

**Review: Bennett Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 365pp. ISBN 978-1-107-02044-3, £90.00.**

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REFLECTING INTERDISCIPLINARY TRENDS in Victorian Studies, musicology, and the humanities generally, Bennett Zon's book offers new contexts for understanding an array of historical individuals, from the early ethnomusicologists Carl Engel and Sourindro Mohun Tagore, to the plainchant apologist Reverend Henry Formby.<sup>1</sup> Zon's biographical groundwork gives him good ammunition to assess why Victorian musicology did not defeat contemporary claims of Britain being a 'Land without Music', and he usefully outlines the history of this epithet.<sup>2</sup> Victorian Britain was already known as a music culture on the defensive: as Zon summarises, increasing secularisation was placing popular music and instrumental genres in competition with more traditional religious vocal repertoire.<sup>3</sup> The re-evaluation of musical life and musicology in this monograph presents some possible reasons for the derogatory maxim's pertinence and survival: shortcomings in Victorian music history and music biography, together with a concert culture that was too London-centred, and in which – despite previous efforts by Purcell and Dunstable – foreign music dominated.<sup>4</sup> Zon acknowledges the background of musico-literary research into nineteenth-century culture; while not alone among humanities scholars who investigate Victorian science, he significantly extends readers' understanding by drawing theories of evolution into musicology, where he interrogates Victorian history and biography to draw significant conclusions.<sup>5</sup> Providing

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<sup>1</sup> Note the growth during the last decade of academic journals combining arts and sciences: *Music and Science* (established 2019); *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research* (est. 2017); *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities* (est. 2015); *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (est. 2011); *Journal of Literature and Science* (est. 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Bennett Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.222–5 & p.237–8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.175.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222–4, p.248.

<sup>5</sup> Some examples of existing publications in this area (not all by musicologists) include: Ruth Solie, "'Tadpole Pleasures": *Daniel Deronda* as Music Historiography,' in *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2004), pp.153–86; Delia da Sousa Correa, *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003);

a model for structuring studies of the nineteenth century according to influential contemporary scientific theories, Zon's monograph is well-organised, clearly argued, and entertaining to read, immersing the reader in Victorian literary culture.<sup>6</sup>

### Non-Darwinian Theoretical Framework

Thus in place of the older image of the evolutionary *ladder*, unidirectional and culminating in an evident (human) pinnacle, the newer Darwinian thinking substituted the *tree*, branching in various directions that were unpredictable and potentially infinite in number.<sup>7</sup>

Zon's research for some time has been aimed at the cultural-historical implications of science and disciplinarity.<sup>8</sup> As he explains in *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, a distinction between Charles Darwin's notoriety and the specific content of his publications can be 'difficult to disentangle in the evolutionary vortex of Victorian culture'.<sup>9</sup> Appearing against a backdrop of other 'developmental models', Darwin's theory of evolution showed that random elements dictated survival, meaning notions of a teleological development of species were in fact non-Darwinian.<sup>10</sup> As far as studies of Victorian culture reflect its zeitgeist, Zon distances himself not only from Darwinian approaches undertaken before the theoretical watershed, but even from 'inadvertently

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Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction: Representations of Music, Science and Gender in the Leisured Home* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); and Alisa Clapp-Itnyre, 'Sexual Songs and Darwinian Dances: The Eroticism and Repression of Folk Music in the Novels of Thomas Hardy', in *Angelic Airs, Subversive Songs: Music as Social Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), pp.149–182.

<sup>6</sup> For a noteworthy precedent to Zon's eclectic approach, see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880*, rpr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Solie, "Tadpole Pleasures": *Daniel Deronda* as Music Historiography', p.156.

<sup>8</sup> See Zon's co-editorial work with Bernard Lightman: *Evolution and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and *Victorian Culture and the Origin of Disciplines* (forthcoming). One of Zon's recent book chapters is 'Evolution' in Daniel Whistler's *The Edinburgh Critical History of Nineteenth-Century Christian Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.13. See also Bennett Zon, 'The "Non-Darwinian" Revolution and the Great Chain of Musical Being', in Bernard Lightman & Bennett Zon, eds, *Evolution and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.196–226.

