

Score Review

Allan W. Atlas, ed., *A Wilkie Collins Songbook* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2023), xix + 180.

Wilkie Collins loved music, or rather some music, whilst hating with a passion the ‘modern German music’ by Schumann and others that, to his ears, ranked not as music at all. For Collins, the apogee of Romanticism in music was not Beethoven, with whom the rot began, but Mozart. It is the ‘heavenly tenderness’ of Mozart’s music that is most attuned to accompany the ‘dawning mystery of moonlight’ in *The Woman in White* (1859), in which the heroine, Laura Fairlie, captivates the narrator through her playing of his music at the piano. Collins’s rejection of difficult modern music in favour of Mozart, Mendelssohn and Italian opera is, not surprisingly, regarded as indicative of his limitations as a listener. Nevertheless, his invocation of Mozart in conjunction with a romanticized description of landscape is not as eccentric as we may now think, since Mozart was widely regarded as a Romantic composer for much of the nineteenth century (and many musicologists of our day happily regard Mozart as seminal to the pre-Beethoven origins of Romanticism).¹ For Collins, Mozart and a mysteriously moonlit landscape were equally Romantic. As with ETA Hoffman’s earlier acclaim for the Romantic depths and transcendent heights of Mozart’s music, reading Collins can help alert us to gaps between accounts of listening experiences in the nineteenth century and our own time.

Music features throughout Collins’s fiction. Who can forget Count Fosco, the ‘devilish’ Figaro-singing manipulator in *The Woman and White*? Collins’s work, like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* – which inspired a song setting within its first year of publication – gave rise to many a composition named after his novels or composed for dramatic adaptations of them. The edition under review combines works alluded to in Collins’s fiction with those associated with it. The volume opens with a biographical sketch, an overview of editorial methods and five plates, several reproduced from a private collection. The Songbook itself includes the overture to *The Frozen Deep* (1857), arranged for piano, six pieces inspired by Collins – two songs, three dances for solo piano and one for cornet and piano – and, perhaps, the heart of the collection for literary scholars, 20 pieces cited by Collins. Most of these are solo songs, but two call for a four-part vocal ensemble, one for a vocal duet, and two for traditional fiddle. Genres range from parlour songs and traditional tunes to the dramatic recitative and aria of John Braham’s ‘The Death of Nelson’ (1811). The volume concludes with a helpful chronology of Collins’s published work, a selected bibliography of other music editions, and a guide to further reading on Collins and Music in Victorian Literature.

The collection’s scope makes it an important contribution to the broadening of the repertoire that is typically given scholarly attention. It also offers new opportunities for performances of British nineteenth-century music, so often derided by critics from the time. The scores are edited for performance. With its variety of

¹ Jim Samson, ‘Romanticism’ in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusic.com.

settings and requirements – from vocal solos and ensembles to instrumental works – the collection lends itself to a miscellaneous evening, or the songs to a vocal recital. The pieces are organized according to their relationship to Collins's work, so there is plenty of scope for creativity when putting together such a performance. However, knowing how the author envisaged a programme being constructed – or private performances attempted – from the wealth of musical material on offer would ensure that the rich resources included in the volume reach their potential, for scholars, performers and audiences.

Which audiences the current volume is intended for is an interesting question. A *Wilkie Collins Songbook* appears in *Recent Researches in the Music of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, a series of critical editions published by the American imprint A-R Editions under the editorship of musicologist Francesca Brittan. The series features a wide range of score editions and anthologies and includes a further example of a collection with literary associations in *The Ingalls Wilder Family Songbook*. The series description points out that, during the period covered, 'music publication became much more widespread, piano manufacture increased, and there was much music-making in private middle-class homes and public concert halls'. This expansion warrants a somewhat miscellaneous and inclusive approach: 'The music in this series reflects this situation with works in many genres and styles and by composers of many nationalities, famous ones and lesser lights'. Alongside other collections illuminating historical and cultural contexts, such as *Emily's Songbook: Music in 1850s Albany*, score collections with literary associations may be a strand that the publisher is interested in developing and for which, importantly, it envisages an audience.

