

## BOOK REVIEW

Marian Wilson Kimber, *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 2017. xvii + 324 pp. Cloth \$95, paper \$28, e-book \$25.20.

Toward the end of the 1957 film version of William Marchant's play, *The Desk Set*, Katharine Hepburn melodramatically recites portions of a poem whose refrain is 'Curfew must not ring tonight!'.<sup>1</sup> Little did this viewer recognize in that moment an homage to an era when women recited poetry and other literature, accompanied not with ringing telephones and a noisy computer prototype, as Hepburn was, but with music. Reciting with musical accompaniment has been known by several names, including melodrama; in his *Grove Music* article on that form, Peter Branscombe mentions eighteenth-century origins such as J.-J. Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1762), though he concedes that the addition of music to dramatic action is probably as old as drama itself. The type of accompanied recitation pertinent here arose in the early nineteenth century as a male accomplishment in Great Britain and elsewhere. By the late 1800s, however, European women and their like-minded sisters in the United States had broken into certain categories of musical oration; their performances were familiar in towns and cities until around 1930. In *The Elocutionists*, Marian Wilson Kimber remedies the 'historical invisibility of musically accompanied recitation by women' and simultaneously educates her readers about a host of interconnected subjects relevant to women's musical progress from private to public spheres. Wilson Kimber's history recounts a familiar Hegelian spiral – women's accomplishments – societal critique – women's redirection – so common in most pre- and early-twentieth-century musical history. Women created opportunities in which to express their dramatic aspirations, yet negotiated persistent ridicule. One female detractor suggested in 1917 that spontaneous outbreaks of elocutionary fervour were frequent and persistent enough in public spaces to be compared with an illness. She added with mock relief, 'Gradually, like a distemper, the thing died out' (p. 21). Though its popularity has passed, female participation in elocution and its musical-dramatic siblings is undocumented no longer, thanks to Wilson Kimber's work.

Chapter 1 bears the name of Ruth Sukow's 1925 novel, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, whose central character chooses elocution as her performance medium.<sup>2</sup> Females appeared frequently among 'platform performers' of elocution in the late nineteenth century; 90 per cent of elocution instructors in the US were female by 1901 (p. 21). Progressive Era women with theatrical aspirations navigated a narrow channel between the theatre's long association with debauchery and prostitution (further fuelled by the white slave panic and resulting Mann Act of 1910), and the reduction of their best oratorical efforts to drawing room accomplishments. All those efforts notwithstanding, serious oratory continued to be culturally coded as masculine. Through commentary on Sukow's novel, Wilson Kimber confirms that, in elocution, women utilized their voices to become the

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<sup>1</sup> Final scene, Katharine Hepburn, *Desk Set*, directed by Walter Lang, (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Sukow, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925).

vehicles of expression of high culture (p. 17). Accused of pretentious efforts to establish themselves in a masculine world, their accomplishments often alternated with critiques which rendered them voiceless (p. 26).

Chapter 2 explores musical practices – comprising both instrumental pieces and vocally inflected readings – found in recitations with music, beginning about 1816. By mid-century, British actress Fanny Kemble (1809–1893) and others had created an American taste for these performances (p. 27). Most pairings of literature with music were ad hoc, but some would be perpetuated in print, and these form a late-nineteenth-century core repertoire of musically accompanied recitations. Wilson Kimber provides fascinating details about touring reciter/pianist duos and their programming from cities as diverse in size as Chicago (c. 1897) and Peoria (1905–1907). *Harper's Bazaar* reported in 1901 that such events were 'in vogue with New York hostesses' (p. 30).<sup>3</sup> Entrepreneurs founded schools of elocution and published pedagogical readers that provided graphic notation to help the elocutionist approach an ideal vocalism for recitation. A graph designed by E.A. Ott assigned emotional levels to each note of an eight-pitch scale.<sup>4</sup> The first scale degree embodied the affect of 'Solemnity', pitch five exuded 'Calmness' and the highest, pitch eight, evoked 'Excitement'. Other pedagogues indicated verbal emphasis in print by typesetting important words at a 45-degree angle to the rest of a horizontal text, or adding shorthand-style flourishes on note-like shapes to indicate vocal slides (pp. 34–9). Our best artefacts of the practice are recordings; the modern listener can hear Percy Hemus in a 1913 performance of a setting of Poe's 'The Raven' with piano accompaniment by Gladys Craven on Victor 35316.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, the four-decade career of Jane Manner (Mannheimer), one of Wilson Kimber's enlightening case studies, is not preserved on recordings. A list of Manner's readings with musical accompaniments – e.g., Vachel Lindsay's 'The Lame Boy' with Chopin's 'Berceuse' – is included in the appendix.

