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Songs of the Victorians

Songs of the Victorians, Joanna Swafford (ed.), 2013–2020. <http://www.songsofthevictorians.com/index.html> (Last Accessed: 14.09.2020). Reviewed by Eva Moreda Rodriguez (University of Glasgow), Eva.MoredaRodriguez@glasgow.ac.uk.



Abstract

The present review occupies itself with the project *Songs of the Victorians*, developed by Joanna Swafford, which intends to provide both an archive (of reduced size as of yet) of parlor and art sort settings of Victorian poems, and an analytical tool for the study of the relationship between music and poetry in this neglected repertoire. The project partly delivers on its objectives, namely through its hierarchical but intuitive interface and through the use of the *Augmented Notes* software (developed by Swafford herself) to provide synchronizations of the original scores with performances of the songs (some of them recorded specifically for the project). The main limitation to the project, however, comes from the fact that it contains only four examples of the repertoire, which makes large-scale comparisons and analysis difficult.

1 *Songs of the Victorians* intends to provide both an archive (of reduced size as of yet) of parlor and art sort settings of Victorian poems, and an analytical tool for the study of the relationship between music and poetry in this neglected repertoire (and, potentially, elsewhere). Indeed, the resource's sole editor, Joanna Swafford, writes in the 'About' section of the site that the archive's aim is to challenge the assumption that the composers of such songs – intended to be performed by women, with piano accompaniment and in domestic settings – were lacking in the sophisticated text-setting skills normally associated with the 'high' art song repertoire. The site thus inserts itself

within a by now well-established current in musicology that, in looking at music as part of the cultural fabric of its time and not simply as a series of composers and works, aims to question the notion that rigid barriers have always existed between ‘high’ and ‘low music’; an obvious precedent to Swafford’s work is Derek Scott’s *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour* (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1989).

2 Although not recognized as such in the ‘About’ section, a further aim of the project appears to be to provide a testing ground for Augmented Notes, a tool developed by Swafford itself which allows the visualization of scores for research, teaching and dissemination purposes. *Songs of the Victorians* was developed under the aegis of the University of Virginia’s Scholars’ Lab, with primary sources coming from The British Library, The National Library of Australia, San Francisco Public Library and others, as indicated in the ‘Special thanks’ section of the site.



Fig. 1: View of ‘Songs’, with the complete list of pieces currently included in the project.

3 The site’s interface is rather hierarchical but, generally speaking, very intuitive, with the main menu consisting of only four links; a Victorian-inspired design theme makes the site very distinctive. The section ‘Songs’ lists each of the pieces presented with the corresponding links to further three sub-sections for each: ‘Archive’, ‘Music Analysis’, and (in the case of the two settings of ‘Maud’) ‘Poem Analysis’.

4 As might have been inferred from the image above, the main limitation at present of Songs of the Victorians , and the main obstacle to ascertain whether its scholarly aims have been met or will be met in the near-future, is the fact that the archive includes only four songs.¹ Nevertheless, the selection of songs has certainly been made with great

scholarly expertise: the sample covers almost half a century, key composers of the era (Sullivan, Somervell, Balfe) are represented, the two settings of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'Maud' facilitate comparison, and the inclusion of Caroline Norton provides a much-welcome gender perspective (which is one of Swafford's research interests). Moreover, due to the generally ephemeral nature of this corpus, no modern editions of these songs exist, with scholars generally needing to travel to libraries and archives to consult the hard-copy original editions, so the project also marks a step towards facilitating access to thus-far neglected repertoires, in the vein of Juilliard's *Ruth Dana Collection Liszt editions*² and Biblioteca Digital Hispánica's 'Teatro lírico' collection³ (just to limit myself to music of the nineteenth century).

5 The 'Archive' section contains images of the original editions of the songs synchronised with sound recordings (some of which are professional ones provided by permission of their respective recording label, and others were made specifically for the project employing non-professional performers). Clicking on the title of each of the songs, the user is presented with one page at a time, in .jpg format (and not the best resolution), as well as an audio player interface. The user can click on 'Play' to start playing the recording, and a box is superimposed on the score highlighting the measure that is being played at any given time, allowing the user to follow the music easily. It is plausible to imagine that this section of the site will appeal to musicians, music students and the general public who might be interested in approaching this repertoire, but would perhaps rather skip the scholarly analysis contained in the sections 'Music Analysis' and 'Poem Analysis'. The synchronization between music and score is enabled by *Augmented Notes*, a tool developed by Swafford itself.

