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## Peer review

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## Early Modern Digital Review

*Early Modern Digital Review* is an online, open-access, and refereed journal publishing high-quality reviews of digital projects related to early modern society and culture. It is committed to productive evaluation of both established digital resources and recent tools and projects. Its publications are distributed online by the journal and its partners, including *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*.

**Larson, Katherine, Scott A. Trudell, Sarah F. Williams, PIs.**

**Early Modern Songscales: English Ayres and Their Dynamic Acoustic Environments.**

Toronto: University of Toronto Scarborough; Maryland: University of Maryland, 2018. Accessed 30 August 2023.

[collections.digital.utsc.utoronto.ca/61220/utsc76553](https://collections.digital.utsc.utoronto.ca/61220/utsc76553).

The website *Early Modern Songscales: English Ayres and Their Dynamic Acoustic Environments* maps the methodology and makes available the results of a project of the same name on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English song, directed by Katherine Larson (University of Toronto), Scott Trudell (University of Maryland), and Sarah Williams (University of South Carolina).

A series of drop-down menus, tabs, and clickable words available on the home page give the visitor access to the material. The section titled “Project Description” in the drop-down menu under “About the Project” is the first one the visitor should engage with, as it does an excellent job at presenting the rationale of the project as a whole and its focus on “ayres,” whose specific characteristics and significance are clearly set out. In fact, the home page itself, while visually pleasing, does not contain much information, and most of the introductory material is tucked away and only reachable through menus and links that the as-yet-unacquainted visitor needs to find their way through. The organization of the home page could be rethought to offer more immediate access to preliminary material, and an overview or map of the website would help the user to understand where to find what. The material accessible through the “How to use the resource” link could also be brought to the forefront.

The website—currently in beta version—is mostly dedicated to the works of Henry Lawes, who has been selected as the project’s case study, but frequent mention of a next phase of the project—to analyze ayres associated with Shakespeare’s plays—suggests that this website will be updated in the future to include further explorations of this topic and additional audio and visual materials. The methodology behind the subdivision of this project into independent but also interlinked stages is explained convincingly, and the website—while working perfectly adequately as a standalone—is already intentionally organized in a flexible way that lends itself well to future changes, upgrades, and additions of material: extensive structural changes won’t be needed.

The website illustrates and makes accessible what appears to be a methodologically sound (pun intended) project. The sections in the drop-down menu titled “About the Project” and “Why Henry Lawes” do the necessary work of contextualizing the decisions made by the editorial team regarding themes selected and conventions used in transcribing and rendering the historical material as well as convincingly explain the scholarly value of the performances of songs and pieces of music. The website represents an excellent resource for those working on the topic of English ayres, and on Henry Lawes’s work in particular, with a rich mixture of visual materials, bibliographical information, and audio files with musical and sung performances.

The material related to this project, and particularly to the seminal conference from which the project originated—Early Modern Songscapes 2019, held at the University of Toronto Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies ([crrs.ca/event/early-modern-songscapes-2019](http://crrs.ca/event/early-modern-songscapes-2019))—is not necessarily presented in the most user-friendly way. Often, the same material—a performance, a transcription of a source, the description of a project or activity—is accessible in a variety of ways (as uploaded files of different formats, as links to external repositories, as clickable titles) and in different locations across the website. This abundance is exciting and probably easy to navigate for those with direct knowledge of the topic, the events, and the performances, and it gives a real sense of the rich scholarly work and high-quality research that was produced through this project. Certain choices, however, such as to present material alphabetically rather than thematically, or not to provide more information regarding each clickable item beyond a succinct title, make navigating between the various items and identifying them and their relationship to one another rather laborious for the non-initiated. Somehow counterintuitively, the text that is present has a colloquial, long-winded style more suited for spoken conversations than an agile research tool and document repository. The material could be more accessible if organized around keywords or bullet points, and by using direct internal links to material available elsewhere on the website rather than explaining to the user through text how to arrive to the necessary location.

The search option in the drop-down menu could also be optimized to provide better guidance in navigating the material on the website, allowing the visitor to find immediately what they are looking for. The limited search options available (title and keyword) assume some knowledge or intent on the part of the user—that is, that they are performing a specific search for a known

item. Broadening the search options and indexing the resources more fully—to chronological intervals, types of performances, song topics, instruments, or voices, to name just a few—would allow a casual visitor to browse broadly through the material available and maybe find something they themselves didn't know existed.

The most important issue, in fact, is the intended audience of this website. As a scholarly resource, Early Modern Songscales will appeal and be extremely useful as a research tool to those already well versed in the topic and familiar with this project or projects of a similar kind. In its current configuration, however, it will require significant effort from any curious member of the general public or the scholarly minded but uninitiated to navigate. Such users will still no doubt enjoy the excellent renditions of musical pieces and songs on offer, but they will not be able to fully appreciate the relationship between the modern performances and the historical resources made available. If the website is also intended to work as an introduction for the general public to the times and musical productions of Henry Lawes, some additions could be made to provide some needed context, such as an introductory biography for Lawes and some information about the development of musical performances around this time both in England and abroad. But as it stands, the resource seems intended for a specialized audience already involved in, or at very least aware of, the activities of the Early Modern Songscales research group. For these informed scholars, the most significant section is probably “Ayres and Dialogues,” with its easy-to-access table of contents and a direct link to the primary source itself, the first book of Lawes's *Ayres and dialogues, for one, two, and three voyces*, published in 1653. The “Full Songbook” page and corresponding file, however, did not seem to be working or to open properly; this might be due to the file format, or to a broken link on the page, or to the reviewer not having (been given?) enough information on what to do with the file.

From the point of view of those minded to use this resource to support their own research, it would be helpful to have more information on how to reference material from the website, and how the website creators advise users to approach copyright issues. Yes, the site acknowledges at the bottom of each page that all content (unless otherwise noted) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, but to fulfil its role as a research tool in full, some further information could be provided given the extreme variety of material made available on the site.

The “Contact Us” page is workable, but it would also be useful for users to have different addresses or named contacts to whom they could send queries on specific topics. The option to have a copy of the query sent to the writer’s own address for records would be helpful too.

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