

LAURA SEDDON



BRITISH WOMEN COMPOSERS AND INSTRUMENTAL CHAMBER MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY



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LAURA SEDDON



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List of Abbreviations

cl	Clarinet
db	Double bass
eng hn	English horn
fl	Flute
GSM	Guildhall School of Music
hn	Horn
NGDDMM	New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2001)
NGDWC	New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
OLMS	Oxford Ladies Musical Society
pf	Pianoforte
pf qnt	Piano quintet
pf qrt	Piano quartet
qnt	Quintet
qrt	Quartet
RAM	Royal Academy of Music
RCM	Royal College of Music
S	Soprano
str qrt	String Quartet
SWM	Society of Women Musicians
TNG	The New Grove (1980)
va	Viola
vc	Violoncello
vn	violin
WI	Women's Institute
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

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Preface

During an undergraduate course I took on women composers, the Society of Women Musicians (SWM) was mentioned in a footnote in lecture notes on Ethel Smyth (1858–1944). After discovering and devouring Smyth’s volumes of memoirs, which did not contain detailed information on the SWM, or indeed other women composers, at that time I was unable to find any other sources which referred to them further. Later research on the 1908 American tour of French composer Cécile Chaminade (1857–1944) further stimulated my interest in the activities of women musicians in the early twentieth century. Yet, I was frustrated in attempts to find chamber works by British women for recitals. Thus, I hoped an exploration of the SWM archive at the Royal College and the archives at the Wigmore Hall would bring to light information on the composers involved in the Society especially those who had written instrumental music.

From many months spent in the archives, the names and activities of an extraordinary group of women emerged; some of these were active members of the SWM and others were composers who distanced themselves from it. Many of the names remain elusive and scores of much of the music mentioned in programmes no longer exist. Some documents and music by a small group of women (including the founders of the Society and active composer members) have however survived. These have allowed a very overdue, in-depth study of the activities, and in particular the instrumental music, of women composers in early twentieth-century Britain.

Laura Seddon, August 2012

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Introduction

Any assessment of women's music and its reception requires consideration of their role in musical society. Early twentieth-century Britain offered women composers a very particular set of circumstances, both social and musical, in which to create their works. The main purpose of this book is to uncover some neglected works and place them in the context of early twentieth-century British music. This exercise builds on the pioneering work of Derek Scott, Derek Hyde, Sophie Fuller and Paula Gillett.¹ The general focus of these studies and other works in this area, however, has been the necessary collection of biographical material, the presentation of cultural context and, more specifically, the promotion of songs and piano works by women. This study, therefore, is part of a second wave of musicological investigation into British women's music. In this spirit it will consider some aspects of women's history and feminist criticism as well as feminist musicology.

Chapter 1 begins by situating the subjects of the book first as women and then, in the next chapter, as composers, within the prescient era that led into the First World War and out of it again. One of the most significant areas of research, presented in chapter 3, has been an investigation of the formation of the Society of Women Musicians (SWM) in London in 1911 and the responses of women composers to it. Lastly, in chapters 4 and 5 there is an investigation of the music of some of these women, situating it, too, within or in opposition to the traditions of the day.

The study focuses on women's instrumental chamber music for a number of reasons, most importantly because of its prevalence in their catalogues of works. Women who were primarily and often highly commercially successful vocal composers appeared to be expanding their repertoire in these years by writing instrumental trios, quartets or quintets. Conversely, women who had written large orchestral works, such as Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) and Edith Sweeny (1885–1930), also chose to write chamber music in these years. In addition, contemporary commentators, such as SWM member Katherine Eggar (1874–1961), philanthropist Walter Willson Cobbett (1847–1937) and composer Thomas Dunhill (1877–1946), were advocating instrumental chamber music as a means for British music to progress and compete with that produced in other European

¹ Derek Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour* (London, 1989), Derek Hyde, *New Found Voices: Women in Nineteenth Century English Music* (Ash, 1991), Sophie Fuller, 'Women Composers During the British Musical Renaissance 1880–1918' (upub. PhD Diss. Kings College University of London, 1998) and Paula Gillett, *Musical Women in England, 1870–1914: Encroaching on all Man's Privileges* (Basingstoke, 2000).

countries. In comparison to their other compositions, the chamber works of women often show a particular stylistic adventurousness. One of the parameters of this study is that it will consider only instrumental music for ensemble, thus excluding music for solo piano and vocal music in any combination; genres which had been associated with women composers since the nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, despite the formal digressions in some of the works of late Romantics such as Liszt and Wagner and the impressionist Debussy, sonata form held sway in much European music. In Britain, Elgar, Parry, Stanford and Mackenzie, as well as theorists such as Donald F. Tovey and Ebenezer Prout, were influential in their use and advocacy of the form. Thus sonata form loomed large in the legacy of women composers. How they responded to this in the composition of their chamber works offers considerable insight into their attitudes towards the canon itself. A high proportion of chamber works by women were phantasies, supposedly free-form compositions. Many were written as entries for the Cobbett competitions instigated in 1905. Each composer's relationship to sonata form and the possibility of an emerging female aesthetic are explored.