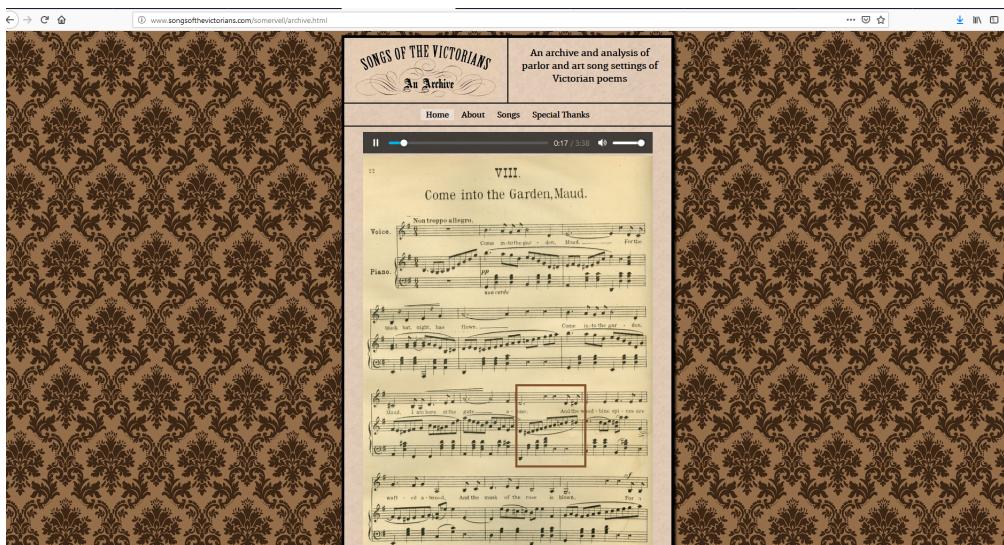


Fig. 2: *Augmented Notes* visualization in action.

6 Although not strictly part of the *Songs of the Victorians* site but hosted on a separate site⁴ (a link to which is provided in the main page of *Songs of the Victorians*), *Augmented Notes* is clearly one of the most valuable aspects of this project. It is innovative in that it allows other scholars to easily create synchronizations of their own musical examples. In order to do so, they need to upload, through the *Augmented Notes* site, .mp3 and .ogg versions of their audio files, as well as an image file of the score (and, optionally, a MEI file of the same). The site then prompts the user to manually synchronize the sound with the score; at the end of the process, a .zip file is provided with the synchronized examples that the user can then upload for free to her own webpage or resource. The process is simple and step-by-step instructions are provided, although it will surely be time-consuming for longer pieces of music. Nevertheless, this is a tool that might greatly assist other projects concerned with the visualization of scores, and for which no comparable alternative, to my knowledge, exists.

7 *Augmented Notes*, however, remains a visualization tool – and one aimed at providing one specific type of visualization, as described above –, and its computational and analytical capabilities are otherwise limited. Possibilities for navigating and analysing the scores and audio files other than through the synchronisations provided by Swafford are extremely scarce. For example, the editions cannot be downloaded easily: the user would have to listen to the song from the beginning and download the pages successively as separate .jpg files as they appear on the screen. Similarly, it is not possible to annotate, extract or download the synchronisations or the audio, and so, even

though the site is provided under a CC-BY-license and the materials provided can therefore be adapted, it is difficult to imagine how this might work in practice.

8 The more scholarly content of *Songs of the Victorians* is contained in the ‘Music Analysis’ and ‘Poem Analysis’ sections. We should not expect to engage here with the advanced computational, analytical and visualization tools that we find, for example, in the more ambitious Josquin Research Project,⁵ which makes use of the possibilities afforded by the Music Encoding Initiative (MEI) to encode musical notation in a way that allows a range of scholarly uses and re-uses. Here, this scholarly content is presented in a more traditional format: through short essays written by Swafford herself, very much along the lines of what one would find printed in a journal article or book chapter, complete with a bibliography and footnotes. *Augmented Notes* is used here to great effect, too: references to specific moments of the song are followed through with a link which both displays and plays the passage under discussion. This is, again, a simple but effective use of digital tools to enhance what is really rather traditional analysis.

