

**Jean Nicolas De Surmont: *From Vocal Poetry to Song. Towards a Theory of Song Objects.* Tr. Anastasija Ropa, with a foreword by Geoff Stahl. Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2017. ISBN: 978383821072-8. 175 pages.**

Goal of this book is to discuss the definitions of ‘song’ and to provide a deeper understanding of its role as a means of expression with literary and musical meanings. To this end the book offers an overview of the development of the various scientific disciplines that focus on the song, “from the genres employed by troubadours and trouvères to the modern commercial song described as *mediatised*” (21). The book starts in fact with the Middle Ages, crosses the period between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and takes into consideration the whole spectrum of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the author intends to provide a vocabulary for the analysis of the song as an object that can be used in any context, the main focus is on French and specifically on *Québécois* songs. This aspect is stimulating as many references are quite unexpected for a reader who is not a French native speaker, and it gives the opportunity to understand the main motives of De Surmont’s commitment.

By postulating that the song is not a field or a discipline but rather an object that has been (and needs to be) analysed from multiple perspectives, the scope of the volume is quite large as it aims at developing an extensive analysis of literary-musical forms that can be identified as songs, as well as of the processes of transformation to which a song can be subject. The author’s main point is the idea that a song is mainly a vocalised object. In his words, a “song object results from the process of interpreting a song phenomenon and an object generally recognized as a song (as described by the semantic unit /piece of poetry sung to a tune/), in a word, an object of performance” (31). According to the book, the main aspect of a song is its existence in the domain of a vocal performance, therefore it is a vocal object as it moves beyond the limit of the text and its music, and it unfolds in the realm of a performed text. Paul Zumthor’s study of oral poetry is a fundamental reference for the author, whose goal is to actually expand Zumthor’s seminal analysis (Zumthor 1990). Quoting the Swiss scholar, De Surmont considers orality as an abstraction, whereas he is more focused on the voice as the only “concrete” (23) presence of the song.

Although focused on the vocal component and despite a rich bibliography, the book completely overlooks the relatively young but fascinating discussion that gravitates around the role of the singing voice and that has nurtured the foundation of voice studies as a new discipline particularly devoted to an interdisciplinary study of the roles of the voice (Kreiman and Sidtis 2011). De Surmont in fact recognises that the vocal aspect includes

the gesture, the connection between the singer and the performers, and among singers and audience, through the presence of the voice – some of the themes that are characteristic of the new trend of voice studies (Weidman 2006 and Meizel 2011) – but does not delve into this matter. This surely undermines De Surmont's main argument.

The book's structure reflects its large scope. After a clarification of the main elements of a song (Chapter 1), it investigates the role of poetry and music and their interconnections (Chapter 2). As persuasively stated by the author, "conflicting, if not dialectic, relations between text and music is part of the present study that considers song objects borrowing methodological approaches from music, linguistic, semiology, and literary studies" (62).

The most solid part of the volume remains its central section, in which the author considers what he defines as "componential mutations of the song object" (Chapter 3), that is the ways in which a song object goes through changes in its functions. The theoretical framework elaborated by De Surmont pays a lot of attention to the variations defined as *oralisation* and *folklorisation*, both being connected with the area of so-called 'traditional music'. The first is the process of a signed song object being adopted into a field of oral tradition, which means the author of the song is no more recognised as such; the second variation (*folklorisation*) is used to describe a process of creating song objects drawing inspiration from themes of oral tradition. Phenomena of *bowdlerisation* (the elimination of parts from the original version "to decrease the content that is viewed as risqué", 73) and *contrafactum* are also considered.

In addition, the volume takes into account the category of hybrid song that comes in between 'oralised' and 'folklorised'. The author does mention variations that are related to the singer's intervention on the piece of vocal poetry, what is usually considered the work of interpretation, but he prefers not to deeper investigate this aspect. Here is exactly where a consideration of the discipline of voice studies would have been a significant enrichment of the analysis.

The critique of the concept of 'popular' – as in popular music or popular song – is engaging. In the fourth chapter, the author states, "influenced by continuous industrialisation of the musical industry and by literary expressions in national forms, traditional song gradually becomes *popular song* and commercial song, with linguistic ambiguity marking the use of the term *popular music* in English" (93).

While acknowledging the different meanings that the term 'popular' has in the English context and in the French one, he criticises Middleton's reflection on the term 'popular' and his four definitions (normative, negative, sociological, technological-economic). De Surmont rejects such definitions as not appropriate, proposing the use of "several terms that indicate the dimension of collective motivation for song production" (112), such as 'signed songs with words' or 'popular signed songs'. "This lexical innovation seems to be more suitable in order to describe the process of composition and the aesthetics of reception, discarding the normative discourse that implied older notions." (112) For other uses, he suggests the term 'traditional song' as opposed to 'folkloric' or 'popular song' as the former term describes both the composition process and the reception. The proposed classification

is interesting, although it is difficult to see how it can be used effectively in popular music studies or ethnomusicology, or indeed in any study that is not specifically intended to provide a taxonomy of the potential uses of songs.

The fifth chapter is probably the least convincing. In it, the author argues that “it is necessary to consider aesthetic and moral values attributed to song” (115); however, the author seems more occupied with the relations between text and music, while analysing the historical trajectory of the meaning of *Lied* – as poetry put in music – and of the word ‘melody’ “which refers to the musical component of a sung work, [but] comes to signify the vocal genre as a whole” (119). In assessing the value of songs through their definition, the author ends up implying strong generalisations, such as “in the Romantic aesthetics, the piano accompanied oral tradition and Romantic songs, while nowadays the guitar is used, renewing medieval song forms and endowing them with the air of nobleness. From the 1950s onwards, the use of percussions also becomes general” (122).

In conclusion, the lexicographic attempt displayed in this and in other publications by the same author provides a necessary critique of the generic use of the term ‘song’. It also shows the potential of a richer vocabulary to describe the interrelations of orality, vocality, and literacy that offers common terms for the answers that researchers give “to the challenges presented by the study of a polysemic object” (136). However, although De Surmont conceives his work as a “supradisciplinary vocabulary” (136), the attempt to provide instruments for a much-needed interdisciplinary dialogue could have constituted a more effective contribution.

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