In addition, in the case studies in chapters 4 and 5, works by Adela Maddison (1866–1929), Ethel Smyth, Morfydd Owen (1891–1918), Ethel Barns (1873–1948), Alice Verne-Bredt (1868–1958) and Susan Spain-Dunk (1880–1962), including three phantasies, are analysed.² One of the phantasies was written as a competition entry, another was a commission and the status of the other is unclear. The works in total represent a range of instrumental combinations: two string quartets, one piano quintet and three trios. Some of the works were published, had multiple early performances and a number of recent concert revivals, while others remain in manuscript form. The above women represent three generations of composers active at the beginning of the twentieth century, attaining widely differing levels of public recognition and private 'success'.

These British composers were all actively composing in London at different periods in their lives, although they were not necessarily born there.³ Some had close links with the London music colleges, and studied composition as part of their education; some studied privately and others such as Alice Verne-Bredt were

² Many secondary sources give Ethel Barns's date of birth as 1880 but her birth certificate specifies 1873. See also Barbara Englesberg, 'The Life and Works of Ethel Barns: British Violinist Composer 1873–1948' (unpub. PhD Thesis, Boston University, 1987), pp. 1 and 3.

³ Ethel Barns, b. London, d. Maidenhead, spent most of her life living in central London; Alice Verne-Bredt was born in Southampton but moved to London in childhood and spent most of her life living in London; Susan Spain-Dunk, b. Folkestone, d. London, spent most of her life in central London; Morfydd Owen, b. Treforest, Wales, d. Oystermouth (on holiday), moved to London after completing her studies in Cardiff in 1912; Ethel Smyth, b. London, d. Woking, spent her life based in the south of England but travelled a great deal; Adela Maddison, b. Ireland, d. Ealing, lived in London, Paris and Berlin. See Sophie Fuller, 'Women Composers', pp. 300–301.

taught informally by family members. While it cannot be claimed that they reflect every woman composer's life in Britain, as a group their works are representative of women composers and they highlight many of the issues facing women in musical society.

In this investigation, 1920 represents the end of an era. This was the point at which the SWM started to campaign for the rights of women performers and became less concerned with the work of women composers. The phantasy competitions became less prevalent in the 1920s as Cobbett's financial support of composers diminished. Instead, he concentrated on instigating other competitions and providing support for students and performers. A new generation of women composers then emerged, including Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994), Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–1983), Dorothy Gow (1893–1982) and Grace Williams (1906–1977).⁴

Consideration of women composers as a separate entity from their male counterparts is a necessary division for this analysis. This is not to argue that women did not face many of the same challenges as male composers, rather that the range of barriers facing creative women and the female experience of interacting within a 'patriarchal' musical society warrant further investigation. At the same time, while many of the initial feminist musicological studies have taken for granted dichotomies such as male/female, public/private and equality/difference, this book's methodology aims to investigate and deconstruct such binary relationships within the context of early twentieth-century music. This discussion therefore raises a number of important questions, which may usefully be addressed at the outset and are considered throughout the text:

Why Focus on 'Women'?

Is there something that binds 'women' as a group or is the category of 'women' maintained because it is the basis of feminism as a construct and without it the discipline would not exist? This is a much-debated issue, as Judith Butler argues, in her influential book, *Gender Trouble*:

[T]here is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even of the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety.⁵

⁴ For further information on Lutyens, Maconchy and Williams see Rhiannon Mathias, *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-century British Music: A Blest Trio of Sirens* (Farnham, 2012); Elisabeth Lutyens, *A Goldfish Bowl* (London, 1972) and Malcolm Boyd, *Grace Williams* (Cardiff, 1980).

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, New York, 1990), p. 3.

This is more than just a semantic issue; many writers have highlighted their concern that the term ‘women’ is always defined in relation to ‘men’. In the 1950s one of the first to investigate this in terms of ‘women’ as ‘Other’ was Simone de Beauvoir who argued that the relationship between the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ was not an equal binary:

In actuality the relation of the sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas *woman* represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.⁶

More pertinently for this study, the assumption that there are enough similarities between ‘women’ of differing age, class, race and historical period to justify the category ‘women’ as a useful distinction has also been contested. Is the only thing that binds women the oppression that they have experienced, or is there something more to the female experience of being? As de Beauvoir argues, the fact that women’s oppression is based on biological differences rather than a specific historical event has made the oppression far more difficult to detect and deconstruct.

