

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Riddell, Fraser. *Music and the Queer Body in English Literature of the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 250 pp.

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<1>For several decades, much of the work in the fields of feminist and queer musicology has framed music as an affirmative, even utopian, force in queer culture. Feminist and queer musicologists such as Philip Brett, Suzanne Cusick, Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, Nadine Hubbs, and Judith Ann Peraino have, crucially, located music as a site of resistance to heteronormative ideologies, a mode through which to celebrate queer identities, or a tool for expressing desires and practices that cannot be explicitly named.

<2>Fraser Riddell’s dazzling monograph, *Music and the Queer Body in English Literature of the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 2022), offers an alternative narrative about the role of music in queer history and culture. Riddell develops an “antisocial queer musicology” that examines more “unsettling and disturbing” ties between music and queerness in *fin-de-siècle* Britain (10, 2). Drawing on theories of queer negativity by theorists like Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and Jack Halberstam, Riddell proposes that music does not always represent a source of “heroic queer self-assertion and emancipation,” as it is often framed in contemporary musicology (as well as literary-historical accounts of music and queerness in the nineteenth century), but also participates in narratives of queer shame, vulnerability, embarrassment, masochism, degeneration, and isolation (2). For Riddell, music’s queerest role at the *fin de siècle* was not to celebrate the stable, liberal, queer subject, but rather to refuse the “terms of the closet” altogether and facilitate moments of *unmaking*, incoherence, and self-dissolution (11).

<3>Drawing on a rich array of source material—including sexological texts, vocal treatises, Gothic narratives, pornography, letters, memoirs, and aesthetic writings—all of which sidestep the realist novel most often treated in analyses of the period—Riddell expertly combines rigorous literary-historical analysis and queer theoretical inquiry to examine works by an array of both canonical and lesser-known *fin-de-*

*siècle* British authors, including John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, E.M. Forster, Arthur Symonds, Richard Marsh, John Gamberil Nicholson, and E.F. Benson. While most of the book centers on queer male authors and works about “male homosexual subject[s],” Riddell also includes discussions of queer female writers such as Vernon Lee and Virginia Woolf and literary representations of “lesbian encounters with music” (3). What ties many of these works together, Riddell argues, is an interest in representations of mythical musical figures such as Marsyas, Dionysus, and Pan, which, he argues, enabled late-Victorian writers to articulate “those strange, antisocial or perverse beliefs about music that lurk on the edge of discourse in Victorian musical culture” (15).

<4>Chapter One deftly demonstrates the ways in which nineteenth-century debates about musical mapped onto *fin-de-siècle* sexual politics. In the context of sexological writing that linked “musical emotionalism” to an often-pathologized male homosexuality—musical emotion was seen as “solipsistic” and “effeminizing” and associated with disorders of the nervous system—thinkers like Symonds drew on Hegelian and Romantic views of musical idealism to strategically defend emotional responses to music (and thus homosexuality) (21, 48). While writers such as H.G. Wells, Edward Prime-Stevenson, E.F. Benson, and Willa Cather shared Symonds’s affirmation of musical emotionalism, Vernon Lee vigorously rejected such an approach in favor of an emphasis on musical form, which Riddell reads as reflective of Lee’s own anxieties about “music’s capabilities to disclose aspects of the self” (44).

<5>Chapter Two delves further into Lee’s musical writings, focusing on her interest in “musical masochism,” which Riddell argues was shared by Walter Pater and Arthur Symons (17). In Lee’s “Marsyas in Flanders” (1900), Pater’s “Denys L’Auxerrois” (1886), and Symons’s “Christian Trevalga” (1902) and “Pachmann and the Piano” (1902), music acts not as a source of stable selfhood, but rather as a “solvent of the self” and a catalyst of “masochistic emotional excess,” “self-shattering,” and “self-dispersal” (70, 80, 61). (Here, Riddell draws on Leo Bersani’s landmark psychoanalytic theories of masochism.) In such moments, then, *Music and the Queer Body* has just as much to say about *disembodiment* as *embodiment*, and puts important pressure on common critical readings, particular of Pater, of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic writings as “queer-friendly defence[s] of individualism” (56).

<6>Continuing the focus on disembodiment, Chapter Three zooms in on the figure of the child chorister, a figure often fetishized in *fin-de-siècle* writing for his “‘pure’ and ‘ethereal’ nature” (98). This chapter contains especially in-depth discussions of Symonds, including readings of his personal writings and poetry and examinations

of archival materials related to his participation in choral services in Bristol and Oxford. Analyzing the “pederastic listening practices” articulated in Symonds’s work [as well as in John Gambril Nicholson’s *The Romance of a Choir-Boy* (1916)] enables Riddell to present an important corrective to common queer readings of the singing voice as an unequivocal site of sexual liberation. Attention to the child singer, Riddell argues, instead promotes an uncomfortable reckoning “with those shameful and embarrassing aspects of queer history that many in the queer community today might prefer to forget” (18).

<7>Chapter Four shifts the book’s focus from de-materialized bodies and immaterial voices to concrete, material objects: musical instruments. In Richard Marsh’s “The Violin” (1891), Forster’s “Dr. Woolcott” (1926), and *Teleny* (1893), Riddell claims, musical instruments serve as important locations for queer touch—“conduits” for queer figures to make tactile contact across spatial distances (139, 142). The chapter then moves to a discussion of scenes from Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908) and Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915), in which female heroines experience piano playing as a source of “epistemological secur[ity]” (160). While this section distracts a bit from the book’s overall antisocial intervention, it nonetheless offers crucial rereadings of these canonical modernist texts from phenomenological and musicological perspectives. The chapter concludes with a third section that returns to Lee and traces her tactile encounters with musical scores as she wrote *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), which Riddell proposes provided her at once with affective contact with the past as well as a painful reminder of “what has been lost” (172).

<8>Chapter Five returns the focus to queer negativity and antisociality, as it explores works in which music puts pressure on linear, reproductive temporality by promoting “the primitive, the instinctual or the bestial” (175). The chapter makes use of contemporary theories of queer temporality and futurity to examine several retellings of the story of Pan—Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan” (1890), E.M. Forster’s “The Story of a Panic” (1902), and E.F. Benson’s “The Man Who Went Too Far” (1904)—in which Pan’s music “elicits . . . forms of sexual pleasure—the masturbatory, the sodomitical” that refuse forward movement, evolutionary development, and reproduction (198). One of the most fascinating interventions in the chapter is Riddell’s reading of Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) as reflections of “antisocial queerness” for their interest in the primitive and the instinctual (179). These narratives offer readers a glimpse into yet another way in which music serves not to reaffirm humanist identities, but rather to “collapse the distinction between aesthetic and sexual pleasure, the human and the animal” (198).

<9>*Music and the Queer Body* thus offers a crucial contribution to conversations in both Victorian studies and queer musicology about the relationships among aesthetics, erotics, embodiment, and subjectivity. Riddell invites readers in both fields to reimagine music not as a utopian source of identity affirmation, but rather as a “startlingly antihumanist” force that fosters a range of complex, difficult, and often disturbing affects and experiences (51). And yet, music’s capacity for queer antisociality also offers its own possibilities. As Judith Butler reminds us, moments of “becoming undone” can be “juncture[s] from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living” (3-4).

### **Works Cited**

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.