Shakespeares Songbook by Stephen Orgel

Listening For The Music In Shakespeare's Plays

A remarkable work that recovers the songs Shakespeares audiences actually heard and brings them to life through performance. Shakespeare lovers have long lamented that so few songs in his plays survive with original music; of about sixty song lyrics, only a handful have come down to us with musical settings. For over 150 years, scholars have aspired—without success—to fill that gap. In Shakespeares Songbook, Ross W. Duffin does just that. Eight years in the making, Shakespeares Songbook is a meticulously researched collection of 160 songs—ballads and narratives, drinking songs, love songs, and rounds—that appear in, are quoted in, or alluded to in Shakespeares plays. Drawing substantially on the unmatched resources of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Duffin brings complete lyrics (many newly recovered) and music notation together for the first time, and in the process sheds new light on Shakespeares dramatic art. With performances by leading early-music singers and instrumentalists, the accompanying audio CD brings the songbook to life. Shakespeares Songbook is the perfect gift for lovers of Shakespeare and an invaluable reference for singers, actors, directors, and scholars. 49 illustrations, 500 music examples.

Features:
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My Personal Review:
It is with pleasure that I recommend Ross Duffin's Shakespeare's Songbook. Foregrounding the musical allusions in Shakespeare's plays, Duffin asks us to radically re-conceive our understanding of the Elizabethan experience of attending plays. By demonstrating how Shakespeare at times cites, at other times extracts the popular music of his time, Duffin makes a compelling case for Shakespearean plays as multimedia events. While we think of a play as a series of acts comprised solely of spoken dialogue, Duffin shows us how Shakespeare uses musical excerpts and allusions to ballads and other "pop music" of his day in order
to amplify his meaning. Duffin's findings suggest that the Elizabethan experience of going to a play would be akin to our experience of watching a film like Moulin Rouge, which cuts and pastes our pop music into a narrative. (Except, of course, that Shakespeare did it so much better!) Part of what makes this book so amazing is that Duffin has reconstructed tunes and songs to which Shakespeare only alludes! The companion CD allows us to get a taste of what the music would have sounded like—performed, I might add, on period instruments!

I do want to clarify something mentioned in the previous review. The writer ends by noting, "the authors have definitely opened the book on the subject of Shakespeare's music." Perhaps this is a typo, but there are no authors (plural). Ross Duffin is the author. Perhaps the reviewer doesn't understand that someone (in this case, Stephen Orgel) could write the foreword for a book without being its author. At any rate, clarification is in order.

This book has changed how I think about and teach Shakespeare. I hope that directors and actors take it up, so that they can return at least some of the music to Shakespeare's plays.

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