When a man makes of woman the *Other*, he may, then, expect to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.⁷

Germaine Greer asserts that the concepts of the ‘sisterhood’ of women, with common ideals and even politics, is a dangerous one: ‘even more questionable than the suggestion that sisterhood unites women across class and ethnic lines is the claim that sisterhood binds women of different generations. Sisters, by definition, belong to an age set.’⁸ Greer, however, does advocate a ‘female’ experience and she is convinced that ‘[f]eminism exists outside the realm of political instrumentality, as an idea’.⁹

The definition of ‘woman’ within a male domain has repercussions for those involved in academic research. Beverly Thiele expands on Artemis March’s three forms of invisibility of women; ‘exclusion, pseudo-inclusion and alienation’.¹⁰ Thiele indicates that even academic work that includes women does not ‘speak

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 15.

⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸ Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London, 2000), p. 292.

⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰ Beverly Thiele, ‘Vanishing Acts in Social and Political Thought: Tricks of the Trade’, in *Defining Women Social Institutions and Gender Distortions*, ed. Linda McDowell and Rosemary Pringle (Cambridge, 1992), p. 28.

of the parameters of women's lives without distortion. Women's experience is interpreted through male categories because the methodology and values of the theorists remain androcentric'.¹¹ This has particular relevance for how musicologists structure their analyses of women's music, as it may be that certain methods of analysis will not yield considered and fruitful results. Thiele goes on to advocate a greater development of gynocentric themes before a universal political theory can emerge. She writes 'As Mary O'Brien's theorizing in *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981) illustrates so well, gynocentric theory is more than a mere counterbalance ... it is the turn of a spiral, not a flip of a coin'.¹²

Yet this area of feminist theory merely sets up yet another binary of gynocentric versus androcentric analyses. Here six women composers are considered within the context of the musical society in which they were working including interaction and comparison with male composers. As Susan McClary argues:

[T]he women who have composed music throughout Western history have coexisted within the same cultural contexts as their better-known male counterparts. Thus, if we are to understand how they might have operated differently within the same stylistic and syntactical procedures as men, we have to begin unpicking what and how those apparently neutral procedures themselves signify.¹³

This study, therefore, attempts to avoid simplistic categorisation of 'woman'; the women themselves did not consider themselves a group, but an analysis that has allowed for issues of gender and sexuality has been deliberately constructed, to build on previous biographical research and work on the canon.

How does the Relationship between Sex and Gender affect this Book?

The dichotomy of sex and gender has implications for this book in relation to the 'female' experience. De Beauvoir commented:

It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be considered so she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity – Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a platonic essence, a product of the philosophical imagination? Is a rustling petticoat enough to bring it down to earth?¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 33.

¹³ Susan McClary, 'Reshaping a Discipline: Musicology and Feminism in the 1990s', *Feminist Studies*, 19/2 (Summer, 1993): p. 409.

¹⁴ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 13.

In the increasing amount of work in this area, the prominent idea that sex was biologically determined and that inescapably led to a particular gender for that body, thus leading to a desire for the opposite sex, has been questioned primarily by Judith Butler. She argues for a more fluid approach towards gender and desire, so that the dichotomies of male/female and masculine/feminine are no longer bound together. She asserts that certain gendered behaviours or ‘performances’ have become so dominant that they have been especially detrimental to women.

When feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed, what is the manner of mechanism of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? Does “construction” suggest that certain laws generate gender differences along universal axes of sexual difference?¹⁵

A decade later Greer goes as far as to argue that: ‘[f]emininity has nothing to do with sex. Men can do femininity better than women can because femaleness conflicts with femininity as maleness does not.’¹⁶ These late twentieth-century explorations of gender have implications for the analysis of the women in this study, who experienced the conflict between late nineteenth/early twentieth-century ideas of [female] femininity and the choice to represent themselves as composers. Applied to a musical context, it can be argued that it was often ‘easier’ for male rather than female composers to maintain some notion of femininity in their music and their lives.

Are Public and Private Mutually Exclusive?

This book examines the assumptions that women’s works were more suited to private performance and that ‘salons’ and ‘At Homes’ were exclusively the preserve of women. It suggests that it was possible as a woman composer to move between public and private spheres and in fact there were many links between the two. Feminist theorists have again questioned the idea that women are inclined to be closer to ‘nature’ and therefore the family and the private sphere, whereas men are somehow connected to culture and the public arena. Sherry Ortner describes this dichotomy:

The family (and hence women) represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to interfamilial relations representing higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns. Since men lack a ‘natural’ basis (nursing, generalised to childcare) for a familial orientation, their

¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Greer, *The Whole Woman*, p. 87.