

A History of Singing
by John Potter and Neil Sorrell

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This cultural exploration of the history of Western and Eastern traditions of singing both fulfils a current gap in the literature and, though this study is in the genre of musicology, fits into a current trend of approaching a subject through interdisciplinary analysis. The authors specialise in very different cultural areas; John Potter (former reader emeritus at the University of York) is both a singer of early western classical music and historian of the subject, and Neil Sorrell (senior lecturer, University of York) is an ethnomusicologist specialising in the study of Indian music. They go to great lengths to iterate that this is not *the* history of singing, though a comprehensive general history was the original inspiration for this book. As noted in the introduction, diving into the vast wealth of *vocalises*, (which can be termed as singing) that have existed throughout time in many different cultures since the birth of humanity, is not only an endless task, but an impossible one.

Despite these opening statements, part I of the study is a whistle-stop tour of the wide variety of myths and theories as to the birth of singing, concluding that singing is a life-affirming activity binding all cultures together. This generalised historical overview is the common writing style of the book. It is clear that part II is reflective of Potter's scholarly interests rather than Sorrell's, as it focuses its discussion on exploring a number of key moments in Western classical singing that have led to the current methods prevalent in classical vocal education and singing style. Part II draws on a number of first study sources including references to key vocal treatises such as Pier Francesco Tosi, Johann Friedrich Agricola, Domenico Corri and Manuel Garcia II. It does not provide much new research, but rather draws together previous scholarly work (including Potter's own previously published work) into one source.

This generalised overview can form a false impression of certain areas of history. For example, the authors appear to form a history of equality between the sexes as Potter and Sorrell state ‘the renewed emphasis on secular music gave many more opportunities to women singers’ (p. 79). This is somewhat true but ignores the many struggles of historical women who performed in the secular market of the Western classical tradition and their common portrayal as an immoral siren until the early twentieth century. A vast quantity of scholarly work has been published in this area, including key works by Susan Rutherford, for example *The Prima Donna and the Opera* (2006) and Susan McClary, such as *Feminine Endings* (1991), which have been ignored by Potter and Sorrell.

The aim of the study is to highlight vocal traditions from other cultures to provide the reader a series of enriching or conflicting images on the history of singing, hence the reason for two authors specialising in different areas of musicology teaming together. However, Sorrell feels it necessary to open part III with an ‘Apologia’ stating that ‘Indian music is the best link to the Western tradition’ (p.151). The apologia defeats the previous stated premise of the study, as it is apologising for the inclusion of a chapter on the Eastern tradition rather than enriching the reader with the knowledge of perhaps an unfamiliar culture. Including a chapter in the Eastern tradition in this way reveals an assumed Western reader. On the other hand, the chapter explores a number of similarities between the histories of Western and classical Indian singing traditions, which is argued to be more relatable to Western singing culture than perhaps previously understood.

Part III continues by exploring recorded music of differing genres from the opposing cultures. Focussing the study on recorded singers explores a vast amount of substantial evidence, highlighting the media influence on the many genres of singing, and is by far the most original research within the whole study.

I would argue that this book is too Western-heavy but paves the way for further scholarly work that can draw together the two cultures from a historical and present-day point of view. The authors state their expected reader to be a non-expert; however, the book explores a number of concepts, such as *portamenti*, *historically informed performance* and *mirkhand* that are not explained in any real depth, therefore requiring the reader to have at least some knowledge of historical musicology from either Western or Eastern tradition. I would suggest that this book is

more suited to the undergraduate music student who wishes to use this study as a starting point for further scholarly exploration.

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