9 Even though *Songs of the Victorians* does indeed take some steps in both illuminating the repertoire it focuses on and opening up avenues of enquiry for the application of digital tools to the analysis of music that falls outside the Western canon, its potential remains limited because of the small size of the archive. It would indeed be transformative to scholars of Victorian music and culture to have access to a large archive of digitized parlor songs, in a multiplicity of formats, and complete with exhaustive metadata. Similarly, the broader critical questions raised by the project and concerning text-setting techniques and musical form necessitate from more extensive comparison than is provided here: one can easily imagine how many possibilities would be opened up by comparisons between settings of poems with the same type of metre, or between musical passages which intended to express the same types of rhetorical emotions. Perhaps the addition of further songs could also accommodate the use of advanced analytical and visualization tools: at present, the user must make any connections and comparisons herself, or use the existing analyses as invitations to undertake her own research, rather than the project enabling research in a more involved, practical way.

10 Swafford indicates in the ‘About’ section that the resource will continue adding new songs and it may even accept submissions from external contributors, but no timeline is given and no guidelines are provided as to how the crowdsourcing aspect will

be managed. It is indeed reasonable to harbour concerns as to whether the site will indeed be further developed, considering that a long time has lapsed since it was last updated. The site itself is dateless, but the Internet Wayback Archive reveals that the earliest archived version is from May 2013⁶, containing two songs. By October 2013 two more songs had been added⁷, and as of September 2019, no changes or updates had been made with respect to the October 2013 version of the site. The University of Virginia Scholars' Lab has not announced any plans either to further expand the archive (Swafford, who set up the resource as a graduate student at the University of Virginia, has since moved institutions).

11 *Songs of the Victorians* cannot be considered as a traditional scholarly digital edition: indeed, the site does not allow the user to navigate, download or annotate the scores; these can only be visualized in synchrony with the music, and there is no engagement with the manuscript or editorial tradition behind a given work, following the classical examples provided by the *Online Chopin Variorum Edition*⁸ and *Beethovens Werkstatt*⁹ – both of which provide several versions, both printed and manuscript, of the same work, allow the user to navigate between them and provide other tools to help in the forming of the research conclusions. Perhaps this predominantly philological approach is not suitable to a repertoire like the one at hand, where such a rich and controversial tradition of manuscripts and editions is unlikely to have existed, or to have engaged the interest of scholars and performers as Chopin and Beethoven had. Nevertheless, this is perhaps not what a site like this sets itself to do or should be expected to do: indeed, it is more directly related to digital initiatives concerning the visualization, archiving and analysis of material and data. In this regard, and while we wait for the archive to be expanded, the site provides a glimpse of what such initiatives might do for lesser known or lesser appreciated musical repertoires. Swafford has made examples from one such repertoire accessible through a user-friendly synchronization of high-quality scores and professional recordings, and provides scholarly research which effectively uses (although in a somewhat limited way at present) the possibilities of visualizations.

Notes

^{1.} ‘Juanita’, by Caroline Norton (1853); ‘Come into the Garden Maud’, by Michael William Balfe (1857); ‘Come into the Garden Maud’, by Arthur Somervell (1898); ‘The Lost Chord’, by Arthur Sullivan (1877).

2. <https://archive.is/6ycPl>.
3. <https://archive.is/nYIW9>.
4. <https://archive.is/82YfZ>.
5. <http://archive.is/ngcV3>.
6. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130516030210/http://www.songsofthevictorians.com/>.
7. <https://web.archive.org/web/20131026214323/http://www.songsofthevictorians.com/>.
8. <http://archive.is/lfUXy>.
9. <http://archive.is/ULQ5S>.

Factsheet

Resource reviewed	
Title	Songs of the Victorians
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Reviewer	
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Documentation	
Bibliographic description	Is it easily possible to describe the project bibliographically along the schema "responsible editors, publishing/hosting institution, year(s) of publishing"? (cf. Catalogue 1.2)
Contributors	Are the contributors (editors, institutions, associates) of the project fully documented? (cf. Catalogue 1.4)
Contacts	Does the project list contact persons? (cf. Catalogue 1.5)

Selection of materials	
Explanation	Is the selection of materials of the project explicitly documented? (cf. Catalogue 2.1)
Reasonability	Is the selection by and large reasonable? (cf. Catalogue 2.1)

