

Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff, eds, *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*

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Reviewed by Poppy Fay

The notion of nineteenth-century England as 'Das Land ohne Musik' has been firmly dispelled in recent years, and this collection of essays, edited by Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff, contributes to the growing recognition of music's significance in Victorian culture and of fiction as a 'natural (though not unproblematic) interpreter of cultural meaning' (p. xiv). The idea for this addition to Ashgate's Music in Nineteenth Century Britain series grew out of a session at the 1999 British Musicological Societies' Conference, entitled 'Fictional Women and the Idea of Music' and a Music and Victorian Literature Study Day held in May 2000 at the University of Reading. It clearly builds on the pioneering research in this field, particularly of the intersections between music and science, developed by Phyllis Weliver, whose monograph, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, was published by Ashgate in 2000. Weliver is also editor of *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth Century British Poetry*, published in 2005 as the companion volume to *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction* (2004). Her view, expressed in *Women Musicians*, 'that analysing how music took part in and commented on a wide range of scientific, literary and cultural discourses expands our knowledge of how music was central to the nineteenth-century imagination' is actively taken up in *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*, which explores and expands this argument.

A significant achievement of this book is the dissolving of binary polarisations, such as the angel/demon trope (where women who made music to promote domestic harmony were perceived as 'angels' and those who used music to seduce were 'demons'), that have formed a focal point for previous research in this area. Losseff rightly argues that current research has moved beyond a point where stark binary polarisations are useful and the essays included in this book, beginning with Losseff's own, illuminate the myriad ways that nineteenth-century men and particularly women interact with music as listeners, performers and composers within various strata of society. As the eleven essays comprising this volume collectively reveal, the 'idea' of music in Victorian fiction is complex and fluid and filled with contradictions.

The essays are grouped into three sections: Musical Identity, Genre and Musicalities, and Construction of Musical Meaning. These sections give cohesion to the anthology, although they are left unexplained in the introduction, which instead groups the articles using different themes. Part I: Musical Identity, consists of three essays by Nicky Losseff, Sophie Fuller and Phyllis Weliver. Musical identity is explored lucidly in Losseff's contribution entitled 'The Voice, the Breath and the Soul: Song and Poverty in *Thyrza*, *Mary Barton*, *Alton Locke* and *A Child of the Jago*', through an examination of working class characters who sing, or, in the case of Alton Locke, compose. Drawing on a wide range of spiritual discussion, including Hindu and Sufic philosophies, Losseff explores the links between voice, breath and soul, and the ramifications these links have in a working class environment where, through the divine agency of the musicians, music arises out of the 'stinking poisonous air' (p. 13).

In the following essay, "'Cribbed, Cabin'd and Confined': Female Musical Creativity in Victorian Fiction,' Fuller, through an examination of six fictional female composers, explores 'the ways in which their authors either reflect or confront the Victorian stereotype of the woman composer' (p. 31). She poses the questions: 'were there authors who explored or even subverted the idea that women were incapable of composing "great" music? Or did works of fiction simply act to reinforce the status quo?' (p. 30). What follows, after summarising the by now well known and much discussed Victorian boundaries placed on women composers, is an enthralling account of fictional women composers' musical lives in novels by Elizabeth Sara Sheppard, George Meredith, Marie Corelli, E.F. Benson and Mona Caird. Much of the essay is quite discursive—describing the plots of the six key novels discussed. This is, however, necessary given the relative obscurity of the novels selected. This represents another strength of the book. While it discusses widely known and studied authors such as George Eliot, it also introduces an interdisciplinary approach to the study of authors who receive significantly less scholarly attention. The result is a richer and broader picture of the Victorian era's values and beliefs and how these were supported or subverted by authors of the period.

Weliver's essay, 'Music, Crowd Control and the Female Performer in *Trilby*' is the least successful of the three essays comprising the first section. The first half of the essay discusses historical understandings of the crowd, drawing particularly on the seminal study *La psychologie des foules* (1895) by Gustave Le Bon. The second half provides a close reading of the George du Maurier novel *Trilby* that positions the diva 'as the focus of the audience and its leader' (p. 69). While this discussion provides new insights into the novel, there is not a clear enough link between the contextual information and the interpretation of *Trilby*. That said, the combining of nineteenth-century crowd control theories with representations of musical performance within novels is highly original. Weliver's further studies in this area will be published in 2006 as part of the Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture Series, entitled *The Musical Crowd in English Fiction, 1840–1910*, and should be an interesting addition to interdisciplinary studies.

Where Part I explores the working-class singer, the female composer and the female diva, Part II: Genre and Musicalities, delves into genres that were popular in the Victorian period—sensation fiction, the pastoral tradition and detective fiction—and how musical conventions were used to create additional meaning in the novels. The essay by Jodi Lustig provides an effective introduction to this section, comparing the use of the piano as a plot function in realist novels by Jane Austen, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, and revealing 'how the piano in one text comes to signify its antithesis in another' (p. 84). Lustig discusses the novels in chronological order, effectively drawing attention to the increasingly complex and diverse meanings and ideas associated with the piano as the nineteenth century progressed. This leads well into the following essay, 'Female Performances: Melodramatic Music Conventions and *The Woman in White*', by Laura Vorachek, which also focuses on performances at the piano. Vorachek reveals the frequent discrepancy between appearances and reality that musical performances can create. She builds on—but challenges—earlier scholarship on sensation fiction and music by Losseff and, more particularly, Weliver. Where Weliver argues that sensation novels 'depict fear of domestic, amateur music, and end in ways that validate this anxiety' (Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*,

p. 100), Vorachek asserts that 'Collins and other sensation fiction authors embrace the complex meanings available in women's domestic music-making' (p. 113).

