger also collaborated with Alfred Thomson on *Aladdin II* (1870-9), a burlesque pantomime. Rodmell gives substantial space to discussing the reputation and performance of French operetta in Britain, covering such composers as Offenbach, Planquette and Audran, with some remarkable details such as on Edmond Audran's *Olivette*, which ran to 466 performances. These lesser byways of composers such as Planquette and Audran may suggest further research opportunities. There is also good coverage of the works of Cécile Chaminade in chapter four, and a considered appraisal of the misogyny that accompanied her success in some quarters.

Underpinning this book is a vast array of primary sources, biographical writings, and much more besides. The text is heavy with direct citation and extracts from sources. Some readers may find this approach off-putting and cumbersome, jumping between prose and extracts from sources. However, Rodmell's writing is clear and the quotations and extracts are extremely well chosen.

Rodmell has given significant voice to newspaper critics, quoting some of their best work, and illustrates that critics such as Henry F. Chorley could hold their own against the perceived superiority of journalism in France and Germany. Rodmell has reminded us that British-language critics, even the more colorful characters, were insightful writers, possessing a huge musical knowledge, a sophisticated vocabulary, and beautiful style.

*French Music in Britain 1830-1914* is a tremendously useful book. It contains just over a dozen well-chosen photographs from newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News* and the appendix comprises a list of selected first performances. Rodmell describes his book as a "first overview" and a "wide sweep" (p. 200) of the subject (similar claims are made in the introduction) but I think he is too modest. To be sure, parts of the book are painted with a broad brush—especially the section on organists, and the part of the book that considers the representation of French music in George Grove's famous dictionary of music—but this book is not a general history.[2] It illuminates, in considerable detail, a period in British musical history brimming with life, with French music and musicians providing significant cultural value to a heady mix of international musical and cultural relations. Scholars interested in pursuing new research on French music in Britain (and vice versa) will find this book the necessary starting point. Their job has been made easy by Rodmell's book. It is a compelling account of the richness of nineteenth-century British musical life, informed by concomitant questions of transnational cultural exchange.

## NOTES

[1] Paul Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles, 1875-1918* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[2] *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. George Grove, 1st edition, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1878-1889).

Paul Watt  
The University of Adelaide  
[Paul.Watt@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:Paul.Watt@adelaide.edu.au)

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

