



Review Essay: Soundscapes and Wordscapes: Music and Literature in Dialogue

Lit-Rock: Literary Capital in Popular Music, edited by Ryan Hibbett, New York: Bloomsbury, 2020 264 pp., ISBN 9781501354694, h/bk \$91, p/bk \$27.96, e-book \$25.16

Review: *The Routledge Companion to Music and Modern Literature*, edited by Rachael Durkin, Peter Dayan, Axel Englund, and Katharina Clausius, London: Routledge, 2022 441 pp., ISBN 9781032232874, h/bk £215, p/bk £43.99, e-book £39.59

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Both *Lit-Rock: Literary Capital in Popular Music*, edited by Ryan Hibbett, and *The Routledge Companion to Music and Modern Literature*, edited by Rachael Durkin, Peter Dayan, Axel Englund, and Katharina Clausius, are volumes with a particular focus on the relationship between music and literature. Both books explore the profound connections between these two art forms in a way that goes beyond the traditional distinctions that typically separate literature from music and, more broadly, what is considered 'high art' from popular culture. In *Lit-Rock*, the main attention is given to the perceived boost in prestige that employing canonised literary figures or tropes gives to musicians of the contemporary era. The edited volume is split between six parts of two chapters each: 'Authorship and Authenticity', 'Craft and Confession', 'Aesthetics, Movements, Technology', 'Signs and Mediations', 'Nation and Narrative', and 'Identity and Discourse'. *The Routledge Companion*, on the other hand, has a wider outlook that offers interdisciplinary insights across different genres, time periods, and forms. The specific focus of *The Routledge Companion* is divided into four parts: 'Questioning the Universal', 'Opera and Literature', 'Musical Form, Literary Form', and 'Popular Music and Literature'. Together, these collections provide important interventions into the ongoing critical debate surrounding the liaison between music and literature, a scholarly relationship which has been steadily growing over the past few decades, as briefly chronicled in the introductory chapter of *The Routledge Companion* (1–2). Both volumes also speak to how these art forms interact to produce cultural capital, as well as their locations within broader ideological, socio-political, and economic frameworks.

Ryan Hibbett's *Lit-Rock* takes a sociological approach as part of its larger overview, highlighting how contemporary musicians use literary works and figures to accumulate what is deemed 'literary capital' in the Bourdieusian sense, as an extension of Pierre Bourdieu's term 'cultural capital' (1986), wherein association with respected forms of art bestows prestige upon those engaging with them – hence the subtitle of the book: *Literary Capital in Popular Music*. In the context of popular music, by engaging with literary tropes or referencing esteemed authors, these musicians are able to elevate their own artistic status. Hibbett mentions this especially in the introduction where he distinguishes between 'the "restricted/unrestricted" division Bourdieu correlates to high art versus pop in general' (16). This distinction sets the tone for the entire volume and allows the chapters to engage with the often implicit hierarchies that exist between the perceptions of high and low cultures, especially in the context of popular music in its various forms and genres, which have all long grappled with their position between these poles. The introduction contextualises this tension in music

and literature by the use of the term ‘rockism’. Hibbett is quite successful in providing the reader with a detailed literature review on the debate surrounding the definition of the term. Varying definitions include: ‘a set of binary preferences – “idolizing the authentic old legend... while mocking the latest pop star”’, an ‘imperial’ form, ‘guilty of claiming “the entire musical world as its own”’, and a ‘gendered framework [...] pitting straight white men against the world, yet all the while owning the righteous position of the underdog’ (5).

It is worth noting that the ‘Popular Music and Literature’ section in *The Routledge Companion* would not have felt out of place if it was included in *Lit-Rock*. As the concluding section of the volume, ‘Popular Music and Literature’ makes use of different genres in both literature and music, including punk and heavy metal, which have traditionally been treated as outsiders in the high culture community, thus it would have been a thematically suitable fit for *Lit-Rock*. This is one of several ways that the two volumes are in fruitful dialogue with each other. Such incorporation would have perhaps even broadened *Lit-Rock*’s musical horizon, as the collection unfortunately suffers from rockism as it was defined and critiqued in the introduction. While the critique is a valid one that targets the unfairly imposed hierarchy between high and low cultures, neither the content of the chapters, nor the selection of authors seem to be immune to it. The spectres of Bob Dylan, David Bowie, Sylvia Plath and William Burroughs haunt the collection, undermining the anti-rockist critique and suggesting that at least some of the musicians and authors who were chosen as subjects were perhaps done so in order to give the book a required legitimacy of canon. A similar issue can be seen in the titles of the authors, out of the 15 (including the main editor) only one is a PhD student (or was so at the time of submission). All other contributors are established figures within their academic circles. It comes as no surprise that the chapter written by the PhD student is about the literary merits of Taylor Swift, where she examines the critique by the Harvard professor, Stephanie Burt, directed at the two poems included in the album booklet of Swift’s *Reputation* (2017), as well as the song lyrics. In this chapter, Weishun Lu is not afraid to challenge the argumentation levelled by Burt by interrogating the ‘deeply ingrained assumptions of what poetry should do and how poetry should be consumed’ (79). At the same time, she also makes a convincing case for the ‘canonisation’ of Taylor Swift, who, while redefining mainstream as arguably the most popular superstar of the 2020s, is still considered to be earning her stripes in terms of reaching the canonisation level of Dylan or Bowie. As a representative of contemporary confessional poetry, Swift is also examined in a similarly erudite

