

Zielonka on Abbott (2017)

Abbott, Helen. *Baudelaire in Song, 1880–1930*. Oxford UP, 2017, pp. xiv + 191, ISBN 978-0198794691

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Following her original and innovative study, *Parisian Intersections: Baudelaire's Legacy to Composers* (2012), which focused on musical transpositions and settings of Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "La Mort des amants," Helen Abbott broadens her analysis in this new volume to present, first, an illuminating overview of the complex and highly important subjects of Baudelaire's relationship to music and composers' responses to his poetry, and then a detailed examination of series of poems by Baudelaire that were set to music as *chansons*, by five composers: Maurice Rollinat, Gustave Charpentier, Alexander Gretchaninov, Louis Vierne, and Alban Berg. Having provided concise but insightful commentary on the well-known settings by Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, and Henri Duparc, Abbott justifies her decision to devote the major part of her study to the works of these five lesser-known composers thus: "Fauré, Debussy, and Duparc were not working in isolation, so to speak, but were part of a very diverse group of composers beginning to experiment with setting Baudelaire to music" (173). There are chapters on each of the five composers, including settings of poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* in Russian translation, by Gretchaninov, and in German, by Berg.

Abbott's own very interesting and convincing analyses are set within the context of the most recent Baudelaire criticism, and the criticism and theory of interdisciplinary text and music studies. This can sometimes lead to a certain opacity in the formulation and exposition of the author's critical and theoretical methodology, as in the following example: "The proposal in this study is that, by examining the nature of the bonds that are formed when a poem is set to music as a song in much more detail, we can move beyond the logic that relies too readily on get-out clauses which suggest that song is simply 'problematic,' 'mysterious,' or paradoxical'" (34). Neither is it made entirely clear how "financial modelling" can be applied here in an illuminating way: "If we take gains and losses as being related to an economic model, our critical language can be supplemented by the language used by the finance industry to describe the net effect of merging two business units together: accretion or dilution" (42). The author does not explain precisely enough how these economic concepts of "accretion" and "dilution" may be applied to the setting of Baudelaire's texts to music in these songs.

The three preliminary chapters and the five chapters on the selected composers present cogent, highly original, and fascinating analyses of formal, metrical, rhythmical, stylistic, and semantic transformations, additions, and deletions that took place when these composers set Baudelaire's texts to music. The author examines in detail the process of "assemblage" and "repackaging" that the selected corpus of twenty-two poems and twenty-nine songs underwent over the fifty-year period under review (1880–1930). Differences in approaches taken by each of the selected composers are revealed clearly and coherently, according to the various analytical categories that are applied, which include the use of digital and statistical methodologies. We learn a great deal, in these analyses, about these composers and about their works, which deserve to be better known and which provide many original insights into the poems of which they are new incarnations and interpretations.

The book has been carefully copy-edited. One might however question the frequent use of the verb to "flag up," and "we might" appears twice in one line in the second paragraph on page 29. Useful figures and schematic tables, a bibliography, a discography, and an index are included. Helen Abbott's new book is an impressive and important contribution to Baudelaire studies and to the emerging field of text and music criticism and theory.

Volume: 47.1–2

Year:

- 2018