

## Musical Women in England, 1870-1914. 'Encroaching on all Man's Privileges'

**Review Number:**

205

**Publish date:**

Sunday, 1 April, 2001

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**Date of Publication:**

2000

**Publisher:**

Macmillan

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Dave Russell

The period from the late 1980s has seen a belated but growing interest in the social and cultural history of women's music life and Paula Gillett's elegantly written, widely researched and thought-provoking monograph is a welcome addition to the literature. Gillett's study seeks 'to extend and enrich current understanding both of women's participation in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century English musical culture and perceptions of the female musician that were heatedly discussed and challenged during that era' (p. vii). Although, as will be argued later, 'musical culture' is interpreted in rather specific ways, within her chosen territories the author succeeds admirably in meeting her task.

As might be suggested by a book that has fifty-eight pages of footnotes (and *real* pre-publisher minimalism footnotes at that, full of extra information, quotation and acknowledgements) as well as eighteen pages of bibliography, the book is rooted in impressively extensive secondary reading and in numerous and wide-ranging primary sources. She has made particularly good use of the music press and of more general periodical literature, with *The Lady* and the *Girls Own Paper* proving especially fertile, and has consulted an array of novels, poems and, to a lesser extent, popular art works. The sources both testify to the importance of the topic in the contemporary imagination and provide rich material for her to explore. If critical notes are to be sounded here, there is rather less use of the general literature on women's history, especially working-class women's history, than might have been expected and statistical data is in short supply. At the very least, census returns would have provided a useful starting point in establishing approximate orders of magnitude in some chapters. Gillett compensates to a large extent, however, through her skilful and subtle use of literary sources, interpreting them in fruitful ways without recourse to unnecessary layers of theory. Although always aware of nuances of meaning, she generally appears to see clear authorial intent within them and reasonably defined audience responses deriving from them. As might be expected from an author who has written a well-received book on Victorian painters, her use of art, although limited by publishing constraints, is also engaging. An apparently slight piece such as George du Maurier's 1875 *Punch* cartoon 'The Fair Sex-tett' (p. 110), for example, receives sustained and informative analysis and emerges as a potentially important source for considering the nature of the male 'gaze' in the 1870s. The pictures that are

used are reasonably well reproduced and are accompanied by brief summaries of the more detailed comment in the main text.

The book's thoughtful introduction identifies the 1870s as a key decade for women's social and political advancement in general terms before sketching out the major ways in which 'music practice, both amateur and professional, was sharply divided by gender' in the later Victorian and Edwardian periods (p. 3). It rehearses both the arguments and the approach - a weaving and balancing of literary, autobiographical and journalistic sources - which emerge in the six chapters that comprise the remainder of the work. These fall essentially into three pairs, the first of which is concerned with the provision and the receipt of late Victorian musical philanthropy. Gillett makes a persuasive case for the importance of this much neglected area of cultural activity, arguing that while such work fell squarely within women's 'traditional' role, 'the close association of music with philanthropic activity led women far beyond the private realm in ways that simultaneously weakened the ideology of separate spheres and the barriers to female participation in the professional musical world' (p. 33). In her study of provision, she focuses largely on three London-based bodies founded in the late 1870s, the Kyrle Society, People's Entertainment Society and People's Concert Society, all dedicated in various ways to bringing music to working-class audiences, and on two popular concert halls, the Royal Victoria Coffee Music Hall (the 'Old Vic') and the People's Palace. Although not exclusively women's organisations, women played a major and often the leading role in the concert societies, while the Old Vic was forever associated with its founder Emma Cons and her niece Lillian Baylis.

