

The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter ed. by Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams.

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 ***The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter* ed. by Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (review)**

Steven L. Rosenhaus

Notes

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter. Edited by Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. [xvi, 366 p. ISBN 9781107063648 (hardback), \$89.99; ISBN 9781107680913 (paperback), \$29.99; ISBN 9781316496664 (e-book), \$24.] Musical examples, tables, illustrations, figures, bibliography, index.

Songwriters have long performed their own works, but the concept of “singer-songwriter” music as a genre developed in the second half of the twentieth century. Editors Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams present an overview of the tradition, starting with its roots through the present day. They discuss its origins and practices in the United States and in a selection of countries around the world.

The *Companion* is in five parts: “Establishing a Tradition,” “Individuals,” “Men and Women,” “Frameworks and Methods,” and “Global Perspectives.” The contributors hail from the United States, Britain, Scotland, Wales, New Zealand, and, in one case, Japan. Most are academically affiliated as educators or doctoral candidates (at publication), with interests that encompass English, anthropology, and sociology, and the expected music-related areas such as musicology and theory. Katherine Williams contributes an essay as well; her co-editor Justin Williams does not. **[End Page 271]**

The editors set a formidable task for themselves and their contributors. Although those who love and perform popular music will recognize examples of the genre when they hear it, the term “singer-songwriter” is a slippery one to define. Tim Wise describes the singer-songwriter as a person “who composes and performs his or her own songs, typically to acoustic guitar or piano accompaniment” (*Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the Worlds*, vol. 8 [London: Bloomsbury, 2012], 430–33). The editors settle on this definition, which is intentionally broad and allows for a wide range of musical styles to be discussed.

Such an expansive definition can lead to questionable subject choices and omissions. Why completely omit people such as Harry Chapin and

Tom Paxton, and mention others such as Leonard Cohen, Cyril Tawney, Paul Simon, and Donovan (Leitch) only in passing? Why focus on German lied composers but ignore the songs of John Dowland? No single book can cover every important singer-songwriter or aspect of the genre, especially with a global approach, and the editors could expand the scope of this book in a subsequent edition or as a second volume.

Part I, “Establishing a Tradition,” begins with David R. Shumway’s “The Emergence of the Singer-Songwriter,” which traces the singer-songwriter phenomenon in the United States in the late 1960s. According to Shumway, these American singer-songwriters created extremely personal songs, even when the lyrics were not specific. He makes a strong case for James Taylor as the first songwriting performer to bare his own emotional or psychological state in his music. Shumway dismisses the genre’s roots in the folk music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, although performers like the aforementioned Chapin and Paxton, are equally “singer-songwriters” and “folkies.” Still, Shumway points out how the genre developed from a specifically personal approach to a more generalized “authentic individual expression” (p. 19).

“Singer-Songwriters of the German *Lied*,” by Natasha Loges and Katy Hamilton, introduces readers to composers they may not otherwise know, especially women composers including Corona Schröter, Luise Reichardt, and Emilie Zumsteeg. The authors’ hypothesis that lieder served as prototypes of the singer-songwriter genre is plausible but a slight stretch. They focus on lesser-known but fine composers over the likes of Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Hugo Wolf, none of whom were known for performing anything but the piano parts of their own lieder.

Mark Finch’s “Bill Monroe, Bluegrass, and the Politics of Authorship” centers on the genesis of one song, “Uncle Pen,” and questions surrounding its authorship and copyright. The article is interesting but seems tangential to the book’s singer-songwriter concentration. More on point is Allen F. Moore’s “Singer-Songwriters and the English Folk Tradition,” which explains components of twentieth-century folk song

such as locality, humor, politics and, especially, compassion and personal experience, and compares the use of these components by a variety of folk singers.

“The Brill Building and...

flared soon after the premiere when the opera's long-term success was assured, though Kessler seems to have accepted his role because he was financially secure and had wanted Hofmannsthal to succeed. The final chapter, "A Retrospective," briefly reviews the (three) collaborators' work from Strauss's first sketches in April 1909 to the premiere in Dresden in January 1911.

Reynolds' book is a revision of his recent Ph.D. thesis, "The Theatrical Vision of Count Harry Kessler and its Impact on the Strauss-Hofmannsthal Partnership" (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014). This is evident at times in the exhaustive presentation of correspondence and occasional diversions to more peripheral topics. A section titled "Who was Claude Terrasse," for instance, at times reads like an entry in *Great Music Online* or *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, and in this format would be more appropriate in a thesis or dissertation, as Terrasse's life and works were tangential to the Kessler-Hofmannsthal collaboration. Attentive readers will notice some redundancies and extraneous or incomplete footnotes, but such issues are minor. Reynolds gives fair warning that *Creating Der Rosenkavalier* focuses on Kessler, *L'ingénu librettin*, and the development of the *Rosenkavalier* scenario. Nonetheless, some readers will be disappointed by the limited coverage of Strauss's role in the opera's genesis, which Reynolds asserts is sufficiently covered in publications by Alan Jefferson, Joanna Botenberg, and Joseph E. Jones, among others. He also finds little benefit in comparing the scores by Terrasse and Strauss, as they bear little resemblance in terms of instrumentation, harmonic language, and overall style. With its focus on the "pre-Strauss" period, *Creating Der Rosenkavalier* is suitable for readers interested in Kessler and Hofmannsthal, and for scholars already quite familiar with the opera's musical genesis or the Strauss-Hofmannsthal correspondence. The most comprehensive and broadly appealing study of the genesis of *Der Rosenkavalier*—one that combines critical study of both the text and music—is yet unwritten.

Creating Der Rosenkavalier convincingly argues that Count Harry Kessler deserves "a place d'honneur" next to Strauss and Hofmannsthal for his role in shaping the opera (p. x). Reynolds draw upon a wealth

of primary sources including Kessler's diary, letters overlooked by previous scholars, and newspaper reviews, production photos, and manuscripts related to *L'ingénu librettin*, an obscure operetta that richly informed the characters and plot of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Considering the opera's enduring popularity, it is remarkable that this story went untold for decades even after key pieces of evidence became available. Genesis studies tend to attract a small audience of specialists, but Reynolds's book will reward both scholars and opera-lovers who are interested in *Der Rosenkavalier*'s co-creators or are fascinated by collaboration and the creative process.

JOSEPH E. JONES

Texas A&M University-Kingville

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