<sup>10</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.11–12.

non-Darwinian' approaches.<sup>11</sup> Zon introduces his 'purposefully non-Darwinian' study by stating:

In my case this undertaking represents a conscious development from purely historical evolutionary interests found in *Music and Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century British Musicology* (2000) and *Representing Non-Western Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2007) to the more overtly theorized non-Darwinian position of this book.<sup>12</sup>

Although Zon adopts a theoretical approach in contrast to his earlier books and to other scholars of evolutionary thought, the links to his previous research are clearly maintained, as shown by citations of his own work within the 2017 bibliography.<sup>13</sup>

### Progressive Contents: The Great Chain of Being

*Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture* is organised around a central, non-Darwinian understanding of Victorian evolutionary science: the Great Chain of Being. This ancient concept took different organisms of nature, from the simplest to the most sophisticated examples, and arranged them in sequence from lowest to highest. Zon follows the Great Chain, structuring his account of Victorian musico-scientific interactions by dealing first with animals, then primitive humans, then children, then humans of artistic genius and finally God and the transcendental.<sup>14</sup> Zon looks to Arthur O. Lovejoy – whose ideas from *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) are allowed to 'freely permeate' Zon's book – and Lovejoy is referenced in Zon's Introduction and Epilogue, giving the Great Chain what Zon calls an 'inherent circularity'.<sup>15</sup>

Chapter 1 (Zoomusicology) uses music to dispel supposed myths of deep antagonism between science and religion, considering Victorian zoology as embodied in zoo and museum layouts and how this reflected contemporary ideas concerning

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.11–15. A key text of influence was Peter J. Bowler's *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore, MA. & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.14–15.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett Zon, *Representing Non-Western Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007); Martin Clayton & Bennett Zon, eds, *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s: Portrayal of the East* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Bennett Zon, *Music and Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century British Musicology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Bennett Zon, *The English Plainchant Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.357–8.

<sup>14</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.20–41.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.4.

animal responses to music. A particular focus is the study of birdsong and how Victorian scientists and theologians often shared common ground when interpreting its transformative musical powers. This chapter establishes the Great Chain of Being as a theory linking animals, humans and the spiritual world; however, Zon is not alone among scholars who discern music's associations with the metaphysical in romantic culture, including metaphorical portrayals of avian creatures as sirens.<sup>16</sup> Chapter 2 (Ethnomusicology) shows the influence of evolutionary theories on early comparative musicology in Britain, although it is not – and does not purport to be – the most detailed among histories of ethnomusicology.<sup>17</sup> While Darwin's concept of 'common descent' made all human races equal, British society harboured imperial ambitions generally more favourable towards Spencerian Social Darwinism, in which some societies were seen as less evolved and therefore musically inferior to the Western classical tradition. However, Zon shows how Charles Samuel Myers' understanding of variation would steer Victorian ethnomusicology towards its relativist turn.

In Chapter 3 (Folk Musicology), Zon examines the way E.B. Tylor's doctrine of 'survivals' influenced how folklore was defined by the Folk-Lore Society, and communicated in the organisation of early folk song collections. Zon re-interprets the work of Cecil Sharp – traditionally subject to harsh Marxist critique – within his own closer reading of the song collector and editor's intentions to read folk song itself as part of an evolution of music. Thus Zon helpfully re-opens scholarly discussion about nineteenth-century folk song, dating the origin of the term to an anonymous *Athenaeum* article of 1847, which contradicts Alisa Clapp-Itnyre's point that folk song collections appeared from the early 1800s<sup>18</sup>. Zon's readers are impoverished by his omission of work by Matthew Gelbart, who traces a gradual movement beginning in the eighteenth century towards the establishment of separate folk and art music

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Hansford, "'Her Voice is Hovering o'er my Soul": Siren Singers and Received Intersections in Fiction and Song, 1830–1850', in *Figures of the Imagination: Fiction and Song in Britain, 1790–1850* (Abingdon & New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), pp.179–226.

<sup>17</sup> For a more comprehensive account of the development of ethnomusicology, see Bruno Nettl, *Nettl's Elephant: On the History of Ethnomusicology* (Urbana, Springfield & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.119; Clapp-Itnyre, 'Sexual Songs and Darwinian Dances,' p.150.

categories by c.1850, so it remains for future studies of folk song and evolution to bring Gelbart's scholarship into play.<sup>19</sup>

Zon's Chapter 4 (Music Pedagogy) draws on some familiar aspects of music education in Victorian Britain, with over-reliance on Bernarr Rainbow's *The Land without Music* (1967), but in the context of theories of evolution and contemporary views of childhood. At this point the importance of 'recapitulation' in nineteenth-century thought is introduced, which Zon explains as 'the biological relation of the individual to the whole'.<sup>20</sup> This chapter highlights the influence of recapitulation on educational theories – piano and vocal pedagogy, including Tonic Sol-fa, are examined in the light of philosophies by key educationists: Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel and Herbert Spencer. Teachers' specific concerns to move learners from initial basic concepts to higher artistic appreciation, morality and Christian fulfilment brought the Great Chain of Being into a particular educational context, in addition to its associations with ontogenies and phylogenies of music and musicians.

