

**Allen Forte.** *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. ix + 366 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-04399-9.



**Reviewed by** Harvey Cohen

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Allen Forte's study, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950*, achieves something unprecedented and urgently needed in the study of American music. He applies sophisticated music theory analysis techniques usually reserved for the study of classical music (such as analytical reduction) to the work of American popular songwriters such as Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers.

While Forte's work can be completely appreciated only by those with extensive musical notation reading capability, the book nonetheless provides plenty of academic ammunition for those in the cultural and musical history field who have argued that American popular song deserves to be looked at more seriously. The book's classical-like analysis further blurs the borders between what has previously been considered "high-brow" classical and "low-brow" popular music, and rightly so. Several writers, including Constance Rourke in her landmark 1930 work *American Humor*, have argued that African American music and the songs of the American musical theater

may very well qualify to be viewed as an American classical music, peculiarly American in origin and character, and therefore not limited by European standards and rigid restrictions. Whether one buys into this premise or not, by the end of Forte's book, the hundreds of examples of meticulously detailed musical evidence leave no doubt of the sophistication and enduring significance of the songwriters covered, especially Arlen, Berlin, Gershwin, Kern, Porter, and Rodgers.

Perhaps the most fascinating element of the work is how Forte dissects dozens of the great pop ballads of the era and examines their construction. In an insightful move, he does more than analyze them musically. He takes into account the commercial considerations behind their creation, and looks at them through the perspectives of the dancers and vocalists as well. These songs were designed by the songwriters rhythmically to inspire dancing audiences, and sonically to please those who listened. Forte repeatedly shows the numerous ways in which they accomplished both goals. He points out the frequent usage of both ragtime-influenced Charleston dance rhythms

and the duple meters which characterized the popular foxtrot dance step. He also cites the songs "After You, Who" and "Ev'ry Time We Say Good-bye" as examples of how Porter utilized vowel sounds at key melodic junctures to enhance a mellifluous vocal performance.

But, as one might expect from Forte's position as the Battell Professor of the Theory of Music at Yale, the keenest insights in the book emanate from his musical analyses. Particularly intriguing are his numerous examples of how the American popular songwriters of this period employed various means of musical innovation deftly to illustrate emotions depicted in the lyrics, much like the "word painting" associated with the development of the European art song in the nineteenth century. Even the essentially untrained songwriter Berlin skillfully engaged in this practice, as seen in his 1946 composition "They Say It's Wonderful." Forte's presentation reveals the power of the song in a new way:

The musical effect...is to support the rhetoric of Berlin's carefully crafted lyric: 'They say that falling in love is wonderful, it's wonderful--so they say.' The first setting of [the lyric] 'they say' is supported by II [roman numerals denote chord positions on a scale], the second setting by V-I, conveying two different interpretations, the first tentative and contingent, the second affirmative and assertive. The young couple [in the lyrics of the song] are musing, inconclusively, about the nature of love, of which they have no direct experience.

Even if one is not versed in the music theory discussed in the example, a cursory listen to Frank Sinatra's 1947 Columbia recording of the song will convey a good idea of what Forte is imparting. Such grace in songwriting craft, while not usually apparent to the casual listener, affects audiences nonetheless and forms a large reason why these popular songs of the "golden era" continue to resonate in American culture and around the world decades after they were written. Forte,

with his talent for unearthing the charms hidden between the notes and staves of American popular song, provides a valuable service by disseminating new insight into how and why this process occurred.

Forte frequently notes the influences of classical music on the American popular ballad, and the similarities and sensibilities the genre shares with classical music (examples include the influence of the operetta in Kern's oeuvre, and Berlin's use of the Wagnerian Tristan chord in the 1932 composition "How Deep Is the Ocean?"). This information is interesting, and the influence cannot be denied, yet it should also be pointed out that, with the exception of Gershwin, the songwriters noted did not think about or utilize music theory in the way that Forte does. Many of them lacked basic musical training, and the great majority did not have the conservatory background reflected in Forte's sophisticated use of musical notation. The innovations by songwriters described in Forte's text were often found by accident, in answer to a musical problem or as the result of deeply felt emotion, not as a learned response of complicated music theory. Books such as Lawrence Bergreen's biography of Berlin and John Edward Hasse's biography of Duke Ellington bear this out. The songwriters that Forte concentrates on are indeed great artists, but they do not fall into the European-derived definition of the trained artist. This fact does not demean their work, but should be clarified.

Forte also provides a chapter concerning the rarely discussed work of female songwriters during the "golden era" of American popular song. Women were a distinct minority in the songwriting community of this period, but artists such as Ann Ronell ("Willow Weep For Me"), Kay Swift ("Can This Be Love"), and Dorothy Fields (lyricist for the controversial "I'm in the Mood for Love") deserve more attention than they have thus far received, and Forte helps to right the balance.

The author reserves two intriguing points about the larger implications of his study for the last two pages of his book. One hopes he will not mind if they are broached here. After dodging the question for the most part in the rest of the book, he asks whether "the corpus of music studied in this volume constitute a basic segment of what might be termed American Leider, analogous to, say, the nineteenth-century German Leider of classical music?" Perhaps Forte surmised that the political and cultural implications of such a question would have been a distraction from his study of the American popular ballad. Yet, it is definitely a question that the evidence presented in the book suggests.

Finally, Forte briefly surveys the state of academic research concerning popular music, and bemoans that it too often centers on sociological aspects, and that this tendency limits the insight that scholars are able to glean from the subject. Fully to understand the significance of popular music, he argues, one has to include musicological as well as sociological research. Forte's *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950* showcases the benefits of a more complete academic approach in the study of popular music.

One additional note: this book would make a superb candidate for a companion CD-Rom project to further illuminate the points made, especially for the musically illiterate and as an aid to teachers.

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