Gillett usefully explores the differences between the various bodies. The People's Entertainment Society, for example, clearly saw musical philanthropy as part of a wider mechanism of social control, while the People's Concert Society was far more committed to sowing "'the seeds of art for art's sake'" (p. 49). She also emphasises the range of formative experiences on offer. Middle-class women amateur musicians could give public performances, while working-class audiences might sometimes see leading performers such as singers Charlotte Sainton-Dolby and Antoinette Sterling at prices within the reach of all but the very poorest, as well as some perfectly competent amateurs and lesser professionals in free or very low cost events held within the local community. (The P.E.S gave a concert for 700 workers in Doulton's Lambeth potteries in 1880.) For aspiring working-class musicians, male and female, there were a variety of classes, bands and choirs, the best of which reached high standards. A handful of talented working-class musicians had their lives literally transformed by individual acts of philanthropy, and none more so than the violinist Marie Hall, whose rise from street musician to concert platform with help from Elgar, the music educator Jane Jackson Roeckel and others, is so well told here. The only disappointing feature of these two chapters is their almost exclusively metropolitan focus. Beyond a brief mention of Miss Say Ashworth's Ancoats girls' choir in the Edwardian period and a few other passing references, the provinces receive the shortest of shrifts as is so often the case in English music history. In fact, some of the most important contributions to musical philanthropy were made outside of London and its environs, and not least in the work of Mary Wakefield (1853-1910), the Kendal-born amateur singer, friend of Ruskin, supporter of women's suffrage and key figure in the establishment of the competitive choral movement, so important to the stimulation of choral music from the later nineteenth century. Perhaps the author felt Wakefield's career to be too well known, or somehow marginal to her central interests, but it is to be hoped that future writers will embrace rather more fully Miss Wakefield in Cumberland, the Ford Sisters in Leeds, the provincial branches of the Kyrle Society and other such activity.

Gillett's second pair of chapters deals with shifting attitudes to the woman violinist, the first tracing the demise of the 'informal ban' on violin playing that so hampered prospective performers in the period before about 1870, the second dealing with attitudes to woman players from the 1890s. This is the most 'cultural' section of the book in methodological terms, with the author making particularly acute use of literary and artistic sources. In one of the pithy and striking summations that are such a feature of Gillett's writing, she argues that opposition to the female violinist was 'the result of satanic and other unsettling supernatural associations juxtaposed with an almost visceral expectation that this female-gendered instrument [she is excellent on this] should have a male master'. (p. 98) The instrument's long association with sin, death and Satan is fascinatingly explored as are the various discourses surrounding the supposedly defeminising

aspects of an instrument, the playing of which cause bodily and facial distortion. As Gillett observes, many of the latter prejudices simply reflected a male desire to keep such an important and highly regarded instrument in their own hands. The importance of the arrival in Britain in 1869 of Czech violinist Wilma Norman-Neruda in changing this situation (a review of one of her concerts gave Gillett the book's sub-title) is well described, although Gillett rightly sees changed context as more significant to historical causation than the impact of great figures, describing her role as 'not that of a female St. George, but rather an active and influential participant in a dynamically shifting situation' (p. 98). Among the key factors identified here are the wider advances in women's education in particular and the nascent feminist movement in general, along with a democratisation of piano ownership leading to a search for new high-status instruments in the drawing rooms of England.

By the 1890s, the female violinist had become positively fashionable and the second of the chapters explores her status in the period to 1914. As ever, Gillett's judgments are balanced and subtle. She is fully aware that traces of old mentalities remain and, while finding potentially empowering and challenging views of the violinist in novels such as George Gissing's *The Whirlpool*, she is equally alert to more conservative formulations in which marriage replaces career and high musical ambition. She also stresses that some avenues, notably those into symphony orchestras, were generally closed. In this context, one far from unsympathetic male commentator observed in 1911 that few women possessed the necessary 'force and intensity which belong to the average male performer' (p. 140). There is, too, an acceptance of the sometimes intense sexual *frisson* that surrounded the young woman player whose luxuriant tresses and thin bare arms were the staples of most fictional accounts. However, she is ultimately more struck by the private pleasures and public benefits that the instrument brought and sees the rise in female-violin playing as one of the changes 'associated with the image of the New Woman' (p.122) and 'a development that clearly opened the way to other previously blocked modes of musical expression' (p. 140).

The final two chapters are less an obvious pair than their predecessors, but are both essentially concerned with women as performers or providers of skills and services within the public domain. The first, 'Immortal Tones', deals with women as public singers. Once again, fictional works as familiar as *Daniel Deronda* and other titles far less well known are used extremely effectively. Old ambiguities and concerns surface, female amateur singers deemed at risk from 'moral danger' lest their brief moments in the spotlight lead to an excess of adulation and unsuitable expectation. The role of the amateur, according to one 1892 tract by Elizabeth Eastlake, was simply to enhance the domestic life of fathers and husbands. Gillett makes helpful observations in this chapter on the complex set of attitudes surrounding the operatic diva. Extremely powerful economically (Adelina Patti received \$4,646 per performance during an American tour of 1881-2) and able to exert remarkable emotional power over her audiences, she was nevertheless both an object of suspicion because of her association with the stage and with operatic passion, and also a highly sexualised figure; participation in and endorsement of soap and corset adverts, which 'called direct attention to the singer's fleshly charms' (p. 178), made the singers to some extent willing partners here. Although Gillett never quite pulls all the various aspects of this chapter together, the trend of broad if never continuous or unchallenged progress which she seems to see as typifying women's position within the musical world, is once again apparent here.