manner in *The Routledge Companion* by Rachel Sykes. Both of these essays treat Swift's lyrics and paratextual poetry as included in the liner notes of her album as confessional literature, to be included in the same breath as Plath and the others who belong in the higher echelon of prestige when it comes to discussions of poetry (379).

Another blind spot, this time shared by both collections, is a rather fragile questioning of 'universality'. *Lit-Rock*'s focus is implicit, while *The Routledge Companion* is much more explicit about it, devoting an entire section of chapters called 'Questioning the Universal' to it. This does not mean that the critique is confined to that section, on the contrary, it is a recurring theme that remains one of the central concerns of the collection throughout. However, the contents of the section remain far from convincing in their argumentations against the 'universal', which Alexandra Reznik argues 'has historically been coded to signify white literature, composers, and music' (52), and whose ideals 'hold up works by white composers and authors as representing universal truths that speak for the entirety of humanity' (49–50). In his brief introductory essay to the aforementioned section, Peter Dayan, one of the editors of the collection, writes: 'As soon as we try to project the universal as a value in its own right, the very words we use [...] seem to betray its ideals, by oppressing an other whose separate identity becomes obscured or demonised.' (8) Although this is a clearly articulated critique, it loses its persuasiveness once the reader realises that the same 'other' can hardly be located in the pages of the volume. With the exception of the final chapter by Christin Hoene, titled 'Music in Postcolonial Literature', the essays in this section focus almost exclusively on British–American works. The postcolonial aspect is also missing in *Lit-Rock*, which is almost entirely based on Anglophone works (with the exception of Marek Jezinski's chapter on Polish rock in late twentieth century). In prioritising Anglophone, especially Euro–American works, *Lit-Rock* falls behind in their own critique towards the snobbishness of rockism once again. These facts also serve to undermine the stated goal of *The Routledge Companion*, which is to challenge the hegemonic understanding of the 'universal'. If the focus of the entire section is on works produced in Western contexts by Western authors, how is the reader supposed to be convinced that the notion of the universal is something to be criticised? Thus, it can be said that the argument put forth by Dayan is not fully supported by the rest of the section. For example, are the readers supposed to embrace the reimaginings of Beyoncé in Morgan Parker's poetry as someone who reclaims her Black agency, while completely ignoring the fact that she has a fashion empire that profits from labour outsourcing? How will ignoring that giant elephant in the room help 'reconcil[e] universality and intersectionality' (Reznik 55) through the figure of Beyoncé? These are only some of the questions that inevitably arise while reading the section 'Questioning the Universal', yet unfortunately, they remain unanswered there.

Nevertheless, one potentially strong response that comes to the rescue can be found in Nathan Waddell's chapter, 'Literary Beethovens', from the last section of the book. While discussing Beethoven, a superior figure that can embody the universal and transcend the arbitrary limits of this world if there ever was one, Waddell talks about the adaptation of 'Ode to Joy' as the anthem of the European Union, another supposedly universal entity which the rest of the world should aspire to be like, while also stressing the fact that Beethoven was adored by the Nazis who were adamant in destroying such a multicultural understanding of universality. The author is fearless in pointing out the irony here:

What is hard to come to terms with here is the oft-discussed quandary from which this apparently open-armed universalism is inseparable: that of the Nazi enjoying Beethoven on the grounds of the very solidarity which seems, on the face of it, to stand so urgently against the xenophobia upon which the Nazi's politics depend. (353)

In this manner, Waddell's words serve as a powerful reminder of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the concept and critique of universality, arguing that the manner with which its exemplary figures have been appropriated by different political ideologies depict that it is a notion that evades simple critique and celebration.