Ruth Solie, like Zon inspired by Peter Bowler (1988), has already acknowledged that Victorian historiography was influenced by an expanding but often 'confused' understanding of evolutionary processes that heavily inflected historical writing, social science and arts criticism in the age that firmly wanted to believe in 'progress'.<sup>21</sup> In Chapters 5 (Music Biography) and 6 (Music History) of *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, Zon's focus moves to British composers as higher organisms of the Great Chain. Examining methodological agendas and examples of biographies and music histories up to and including the nineteenth century, Zon explains how British publications addressed the 'Land without Music' claim and to what extent they were successful. Although music at the time was understood to harbour redemptive or moral qualities and – under the influence of texts such as Reverend H.R. Haweis' *Music and Morals* (1871) – to be reaching its developmental apogee, the product of highly-evolved

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music": Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially p.10 & p.111–49.

<sup>20</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.222. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines biological recapitulation as, 'the appearance during embryonic development of successive forms resembling those of the organism's evolutionary predecessors', and musical recapitulation as 'part of a movement [in sonata form] . . . in which themes from the exposition are restated'. Della Thompson, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.1145.

<sup>21</sup> Solie, "'Tadpole Pleasures": *Daniel Deronda* as Music Historiography', p.156.

beings, British composers had failed to compete successfully against their continental counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Zon concludes that Victorian composer biographies – ‘the work of Edward Holmes, C. Hubert H. Parry and others, tracing the process of biographical transformation from Carlylean Great Man to Spencerian Fittest Survivor’ – did not address the ‘Land without Music’ critique and neither did they follow the Darwinian rejection of recapitulation, failing to understand that individual lives could not necessarily portray a picture of national greatness.<sup>23</sup> Zon explains how Victorian music history, focused on notions of genius, creation and invention, looked back to a glorious British musical past as part of what he terms an ‘apologetic’ approach in contrast with developmental models from general history in the period.

In Chapter 7 (Music Theology), Zon culminates his study by taking readers to the top of the evolutionary Great Chain, to God himself, only to supplant the deity in his Epilogue with the ultimate philosophical superiority (after Walter Pater) of music and musicology. Considering the immanence of human originality in liturgical music – the way genres such as oratorio, plainchant and hymns embodied Christological theology – Zon’s chapter explores the relative and absolute in Victorian musical culture, specifically their relation to contemporary concepts of spiritual progress. Zon suggests that the emotional quality of music, which could elicit in humans a ‘feeling of divine oneness’, was a factor for Christians when, ‘[i]n scientific terms the (relative) ontogeny of Jesus recapitulates the (absolute) phylogeny of Christ’.<sup>24</sup> In this chapter, clearly influenced by Zon’s understanding of plainchant in its theological context, and despite a disappointingly superficial gloss on hymns and Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius*, liturgical music is treated as mediator between theology and science to show how evolutionary theories permeated Victorian society.

Like the Great Chain of Being, the content and organisation of Zon’s book has a genuine sense of progression: a graded series of topics is arranged systematically, moving incrementally as if ascending from the simplest organisms to the most complex, spiritually-complete and sophisticated forms of being. From the inherent potentiality of ideas generated at the lowest levels – whether through chance, fitness or aspiration – the fructification and achievement of the finale is reached, a truly eschatological

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<sup>22</sup> Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, p.209–210.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192, p.224.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.267–8.

conceptual destination. Music's qualities of communication, emotional engagement, universality and transcendence, although far from absent in previous scholarly discourse, are brought to the fore. Through music, Zon's series of liminal figures – songbird, savage, folk musician, child, musical genius, national hero, and deity – are linked to create a narrative not merely of upgrowth and improvement but succession, recurrence and reappearance. *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture* portrays a society in which music was integral to the spiritual progress and interconnectedness of all its participants. Zon argues that notions of historiography and scientific progress were infused within Victorian literary culture – which he exhibits in all its plenitude – to depict organic change but also residual remnants, progressive trajectories and recapitulatory cycles.



BIOGRAPHY: Roger Hansford's research interests revolve around nineteenth-century romanticism, particularly keyboard and vocal music in Victorian Britain and their literary contexts. At University of Southampton, Roger was among the early supporters of the Southampton Centre for Nineteenth-Century Research, and a teaching assistant for the undergraduate course 'Materials of Music History, 1500–1900'. He has presented papers at the Biennial Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music, the Biennial Conference on Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain, and at University of Southampton's 'Other Voices Study Day'. Roger holds a Post-Graduate Certificate in music education, and gained distinction for his MMus in Musicology, including the analytical project 'Narrative Structure in Chopin's Ballades: Large-scale Romantic Works and the "Problem" of Sonata Form'. His doctoral research attracted funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and led to the 2017 monograph *Figures of the Imagination: Fiction and Song in Britain, 1790–1850* (Taylor & Francis).

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