important touchstone for us all in the coming years, as we continue to explore writers across borders and write our literary histories anew.

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Katherine R. Larson’s *The Matter of Song in Early England* is an exceptional study. It offers the perspective not just of an academic—Larson is professor of English at the University of Toronto—but also that of a performer, as Larson is an accomplished singer. In this monograph, she brings together work she has done in editing two essay collections, one on Mary Wroth and one on song and gender in early modern England, a host of journal publications, and new research and analysis. *The Matter of Song in Early England* is accompanied by a companion site featuring fourteen pieces recorded by Larson and lutenist Lucas Harris. As Larson writes in the prologue of the book, this experiential aspect of her project—what Carolyn Abbate calls the “drastic,” as opposed to the more objective “gnostic” response to music (9)—made the endeavor more personal and more embodied, especially as it is this embodiment that she is most often concerned with in detailing women’s experiences with song in the English early modern period.

Larson begins her book with an introduction to women’s music-making and the physical acts of doing, detailing what forms of vocal music were available to women, touching on the aesthetics of performance, and ultimately asking what song as a genre means and signifies in early modern England and how women engaged with these works as writers and performers. In seeking to “animate songs” from less obvious sources and locations (2)—such as psalm translations, songs in sonnet sequences, lyrics labeled as song in verse miscellanies, songs in romances, song in household drama, and masques—Larson sets herself the task of excavating the musicality and musical practice of works for which only lyrics survive. While many musicologists, trained to venerate written notation, have been reluctant to work with these materials, Larson is uniquely prepared to grapple with this repertoire and its history as a scholar-practitioner.

Over the course of five chapters, the prologue, and the epilogue, Larson documents women’s participation in performative song in early modern England.
Offering definitions and background for readers versed in music historiography but not literary analysis, and vice versa, Larson begins in chapter 1, “Airy Forms,” by addressing the very concept of song as “a playful starting point for opening up the matter of song as a formal crux in literary studies” through the example of Theseus’s and Bottom’s descriptions of song in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (33). She elegantly examines the taxonomic ambiguities that complicate the understanding of early modern “song,” “lyric,” “poesy,” and “form” and their gendered and embodied significations. Ending the chapter with a case study of the Countess of Pembroke’s *Psalmes* (ca. 1599) as song offers readers an example of the beautifully written and carefully researched arguments and accounts of personal performance that follow in the book. Larson is candid about the decision-making each performance needed, as well as the physical difficulties and rewards of singing the pieces she and Harris chose. One of the most compelling attributes of the recording is that Larson, encouraged by Harris, never sought to sound “beautiful” or like a professional singer performing these would today but embraced the singing of each piece as one of their original performers might have, at times struggling with range or breath support.

In chapter 2, “Breath of Sirens,” Larson explores the ways in which women’s singing was gendered in terms of musical breath and rhetoric. Drawing on singing treatises and handbooks, manuscripts, scores, and, especially, extant writing about women’s singing, Larson creates a rich analysis of how early moderns thought about breath and sound production. She ends the chapter with a close reading of Margaret Cavendish’s writings about song and singers, demonstrating how Cavendish’s interest in ballad singing and its effects reflect on her political and social positions. Larson’s own expert knowledge of vocal production adds considerable value to her explanation of early modern writing about the throat, vocal folds, and other physiological features, and her musical training enables her to clarify influential points in the tangle of music theory, mathematics, and philosophy prevalent during the period. Her straightforward and clear writing is a boon to all readers but especially for those coming from a literary background with little or no musical knowledge. Chapter 3, “Voicing Lyric,” turns the tables, focusing on the writings of Mary Wroth, literary theory, and various approaches to the “aurality of poetic production” (110). Again, Larson provides thorough explanation and generous references and offers new frames with which to view the role of song in Wroth’s writing and in the writing of other women of her social circle. Her argument that Wroth’s use of the slashed S, or *fermesse* ($), in Folger V.a.104
carries musical significance, is detailed and well-argued, and should compel other scholars to consider the ways in which writers may have indicated musical structures in their work (119–22). In analyzing Wroth’s notes in her *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621), Larson finds clear evidence of Wroth’s intentions for the musicality of her words, identifying existing melodies to which Wroth’s texts were written as contrafacta (new words for established melodies) and settings of Wroth’s texts by contemporary composers. Scholars clearly cannot now read Wroth without acknowledging, as Larson writes, the “singing body that hovers behind” this manuscript and, by extension, many others (124).