Shakespeare's words had traditionally been the epitome of high culture, and his *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, accompanied by Mendelssohn's overture and incidental music, headlined elocution programmes for an incredible 124 years, from 1833 until 1957. Wilson Kimber devotes Chapter 3 to that popular spectacle, nicknamed 'the Dream'. The author points out the advantages of such a programme for nineteenth-century women elocutionists. A recited form forewent scantily clad dancers considered problematic in the Victorian era; women could thus be solely responsible for a dramatic interpretation and simultaneously preserve the stereotype of ideal womanhood. Further, solo performance of an entire play showcased the virtuosity of female elocutionists and the female vocal range was well-suited to Mendelssohn's 'fairy music'. Fanny Kemble began performing 'the Dream' in 1847, the year of Mendelssohn's death, and continued until 1869. Kemble's voice (or voices, since she changed for each character) succeeded as a substitute for the play's visual spectacles, according to one audience member – 'on the stage the palpable grotesqueness of the asses' ears, nay, of the fairy form even, would spoil it all – 'tis too airy for anything but the voice and her voice' (p. 59).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'Questions of Good Form', *Harper's Bazaar* 34, no. 14 (April 6, 1901): A943.

<sup>4</sup> E.A. Ott, *How to Use the Voice in Reading and Speaking* (New York: Hinds, Noble and Eldredge, 1901): 121.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200013628/C-13391-The\\_raven](http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200013628/C-13391-The_raven).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Mary Thacher Higginson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921): 37.

Such recitations accompanied by music would soon be rendered old-fashioned by radio and movies, but these elocutions enabled progress in women's entertainment. As Wilson Kimber summarizes, 'elocutionists became more voice than body ... [thus] mediating the problem of the female body displayed on the stage' (p. 62).

Chapter 4 offers substantial evidence that the subgenre of sentimental accompanied recitatives was gendered female from the 1890s to 1914. Published anthologies featured standard elocutionary genres: pathetic, humorous, dramatic, patriotic and religious. Pieces about the temperance movement, those featuring a dialect, or musical readings were grouped under the 'specialized' category. When music was included, it played both diegetic and non-diegetic functions. Poetic topics were essentially the same as those favoured in American parlour songs; memories of Grandmother, a sentimental keepsake, love lost and found, the battlefield, and religious themes were popular. Though falling in the minority of recommended music, classical choices for sentimental texts included 'Vision' from Schumann's *Albumblätter*, op. 124, the Bridal Chorus from Wagner's *Lohengrin* (representing sleigh bells and wedding bells, respectively) and Mendelssohn's *Song without Words*, Op. 62, no. 3, which accompanied Poe's 'The Bells'. If a minuet or jig were mentioned, they were supplied. Strains of 'Nearer, My God, To Thee', 'Jesus, Lover of My Soul', or 'Rock of Ages' created virtual spaces of religious devotion. Wilson Kimber judged that Rose Hartwick Thorpe's 'Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight' (1867) mentioned at the beginning of this review, was the most recited poem in the 'brave heroine' category in the late nineteenth century, 'so much so that it [also] became the text most often cited in criticisms of elocution' (pp. 84–5). Its central character rescues her imprisoned lover by preventing the bell's ringing that would mark his execution, by swinging from its clapper. Though adding music from Beethoven's *Fidelio* or Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* seems plausible, 'Curfew', like other heroic poems, was not paired with music. In other selections and to great effect, however, elocutionists performed with music 'to reach into audience's hearts and to move them with music that they loved' (p. 86).

Wilson Kimber further enlivens the narrative arch of her monograph in Chapter 5, 'Grecian Urns in Iowa Towns'. This is an essay on intersections among François Delsarte's spiritual and geometrical codifications of bodily movement, the discipline of elocution, pre-World War I gender roles and Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* (1957). The evocative poses gracing the book's cover are explained in this chapter. Sometimes a corps of women rendered poses as a featured performer recited dramatic poetry. Delsarte poses accomplished important cultural work for female platform performers in the decades surrounding the turn into the twentieth century. This oddly democratic, early form of physical education re-introduced the female body to elocution and musical recitation by associating it with high culture. Girls and women struck Delsartean poses meant to conjure images of the Greek Isis, Ariadne or Psyche, or biblical figures such as Miriam, Jephtha and Esther. If music heightened dramatic impact, posing embodied and further emphasized it for both performer and audience member. Loosely draped, white costumes supported Progressive-Era efforts to abandon Victorian corsets. Yet, only the most naïve reader would suppose that these efforts by elocutionist women would underpin lasting change in the status of women on the stage. In *The Music Man*, scenes featuring the mayor's wife and her Delsarte-posing entourage are emblematic of the ridicule women repeatedly faced as they adopted new avenues of self-expression in the American theatre. A great strength of this book is Wilson-Kimber's contextualization of these and other depictions of women, which actually dismantled hard-won advances in the performance world.

