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Deborah Mawer, editor. *Historical Interplay in French Music and Culture, 1860-1960*. Routledge, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Deborah Mawer, editor. *Historical Interplay in French Music and Culture, 1860-1960*.

Keywords

French music, 19th century, 20th century, Deborah Mawer, history

Deborah Mawer, editor. *Historical Interplay in French Music and Culture, 1860-1960*. Routledge, 2018. 253 pp.

This book seeks to present a history of French classical music. It aims to explore through historical perspectives the relationships in French musical culture between the modernist era (1860-1960), and its various historical others, from the medieval period to the early part of the 19th Century. Based on aesthetic and poietic perspectives, as well as on the intertextualities that influence the writing of music history, the study presents a series of researched papers that explore questions of cultural meaning in a French context. Although not used by all contributors, the theoretical foundations of the volume include Jean-Jacques Nattiez's *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*, and Michael Klein's *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*.

The topics approached include the interrelation between music and “cultural studies, fine art, film studies and critical theory, as well as musical sub-disciplines of theory and analysis, compositional and performance studies” (2). The book is organized in two main sections: Part I: French music and culture, 1860-1930, and Part II: French music and culture, 1930-1960. Each case-study chapter reveals a dialogue between historical periods which unveils either “a synthesized story, a tense disjunction, or a strong Bloomian historical misreading” (4) based on Harold Bloom's writing on influence and reception.

Examples of the different manifestations and outcomes of these cross-temporal dialogues include in Part I the intertextuality between Watteau's themes of *fête galante*, turned into the medium of poetry by Verlaine and music by Debussy: “The essential theme of Verlaine's collection, namely ‘emotional attitudes towards love’, are ‘offered in a kaleidoscopic presentation.’ Debussy retained this kaleidoscope in his distillation into six songs” (60). Also interdisciplinary in scope, Caroline Potter's study on Erik Satie, “Adventures in gastromusicology: Satie, *La Sirène* and *Trois petites pièces montées* (1919),” is inspired by François Rabelais's *Pantagruel and Gargantua* and Helen Julia Minors's exploration of the relations between text and music in *Le Tombeau de Ronsard*, published in Henry Prunières's *La Revue Musicale*.

Intertextual disjunctions appear more prominently in Part II of the volume with Laura Hamer's essay “Beyond neoclassicism: symphonic form, catharsis and political commentary in Barraine's *Deuxième symphonie* (1938)” about Elsa Barraine's work representing a musical act of anti-Nazism, and Isabel de Berrié who examines the importance of music in *La Symphonie fantastique*, a film about the life of Hector Berlioz, and *Les Visiteurs du Soir* in her chapter “Historical French music in French feature films of the Occupation years.” More revealing of potential misreadings is Jolivet's treatment of Beethoven's biography, the subject of Jun Zubillaga-Pow's piece “Jolivet's Beethoven: supplementarity, topicality and

alterity,” which sheds light on the notions of “performed history” and “playful” ideas introduced by Kofi Agawu and Jacques Derrida (9).

The book’s strength rests on its ability to reveal the instability of meaning and interpretation in writing the history of French music and culture, and the extent to which disjunctions and misreadings may significantly occur when composers and music historians seek to re-present the past through the lens of the present. The attempts to reframe the lives and music of composers like Jean-Philippe Rameau, Hector Berlioz or Pierre Boulez call for a critical discussion on the semantics of historiography and its theoretical foundation and framework. From this standpoint, the volume constitutes a distinctive and valuable addition to existing scholarship. A likely audience for the book includes students and scholars specializing in the history of music and literature and their interrelations, but also cultural historians and all music lovers around the world.

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