Despite these limitations, it is important to stress that both *Lit-Rock* and *The Routledge Companion* offer very valuable insights into the relationship between music and literature, especially by emphasising the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Neither of the books are satisfied with elementary understandings of music or literature. The Bourdieusian sociological outlook that frames the entire approach of *Lit-Rock*, as well as the philosophical overtures that can be found in the 'Music and Literature in Poststructuralism' chapter of *The Routledge Companion* underline the importance of interdisciplinary input when analysing these fundamental topics. The varying sections in *The Routledge Companion* stress just how crucial it is to place music and literature in the broader ideological and socio-cultural contexts when doing analytical work. The editors, as well as the contributors have approached their topics by being fully aware that treating these bodies of art as if they were done for art's sake is a questionable method of analysis. Instead, they should all be considered as cultural productions of certain ideological, cultural and socio-economic conditions.

That being said, neither collection ignores the fact that they are dealing with literary and cultural works, and this is reflected in their overall methodological approach. For example, the chapter 'Cycling on Acid' by Tymon Adamczewski in *Lit-Rock* (120–34) draws poetic inferences through the close reading of the

metaphorical figure of a bike, through Pink Floyd's song 'Bike' and Tomorrow's 'My White Bicycle' (both 1967). Adamczewski does not only focus on the form, but also the lyrical content of the songs. Adamczewski's chapter goes on to include different genres on his allegorical bicycle ride, making explicit the connections between the psychedelic rock of the late 1960s and the stoner rock evolving into stoner metal from 1990s onwards (129–30). Both genres deal with, and are named after, substances that expand the boundaries of human consciousness, and it is important to stress that these boundaries are also expanded in their musical forms. The significance of considering the form of a musical piece while analysing it cannot be overstated, considering that, for example, studying Napalm Death's 1.3-second-long song 'You Suffer' (1989) would naturally differ from analysing an hour-long improvisational jazz piece or a work of classical symphony. Hence, it is noteworthy that an entire section of *The Routledge Companion* is devoted to form in music and literature, with subjects varying from Chinese (263–71), French (207–19), and Brazilian poetry (313–22) to the canonical works of Virginia Woolf (272–81) and Aldous Huxley (282–91). While lyrics are not the only feature to be analysed in music, any collection that would completely exclude lyrics and completely disregard their poetic value would have a glaring blind spot. One of the most important chapters that help *Lit-Rock* avoid this pitfall is 'Hand in Glove' by Martin Malone. Malone, who has been involved in the music scene as a musician and a producer for a long time, takes an unorthodox analytical approach to examining 'punk and post-punk's hand-in-glove relationship with the poetry it helped spawn' (153) by not just writing a scholarly article on the topic, but also including a conversation with Simon Armitage. Armitage, who is the Poet Laureate, a professor of poetry at the University of Leeds, as well as Malone's former bandmate, is uniquely placed to offer insights into the intersection between music and literature, and Malone incorporates his input in the most suitable way possible.

By carefully balancing attention to both form and content, *Lit-Rock* and *The Routledge Companion* ensure that their analyses remain comprehensive and nuanced. This meticulous approach extends not only to their individual chapters, but also to the overall structures of the collection, where the order of chapters has been arranged very carefully, allowing for smooth thematic connections. For example, in *Lit-Rock*, although the book seems to be switching from one part to another between Patricia Malone's 'Kurt, Kathleen 'n' Kathy' (49–61) and David R. Shumway's 'Joni Mitchell and the Literature of Confession' (65–77), the underlying theme of 'authenticity of the self' connects both chapters to each other, allowing the reader to seamlessly transition from one text to another. Shumway's chapter about Joni Mitchell transforms the self-authenticity theme into a discussion about confessional poetry, and passes it onto

the following chapter on Taylor Swift, ensuring that the red thread doesn't get lost between the pages. In that same manner, Pat O'Grady's concluding chapter 'Limits of the Literary' (227–40) brings everything full circle and ties it together with Ryan Hibbett's introduction, with both essays having particular subsections that discuss what Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize for Literature award means for a renewed understanding of the intersection between music and literature.

Ultimately, taking into account both their strengths and weaknesses, the two edited volumes are quite successful in furthering and deepening the developing academic conversation on music and literature. Even as they remain constrained by certain disciplinary and cultural limitations, they manage to push the boundaries of traditional academic approaches. This approach is strengthened by the incorporation of interdisciplinary methods, also considering that analysing music and literature together would always necessitate a wider outlook than a conventional one that is being constrained by tradition. With that said, the persistence of Euro-American focus in both collections, the absence of postcolonial voices and only a limited inclusion of non-canonical works of literature and music suggests that there is still work to be done in expanding the scope of these dialogues. Future research on this matter might benefit from different topics, such as the devotion of an entire genre of music (power metal) to fantasy literature, or the use of musical and lyrical form in postcolonial resistance, e.g. in Fela Kuti. As such, while both volumes include important contributions to the growing field of music and literary studies, their shortcomings also point to the need for more confrontations with issues of cultural representation. In that way, they end up asking more questions than they answer, which is an inevitable, and even desired, outcome of critically engaging with a developing interdisciplinary area of academic research.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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