Parody is inescapable in any discussion of the popular stage. Wilson Kimber's Chapter 6, 'In Another Voice', examines recitation in dialects that parodied class, ethnicity and age difference. Though men were most closely associated with dialects, some women developed specialties in Cockney, Irish and other accents. Resonating with famous vaudeville characters like Fanny Brice's 'Baby Snooks', women most frequently imitated the voices of children. Like other forms of popular musical culture, elocution with music also celebrated the comic genius, virtuosic musicianship and notable maternal gifts associated with African Americans even as it capitalized on the tragedies that motivated the Great Migration. The 'Mammy' or child-minder stereotype, was a non-sexual, maternal stand-in for the actual African American nannies who provided child care for white children during the Progressive Age. Paul Laurence Dunbar was deeply influenced by elocution's zenith and, as the first widely recognized African American poet, he provided other dialect pieces for elocutionists. Though they were published in *The Century*, Dunbar's writings were relegated to the section entitled 'In a Lighter Vein', thus marginalizing both black Americans and the elocutionists who read them in performance (p. 122).

Wilson Kimber's Chapter 7 focuses attention on elocution with music in the Chautauqua tent circuit, which flourished from 1904 to 1930. These venues combined music and spoken word from its beginning as it emphasized education and self-improvement. Predictably, oratory about politics and education were delivered by men, while poetry and drama were female domains, but women also played in instrumental music ensembles, as documented in a photograph of the Metropolitan Ladies' Orchestra taken in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1912 (Figure 7.2, p. 158). Though participation expanded in these ways, traditional stereotypes of modest and retiring women were reified as the ideal on the Chautauqua circuit.

Chapter 8 focuses on choral speaking, documented in the US from the late nineteenth century and proliferating in the 1930s and 1940s. Women wrote most of the pedagogical literature, which emphasized Depression-era aesthetics of social usefulness, cooperative spirit and patriotic sentiment. With a nod to the Delsarte movement, these choral recitations included movement and poses, sometimes executed sequentially in changing tableaux. These were especially favoured in women's colleges, where the popularity of elocution classes made choral speaking imminently practical. Cécile de Banke, who directed a 'Verse-Speaking Choir' from 1933 to 1948 at Wellesley College, favoured works of the Harlem Renaissance poets in her productions.

Wilson Kimber devotes Chapter 9 to the careers of two American 'Words and Music Ladies', Phyllis Fergus (1887–1964) and Frieda Peycke (1884–1964). Both women worked to be recognized primarily as composers and secondarily as 'interpreters' (p. 203). Their compositions, published and marketed by Chicago publisher Clayton F. Summy in the 1920s, were taken seriously as high-art melodrama. Among the second generation of US women to attend college, Fergus did not matriculate at Smith College until she had reached her twenties. She graduated in 1913 and earned a Master's degree at the American Conservatory in 1918. Chicago's Cordon Club, in which she was active, featured well-known musical celebrities such as Frederick Stock, John Barrymore, Sophie Tucker and Lillian Gish at its meetings. A serious composer, performer and active clubwoman, Fergus thus exemplifies women who successfully balanced new professional opportunities in public and private, individual and group spheres.

In Chapter 10, Wilson Kimber traces the shift in subject from the sentimentality that characterized turn-of-the-century elocution materials to women's humour

after World War I. This new female genre emphasized the perspectives of women in everyday life as its subject matter, as well as their agency in choosing specialized careers by their very presence on stage. Women's humorous visions of the modern age poked fun at Victorian styles and practices, men's failings in the childcare and housekeeping realms, courtship and marriage. In her song about men's fallible commitment to women, Lalla Ryckoff quipped: 'When a pair of red lips are held up to your own/with no one to gossip about it!/Do you pray for endurance to leave them alone?/Well, maybe you do! But I doubt it' (p. 225).<sup>7</sup> Musical creators as central to twentieth-century women's classical music history as Marian Bauer and Ruth Crawford Seeger left behind unpublished 'compositions with readings'. Most of Bauer's date from around 1912, while Crawford Seeger's only item, a suite of dissonant character pieces with narration entitled 'The Adventures of Tom Thumb', was composed in 1925.

Seen as a whole, Marion Wilson Kimber's *The Elocutionists* is a meticulously documented, compensatory history of a forgotten women's musical performance genre. The author expertly situates her primary and secondary source research among that of others in copious endnotes accounting for one-sixth of the book's 330 pages. Standard front-matter lists of figures and musical examples are unfortunately missing, but the 18 black and white photographs, 10 line drawings and 25 music examples are well-chosen. A single complaint is that each chapter still feels a bit like its own story, which might have been remedied by an Afterword that accomplishes more chronological synthesis than the present one. Still, the author's facility with biographical storytelling is evident in sections about Jane Manner, Fanny Kemble, Phyllis Fergus and Frieda Peycke. The chapters devoted to the presence of elocutionary practice in Willson's *The Music Man* and the importance of the Shakespeare/Mendelssohn pairings are creative, insightful and thought-provoking. Ultimately, Wilson Kimber rewards the reader with the special care she took to illuminate not just the history she details, but many contexts and meanings for the women involved and the ones to come after them.

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<sup>7</sup> Lalla Ryckoff, *I Doubt It!* (Chicago: Clayton F. Summy, 1923).