There is an enthusiastic market for Collins memorabilia, especially in the United States, where his popularity during his lifetime was immense and his works widely published by American publishers. Indeed, the likely audience for this moderately expensive edition includes such collectors, who might also wish to stage performances of some of this repertoire, sometimes for occasions involving elaborate Victorian cosplay. Atlas himself, in his editorial note on Collins and Music, encourages his readers to break into song, 'Who knows: perhaps some of Collins's readers put their book down, listened to the "silent" music cited on the page, and then (as I occasionally have done myself) joined Mr. Jay, Augustus Pedgift Jr., or Squire Colebatch in a full-throated duet!' The hope that readers may use the edition to make connections between their reading and listening experiences is salient in an age when readers no longer have the same remembered repertoire at their command that writers of the Victorian era could call upon. Scholars of Collins's work interested in the role of music in his work or the subsequent cultural reception of his writing will also appreciate the opportunity to encounter this carefully edited collection of scores.

One of the most valuable aspects of the collection is its bringing to a wider audience – both scholarly and, more generally, musical – a broader selection of key pieces of music from the period. The scholarly study of music in nineteenth-century Britain has seen a significant shift since the late twentieth century, with an important wave of research on its social and cultural contexts pioneered by conferences, publications and journals – including the *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*. However, researchers in the area are regularly challenged to find new ways of engaging with 'the music itself'. Publications by, for example, Derek Scott, Sophie Fuller, Phyllis Weliver and Oskar Cox Jensen have contributed to an expansion of musicological topics to include parlour song, ballads and the salon, and an important element of many of these projects has been close

engagement with music, via performance.² This volume's popular song and piano repertoire further illustrates the valuable corpus of popular and 'everyday' music that formed such an important part of Victorian musical experience, and offers new ways of bringing it to scholarly attention.

Although Atlas has written elsewhere on Collins and music, the scholarly commentaries here on the uses of music for added meaning and social significance are brief.³ For an academic audience, the Songbook is best approached in conjunction with these other publications, as well as articles by Losseff, Vorachek and Weliver, all cited in the Bibliography.⁴ There is minimal information here on the music, its stylistic context, composers, performers, and their work, and the text relies heavily on Brown and Stratton's 1897 volume for biographical information, rarely offering detail beyond this. Nevertheless, there are numerous interesting anecdotes and snippets that draw together aspects of music and its organization with information about reception history, as well as the connections between songs, performers and composers, which have eluded other methods of enquiry.

The volume is particularly interesting for its use of sources from both the UK and America. Editions of the songs and piano music, including unauthorized publications, periodicals, and ephemera, are engaged thoroughly and critically to build a fascinating picture of the contexts of Collins's musical mentions. Atlas's discussion of reception issues on both sides of the Atlantic, via literary and musical documents is important and innovative. Again, this approach offers a model for combining a wide range of source materials to pursue new lines of enquiry. In addition, it is testimony to the richness of musical and historical material now available online. Atlas explains that much of the research was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic and was therefore reliant on online collections and archives, a reflection of the importance of digital resources for the broadening of scholarly enquiry during modern times.

The musical editions are thorough and clear, with exemplary notes on the methodology and editorial decisions. The music is set out in a manner conducive to performance. The volume includes alternative versions and extra examples showing, for example, differences in accompaniment or word setting, allowing for an informed approach among scholars or performers. An impressive selection of different sources is included, much of which is testimony to the essential place of online sources in musicological research. Atlas deals well with remaining

² Derek Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989); Sophie Fuller, 'Elgar and the Salons: The Significance of a Private Musical World', in *Edward Elgar and his World*, ed. Byron Adams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 223–48; Phyllis Weliver, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Oscar Cox Jensen, *The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

³ Allan Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins on Music and Musicians', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 124/2 (1999): 255–70; Allan Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins and Music' in *Wilkie Collins in Context*, ed. William Baker and Richard Nemesvari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 245–51.

⁴ Nicky Losseff, 'Absent Melody and "The Woman in White"', in *Music & Letters* 81/4 (2000): 532–50; Laura Vorachek, 'Female Performances: Melodramatic Music Conventions and The Woman in White' in *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 105–28; Phyllis Weliver, 'The Prima Donna, Opera chorus and Amateur Violinist: Music as "Event" in Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife*' in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 48/2 (2012): 178–94.

unknowns, setting out the possibilities and the reasons for being unable to make a final decision. Despite the range of required performing resources, which makes its translation onto the stage or into the private music room less than straightforward, the edition offers a real opportunity to embrace a new repertoire underpinned by significant and rigorous scholarly work.

The volume adds much to continuing developments in music and literature studies in nineteenth-century Britain, offering new perspectives and methods. Pursuing musical research via literary connections, performances, reception studies and a broader range of sources and links – as modelled so inventively in this collection – suggests novel and creative ways of reinvigorating music research with ‘the music itself’ at heart and centre.

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