Women’s voices also “hover” in the household plays and texts written by women that are the focus of chapter 4, “Household Songs” (139). Recent scholarship has done much to excavate this body of work, but, as Larson acknowledges, scholars must embrace the fact that speculation and guesswork are inherent in grappling with this material (140). Here, she seeks to uncover and explore the hints and traces of music in Jane Lumley’s translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (ca. 1554); plays by Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley; and plays by Margaret Cavendish, with an emphasis on *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668). In all these instances, Larson examines not only the play texts but also incorporating accounts of live performances. She cites the primary sources documenting that most women’s singing and other music-making was done in the home. Establishing the spoken and sung aspects of household dramas alongside these authors’ musical holdings, Larson gives readers a deeper understanding of the musical details found in these works. This understanding allows for broadening the body of work in this genre by applying “musically oriented interpretation” in analyzing period texts by women (153). Larson returns to Wroth at the end of the chapter, where she speculates about music and song in *Love’s Victory* (ca. 1620), offering delicious hypotheticals based on Wroth’s own structural forms and references.

In the final chapter, “Sweet Echo,” Larson turns her attention to the masque a pageant of music, dance, and drama, often centered around a theme. Despite masque’s reputation for elaborate music, there is little known about women’s roles beyond those of dancer and patron. Here Larson delves into the far less-known role of women as singers in masques, taking as a case study Alice Egerton’s 1634 performance of the Lady’s Song, “Sweet Echo,” in Milton’s *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle (Comus)* (1634). Background on Milton’s musical experience suggests that he was well-attuned to the idea of the body as an instrument; as Larson demonstrates, he plays on this idea and on the concepts of air and breath and their
powers in *Paradise Lost*. While *Comus* has no extant notation, it is full of sound-related directions and references, and Larson, applying the musically oriented interpretative methodology laid out in the previous chapter, finds new musical traces in it by reading it in the context of the 1634 performance’s history. Henry Lawes composed “Sweet Echo” specifically for Egerton, for whom he had written numerous pieces, in order for her to show off her voice, a performance of spectacular embodiment. Performing “Sweet Echo” herself, Larson writes “I found it easy to imagine it functioning as a kind of show-stopping aria” (189). Larson writes candidly of the song’s sensuality and eroticism and her own physical sensations when she and Harris served as the embodiment of the work, connecting the physicality of song from the past with that of the present.

Throughout, Larson guides the reader through numerous and often overlooked primary sources, tracing the histories of their contents and reading them anew. She has opened the door for scholars in understanding the importance of song for early modern women and in expanding the false boundaries that have previously left so many texts, lives, and connections unexplored. She also makes a compelling case for multidisciplinary approaches to the scholarship of creative works: she demonstrates how song, words, place, gender, and the body are intimately intertwined and should not be broken apart, which would result in incomplete scholarly knowledge. By being well-trained in multiple fields and willing to experiment and speculate in practice and analysis, Larson has created a work of scholarship that will serve as a model for researchers whose perspectives are wide and inclusive, and a work that will help show a way forward for those who wish to be.

**Kendra Preston Leonard**
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This illuminating collection does much to refute a persistent myth that early modern women were at every turn (choose all that apply) oppressed, suppressed, repressed, or voiceless and that they were without material, legal, social, or familial recourse in the face of slander, domestic abuse, homelessness, failed businesses,