The following essay, 'Indecent Musical Displays: Feminizing the Pastoral in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*', by Alisa Clapp-Itnyre, is drawn from the author's book, *Angelic Airs, Subversive Songs: Music as Cultural Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2002). For Clapp-Itnyre, *The Mill on the Floss* depicts 'the struggle between female agency in musical expression and the feminine passivity and propriety expected by Victorian audiences' (p. 129), and Clapp-Itnyre examines the historical context of the pastoral convention. Her study takes into account the two important past studies on Eliot and music, William J. Sullivan's 1974 article 'Music and Musical Allusion in *The Mill on the Floss*',¹ and Beryl Gray's *George Eliot and Music* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). Unfortunately, Delia da Sousa Correa's *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture*, published by Palgrave in 2002, appeared too late to be included in the research for this book.

The final chapter of this section discusses detective fiction, a genre 'rarely accorded the critical respect or attention enjoyed by the works of Wilkie Collins or Edgar Allan Poe' (p. 151). Irene Morra focuses on the character of Sherlock Holmes in the Arthur Conan Doyle stories, a character whose musicality has received little attention. Morra argues that 'the stories offer a complex characterization of the detective in terms of his ability to compose, perform and appreciate music' and that the 'equation of musical ability with the ability to determine ... the actions and emotions of others, is characteristic of many nineteenth-century novels' (p. 153) including works by Jane Austen, the Brontës, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James. 'With this understanding,' Morra believes 'the falsity of the limitations imposed upon the appreciation of the detective genre can be exposed, and the function of the "musical" Victorian detective explored more fully' (p. 170).

The essays in Part III: Construction of Musical Meaning, do not intersect as smoothly as those of Part I and Part II because the ideas and themes discussed are more divergent. Joe Law explores the role of music in articulating 'that which could not be named'—erotic love between men—in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and related works. He effectively argues that 'music or the idea of music is stressed at key points in the action of ... Wilde's novel, often in conjunction with other comments that readers have found suggestive of homosexual desire or behaviour' (pp. 175–76). Charlotte Purkis then examines Gertrude Hudson's book *Impossibilities: Fantasia* (1897) and, through its seven interconnected prose pieces, she probes how to 'interpret—discuss, describe, represent, depict, re-enact, and perhaps "embody"—music using words' (p. 207). In the third essay in this section, Jonathan Taylor studies musical 'mastery' and 'servitude' and 'the Jew' in Victorian writing through a study of works by Thomas Carlyle, Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, George Eliot and George Du Maurier. He draws parallels between the 'emancipation of the dissonance'—the new atonality of Schoenberg (via Wagner and Mahler)—with the emancipation of the Jew. In the final chapter, Karen Tongson provides a reading of Thomas Carlyle's musical thoughts and, 'by tracing the contours of Carlyle's ideas about music and fiction, often addressed in negative values,' she interprets Carlyle and his works 'against the grain of his previous critical reception, which casts him as a disbeliever in aesthetics and in the compatibility of music and fiction' (p. 245).

¹ *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 16:3 (1974): 603–34.

All eleven authors provide a wealth of evidence to substantiate their readings and, collectively, the chapters draw on extensive, and very broad, sources. They engage thoroughly with previously published scholarship in the field, but also with the other chapters in the book. The essays, in their referencing of and active debating with other essays in the volume, particularly in Part I and Part II, build up a powerful argument for the diverse and complex meanings imbued in novels of the Victorian period and beyond through musical allusion.

While the primary focus of this book is the Victorian period, some authors explore beyond the boundaries of 1837 and 1901. More work still needs to be done in this area, extending studies to the long nineteenth century. It would perhaps have been beneficial to expand studies in literature and music beyond England to Scotland and Wales—certainly this would have been appropriate for a series purporting to explore ‘British’ music. As Dolly MacKinnon noted in her review of Weliver’s book (*Context* 24: 69), this is a significant problem with the series so far.

Nicky Losseff and Sophie Fuller write: ‘By offering reflections on music in one of its many reception contexts, we hope to contribute to an enhanced awareness of the culture and sociology of nineteenth-century music’ (p. xx). This collection of essays certainly does that while also leaving the reader with a sense of how many new possibilities there are to be explored in this field.

**Alison M. Garnham, *Hans Keller and the BBC*
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Reviewed by Anthony Burton

I remember vividly an early encounter with one of the most remarkable minds in British musical life. Shortly before my seventeenth birthday, I went to a London Philharmonic Orchestra concert which began with Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*. The programme note was by Hans Keller, and it was divided into two parts. The first was headed ‘To be read before the performance.’ The second was headed ‘To be read after the performance,’ and it began: ‘It is a pity that the reader is not heeding my advice...’.

That single, devastating half-sentence says a great deal about Keller. There was the subject-matter: Schoenberg was the composer at the very heart of his thinking about music. There was the psychological insight, the result of close study and even self-analysis in his younger days. There was the dry humour, and the utterly precise use of English; no other tense, no other form of words, would have produced exactly the desired ripple of guilty starts all round the Royal Festival Hall. And there was also, to be frank, the characteristic relish in getting the upper hand—even over a passive reader with no chance of arguing back.

At that time, I knew Hans Keller only as a distinctive voice on the radio and as the author of a few articles. Little did I realise that a little more than a decade later I was to become a colleague of his at the BBC in central London, then after his retirement occupy what was generally known as ‘Hans’s old office’, and later represent the BBC musical hierarchy at his funeral in 1985. Not that I really got to know him well: I occasionally shared a lunch table with him and a few colleagues, but I never joined the admiring circle which then adjourned to the