

## Review

Natascha Veldhorst, *Sounding prose. Music in the 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Dutch Novel*, London, Anthem Press, 2022, 86 pp. ISBN 9781839983009.



According to the Italian literary historian Albert N. Macini, the early modern novel ‘reflects, perhaps better than other genres, the ideological, ethical and literary climate of seventeenth-century society. Novelists were dependent upon the approval of a wide public and they therefore consciously reflected the ideas and tastes generally held’ (61). In this brief monograph, Natascha Veldhorst, assistant professor of Arts and Culture Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, explores the presence of music in the seventeenth-century Dutch novel. She argues that the specific way in which prose fiction is dealt with in the early modern period cannot be understood without analyzing the place that music occupies in it. Although the novel flourished in this period, surprisingly little research seemed to have been done on the genre. There is no comprehensive survey of the early modern novel, particularly when it comes to the Netherlands.

In this exploratory study, Veldhorst introduces a lot of Dutch authors and their prose works and links them to the musical influences in the stories.

The study is divided into ten short chapters but lacks an introduction which outlines the content and structure of the book. As a reader, you have no other choice than to be carried along by the author’s discourse; only at the end of the book does it turn out that she effectively delivers a consistent story. First, the author briefly introduces the research area of ‘music-literary studies’ and the ‘music novel’, followed by a very short overview of earlier studies on the role and function of music in prose fiction. She then explains why in earlier research the early modern novel has remained underexplored. According to the author, the main reason seems to be the fact that the current definition of the genre does not correspond to the early modern reality. The seventeenth-century novel was highly diverse in scope, content, and form. Veldhorst calls it an ‘ultimate open literary form’ (15) without written rules.

In the next part, she discusses some inserted genres in early modern novels, such as poems, letters, and songs, and concludes that even famous authors like Boccaccio, Cervantes, d'Urfé, or Schlegel used this technique. Veldhorst mentions a lot of unexplored research fields, although very briefly and without any concrete literary examples. She then discusses her main research theme: the presence of music in the seventeenth-century Dutch novel. Based on a corpus of about one hundred titles from the period 1600-1650, she examines whether the analytical model of the German literary scholar Werner Wolf (1999) about song texts and other musical elements in novels can be useful for the examination of early modern prose fiction. Veldhorst concludes that music was abundantly present in prose fiction; in more than two-thirds of the analyzed corpus she found music references. She distinguishes five categories: (1) prose texts without any musical references; (2) music as a theme, but without any song texts; (3) music as a theme, with song texts included; (4) music as a theme, with song texts and tune indications included; (5) and music as a theme, with song texts and music notation included. She discusses each category briefly and rather descriptively, focusing on exceptions rather than concrete examples.

In the last and most interesting part of the book, Veldhorst discusses the two main functions music can have in novels: music as a theme and as a structural principle (how can music influence the form of the text?). She states that music was such an important novelistic theme because of the oral tradition that was still very vibrant. Reading was an important part of social life, so texts had to be suitable for oral presentation. Readers were expected to have an expressive manner of declamation, to project emotions and evoke the audience's response. Inserted genres like songs were perfect to capture the attention of the audience and entertain them. Finally, Veldhorst shows that it is very likely that the songs were also sung during the reading, as a relatively large part of the novels with songs also contains 'tune indications', a typical Dutch phenomenon. In this part of the study, Veldhorst's knowledge and erudition about the early modern song culture, which the author already demonstrated in earlier work, is well-reflected.

The compact format of the book – the main text only consists of sixty-two pages – obviously imposes certain choices. There is no appendix with an overview of the corpus, which is a shortcoming. Because Veldhorst also fails to mention the place of publication of the cited prose works, it is not always clear whether these works have to be placed in the Northern or Southern Netherlands. She speaks consistently of 'the Netherlands', but seems to be looking primarily through northern eyes and does not make any comparison between novels from the north or the south. The bibliography of Buisman (1960) about popular novel writers in the early modern Netherlands, on which Veldhorst also largely based her corpus, barely mentions any work from the south, so she probably only studied prose works from the Dutch Republic.

Veldhorst clearly wants to appeal to a wide audience and takes the reader by the hand throughout her discourse, with such phrases as 'let us now return to', or 'in a later section, I will come back to the question'. The story often remains too descriptive; as a reader I would have enjoyed more concrete examples and citations. Veldhorst places the early modern novel in a European perspective, but here, too, a more thorough comparison with

concrete text material would have been desirable. Nevertheless, this essay provides a new perspective on the historical development of prose fiction, and it generates an original insight into the role of music and into reading practice at the time.

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