Archiving of the data	Does the documentation include information about the long term sustainability of the basic data (archiving of the data)? (cf. Catalogue 4.16)	no
Aims	Are the aims and purposes of the project explicitly documented? (cf. Catalogue 3.1)	yes
Methods	Are the methods employed in the project explicitly documented? (cf. Catalogue 3.1)	yes
Data Model	Does the project document which data model (e.g. TEI) has been used and for what reason? (cf. Catalogue 3.7)	yes
Help	Does the project offer help texts concerning the use of the project? (cf. Catalogue 4.15)	yes
Citation	Does the project supply citation guidelines (i.e. how to cite the project or a part of it)? (cf. Catalogue 4.8)	yes
Completion	Does the edition regard itself as a completed project (i.e. not promise further modifications and additions)? (cf. Catalogue 4.16)	no
Institutional Curation	Does the project provide information about institutional support for the curation and sustainability of the project? (cf. Catalogue 4.13)	no
Contents		
Previous Edition	Has the material been previously edited (in print or digitally)? (cf. Catalogue 2.2)	yes
Materials Used	Does the edition make use of these previous editions? (cf. Catalogue 2.2)	no
Introduction	Does the project offer an introduction to the subject-matter (the author(s), the work, its history, the theme, etc.) of the project? (cf. Catalogue 4.15)	no
Bibliography	Does the project offer a bibliography? (cf. Catalogue 2.3)	yes

Commentary	Does the project offer a scholarly commentary (e.g. notes on unclear passages, interpretation, etc.)? (cf. Catalogue 2.3)	yes
Contexts	Does the project include or link to external resources with contextual material? (cf. Catalogue 2.3)	no
Images	Does the project offer images of digitised sources? (cf. Catalogue 2.3)	yes
Image quality	Does the project offer images of an acceptable quality? (cf. Catalogue 4.6)	no
Transcriptions	Is the text fully transcribed? (cf. Catalogue 2.3)	yes
Text quality	Does the project offer texts of an acceptable quality (typos, errors, etc.)? (cf. Catalogue 4.6)	yes
Indices	Does the project feature compilations indices, registers or visualisations that offer alternative ways to access the material? (cf. Catalogue 4.5)	no
Documents		
Types of documents	Which kinds of documents are at the basis of the project? (cf. Catalogue 1.3 and 2.1)	Collection of texts
Document era	What era(s) do the documents belong to? (cf. Catalogue 1.3 and 2.1)	Medieval
Subject	Which perspective(s) do the editors take towards the edited material? How can the edition be classified in general terms? (cf. Catalogue 1.3)	Philology / Literary Studies
Presentation		
Spin-offs	Does the project offer any spin-offs? (cf. Catalogue 4.11)	none
Browse by	By which categories does the project offer to browse the contents? (cf. Catalogue 4.3)	Authors, Works, Documents
Search		
Simple	Does the project offer a simple search? (cf. Catalogue 4.4)	yes

Advanced	Does the project offer an advanced search? (cf. Catalogue 4.4)	yes
Wildcard	Does the search support the use of wildcards? (cf. Catalogue 4.4)	yes
Index	Does the search offer an index of the searched field? (cf. Catalogue 4.4)	no
Suggest functionalities	Does the search offer autocompletion or suggest functionalities? (cf. Catalogue 4.4)	no
Helptext	Does the project offer help texts for the search? (cf. Catalogue 4.4)	yes
Aim		
Audience	Who is the intended audience of the project? (cf. Catalogue 3.3)	Scholars
Typology	Which type fits best for the reviewed project? (cf. Catalogue 3.3 and 5.1)	other: Multimedia edition
Method		
Critical editing	In how far is the text critically edited? (cf. Catalogue 3.6)	Transmission examined, Normalization, Emendation, Commentary notes
Standards	(cf. Catalogue 3.7)	
XML	Is the data encoded in XML?	no
Standardized data model	Is the project employing a standardized data model (e.g. TEI)?	no
Types of text	Which kinds or forms of text are presented? (cf. Catalogue 3.5.)	Facsimiles, Diplomatic transcription, Edited text, Commentaries
Technical Accessability		
Persistent Identification and Addressing	Are there persistent identifiers and an addressing system for the edition and/or parts/objects of it and which mechanism is used to that end? (cf. Catalogue 4.8)	none

Interfaces	Are there technical interfaces like OAI-PMH, REST etc., which allow the reuse of the data of the project in other contexts? (cf. Catalogue 4.9)	none
Open Access	Is the edition Open Access?	yes
Accessibility of the basic data	Is the basic data (e.g. the XML) of the project accessible for each part of the edition (e.g. for a page)? (cf. Catalogue 4.12)	yes
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License	Under what license are the contents released? (cf. Catalogue 4.13)	CC-BY
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Editors	Joanna Swafford	