

REVIEW

Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music by Anna Beer

The lives of eight remarkable women who dared to compose music

Jessica Duchon Published: 27 March 2016



harmony: Robert and Clara Schumann (Alamy)

The under-representation of female composers in concert programming, broadcasting and recording is, if you think about it, little short of scandalous. What we broadly term

“western classical music” of course encompasses works from many centuries, during most of which women were denied equal status with men, and were often educated only to a point that advanced their marriage prospects. Yet women have composed great music ever since Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century. It should have been clear from then on that women were not physiologically incapable of this.

Nevertheless, so few female composers have become well-known that the assumption has often been that they simply do not compose. As Anna Beer says in her book’s endnote: if a C major chord is the same whether written by Wagner or a female composer, why should the former be played every day and the latter not?

Sounds and Sweet Airs explores the lives of eight composers, each from a different era and place — the earliest, Francesca Caccini, lived in Renaissance Florence, and the most recent, Elizabeth Maconchy, died in Norwich in 1994. Each faced challenges that were particular to her cultural environment, but also problems common to them all: the tugs of family life, health matters, household income and a perceived need for “propriety”; plus the superficiality of critical commentators who insist on considering a composer’s gender and nationality before her music.

What Beer terms “the shadow of the courtesan” haunts the reputations of several of her subjects: from the cruel rumours that dogged the inspiring Marianna Martines in late 18th-century Vienna (and suggested that she was mistress to the librettist Metastasio) to the well-endowed Barbara Strozzi in 17th-century Venice (“Oh, what tits!” the Duke of Mantua’s envoy reported home). And in 17th-century France, Jacquet de la Guerre cannily navigated a cat’s cradle of intrigues at the court of Louis XIV, where an artist’s fate might depend on favour with the monarch’s current mistress of choice.

If women were not being sexually objectified, then their frail beauty or domestic virtues were being sentimentalised, an increasing trend as the 19th century progressed. Fanny Hensel’s father described her musicianship as “an ornament” — he wished her to be first and foremost a nice mother, even though he admitted her talent might have equalled that of her brother Felix Mendelssohn had she been male.

The syndrome reached its zenith in the early 1900s with the unfortunate Lili Boulanger, the wildly talented sister of the better-known Nadia (a celebrated pedagogue). Lili, tall and desperately delicate due to what was probably Crohn’s disease, was the first woman to win the Prix de Rome, France’s most famous composition prize. But her ill-health hampered her short life and she died at 24, leaving her magnum opus, an opera based on Maeterlinck’s play *La Princesse Maleine*, incomplete. Yet her pallid looks, although the result of critical illness, were horribly romanticised during her lifetime.

Supportive husbands come out of this book well nonetheless. Jacquet married Marin la Guerre, the organist at Saint-Chapelle and clearly a like-minded companion; Fanny Mendelssohn’s husband, Wilhelm Hensel, proved more positive about her vocation than did her celebrated brother, Felix. William LeFanu nursed the young Maconchy through tuberculosis during the 1930s. The least congenial partner was, sadly, Robert Schumann, whose idealistic dreams of a marriage of minds, in which he and his wife, Clara, would compose together, lasted only until they began, prolifically, to create children instead.

Beer’s writing is lucid, engaging and exuberant, strongly evoking the cultures and atmospheres that surrounded her subjects. We walk with Strozzi along the mysterious canals of 17th-century Venice, where in moral and sexual terms, anything went — indeed, Strozzi’s music is apparently still considered “too sexy for church” (an opinion voiced in

2015). And we stew quietly with Maconchy as her otherwise congenial teacher, Ralph Vaughan Williams, “quietly suffocates” her longing to study with Bartok.

These refreshing and spirited portraits often contradict popular images of the women in question. Clara Schumann apparently walked much faster than her husband, often 20 paces ahead. Boulanger seems replete with *joie de vivre* despite her illness, going on all-night outings with her companions.

More frustrating, though, is the music, which takes second place to the lives, with Beer mostly quoting other musicologists and critics in order to describe it. The term “sweet airs” in the title also grates, and reinforces preconceptions about women composers. I only hope it has been chosen for irony’s sake.

Still, the book in general is terrifically enjoyable and accessible, and leaves one hankering for a second volume. Candidates could include Pauline Viardot, the great singer and friend of Ivan Turgenev; the impassioned suffragette Ethel Smyth; and perhaps Marie Jaëll, an intriguing and troubled Liszt disciple. And among today’s leading composers, there are many great women (Sofia Gubaidulina, Eliane Radigue, Joan Tower, Kaija Saariaho, Unsuk Chin), each of whom deserves a book to herself.

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