

*Eroticism in Early Modern Music*. Bonnie J. Blackburn and Laurie Stras, eds. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. xx + 308 pp. \$119.95.

---

This anthology of ten substantial essays traces its origins to the conference *Eros and Euterpe: Music and Eroticism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* organized at Indiana University in 2004 by Massimo Ossi. The book was long trailed as “forthcoming” under the title *Eros and Euterpe: Eroticism in Early Modern Music*, edited by Massimo Ossi and published by Oxford University Press; the title and imprint under which it is still listed on the web profiles some of the contributors. Although under different editorship and shorn of its poetic foretitle (as per Ashgate’s austere policy), readers can be reassured that the volume under review is one and the same long-awaited book.

As Laurie Stras notes in her helpful introduction, the topic of early modern eroticism has enjoyed a scholarly flowering in recent years: 2010 saw the publication of both *Erotic Cultures of Renaissance Italy*, edited by Sara Matthews-Grieco, and *Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy*, edited by Allison Levy, for example. Although the related topics of gender and sexuality are now firmly entrenched within the scholarly domain of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music, eroticism has received comparatively little attention from musicologists, and in turn the recent scholarly activity surrounding eroticism has paid little attention to music — an important exception being Flora Dennis’s contribution to the former volume (which, oddly, is cited hardly at all in *Eroticism in Early Modern Music*).

The anthology under review is thus a timely and welcome contribution to an exciting and energetic field of research, and it contains essays of real weight and significance. Nonetheless, its considerable scholarly success is subject to the kinds of limitations that always attend anthologies, and it is worth noting the most significant of them here. First, the coverage in geographical terms is very uneven: Italy (the home turf of the editors, past and present) is the subject of six of the ten chapters; England gets two, and France one, while one ranges too widely to categorize. Second, the contributors to *Eroticism in Early Modern Music* are almost unanimous in their focus on what Stras in her introduction terms “the music itself” (6), alongside the texts with which that music is allied through song. This stands in contrast to Dennis’s essay, mentioned above, which is concerned primarily with the material, visual, and discursive cultures of early modern music, and

readers who do not identify as music analysts will feel the lack of these broader (especially material and visual) perspectives in the volume.

Stras observes in her introduction that persuasive erotic readings of musical texts generally rest on the eroticization of musical features in contemporary written discourse, especially in music-theoretical texts that can be placed in close proximity to the musical practices under discussion. The success of this strategy, which underpins the majority of the chapters in the book, relies to a great extent on demonstrating the validity of applying particular theoretical concepts and metaphors to particular musical examples — something that is achieved with great skill here in most cases.

In many of the chapters, this approach is combined with the reinterpretation of song texts in light of the covert erotic lexicons laid bare in such modern philological tours de force as Jean Toscan's *Le Carnaval du langage* (1981) and Valter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno's *Dizionario storico del lessico erotico italiano* (1996). While there is clearly much to learn from this process, it is obviously a mistake to reread the whole corpus of early modern secular music through a systematic and credulous deployment of these compendia of double entendres. The results are undeniably amusing, but there are resources enough in these lexicons to make strong pornography out of a pizza menu. The contributors to *Eroticism in Early Modern Music* are certainly aware of this, and their approach is on the whole judicious and careful, but the reader does occasionally feel the discussion give in briefly to the temptation to list entertaining examples clad in scanty commentary.

The analyses unfolded in this book work best when they are richly contextualized, so that the function of eroticism, in social and cultural terms, is as thoroughly evidenced and discussed as its presence. This crucial contextualization is achieved with signal success the majority of the time in the majority of the chapters, and, despite its limitations and for its numerous salutary examples of hugely creative and satisfying scholarly interpretation, this book should be recognized as a trailblazing contribution to a fascinating field of research.

TIM SHEPHARD, *University of Sheffield*