The final chapter deals with women in the music profession and covers much ground. After examining the labour market in general terms, it considers opportunities for singers, wind players (the Royal Academy of Music offered the first wind scholarship for females as late as 1901), teachers, tuners and various other groups. A picture emerges of an increasing number of young women entering the profession from the growing number of colleges and conservatoires, but finding it overstocked and positions therefore often poorly paid and insecure. The chapter concludes with an interesting section on the Society of Women Musicians (1911). This was founded to improve the opportunities for women composers, many of who found it relatively easy to get their work performed but extraordinarily difficult to have it published. Although not an overtly suffragist organisation, some of its members most certainly were involved in various groupings within the cause. The wide range covered does give this chapter a rather more episodic feel than most others do, but valuable new material emerges. It is here, however, that the relative lack of

statistical data is most noticeably felt, while Gillett's concentration on the middle- and lower middle- class musician is also rather limiting. Working-class female musicians, such as street entertainers, are occasionally glimpsed but never receive any sustained attention. While contemporary sources make them hard to study in any depth, working-class women were involved in the profession in many ways and we need to be aware of them and the questions they raise. Did those at rank and file level have a less positive career trajectory than their better-off sisters, for example? Certainly, magistrates in the Yorkshire town of Brighouse, thought they should, making it a condition of licence renewal in 1904 that women pianists under 21 years of age were banned from playing in public house music rooms. Let us hope that Gillett or those who follow her will open up the class dimension of the gender debate rather more thoroughly in the future.

These final comments raise some rather bigger concerns about the book. There is nothing more annoying for an author than to be criticised for writing the 'wrong book' (the one the reviewer would have written, and brilliantly so) and the following might sound a little like a contribution of that type, concerned as it is with exclusions rather than what is actually there. However, Gillett does leave herself open to the challenge that she has ignored or downplayed a number of important issues. The book's title certainly suggests a rather more comprehensive survey than we are actually given. Obviously, a whole variety of practical and commercial reasons mean that most titles imply a rather more exhaustive coverage than is delivered, but Gillett's problem is compounded by her failure to define her content matter at the outset. There is an assumption that 'music' is mainly (although certainly not exclusively) 'art music' or adjacent to it, that 'musicians' are largely drawn from beyond the manual working class and that musical activity is most typified by certain types of concert platform, the parlour and the philanthropic venue. This marginalises or excludes many key areas. Can one really write a history of 'musical women' without mention, beyond a few passing remarks, of music hall and musical comedy? For many Victorians and Edwardians, Marie Lloyd, Vesta Victoria, Gertie Millar and others *were* the nation's musical women. Such performers and their thousands of lesser known compatriots need acknowledgement at the very least (the class issue is again important here), while comparison between the economic and cultural situation of leading variety and musical comedy stars and that of their operatic equivalents would have been interesting indeed. Perhaps the author defines this territory as 'theatre' rather than music, or believes enough has been said and that other areas are more neglected, more pressing. Whatever the case, the decision to ignore the halls needed comment and represents a missed opportunity. Perhaps more strangely, the book does not consider the *voluntary* musical society in any detail beyond the limited context of philanthropic activity. However, it was in this sphere, and especially in the choral society, that musical women made (at first sight) some of the most significant musical gains of the period. Male-dominated in the first half of the nineteenth century, the choral society became a significant female space by the 1890s, where women from a very broad social spectrum could enjoy a rich and rewarding musical and social life.

The other major flaw in the book is the absence of a conclusion. It ends rather suddenly, an informative discussion of women composers unexpectedly followed by a brief final paragraph. The richness of Gillett's findings deserves better, as does the larger topic of women's place within musical life and the wider culture. While the overall theme of the book concerns the breaking of barriers, the emergence of women into new territories, there are other narratives that demand attention. Does the fact that choral societies were having increasing problems finding male singers from the late nineteenth century, or that there is evidence that the male audience for serious concerts appears to have shrinking from a similar time, suggest that women were breaking into the musical world at precisely the moment when music of the types privileged in this book was losing its prestige within the wider society? The book ends without larger questions of this type being addressed.

Despite these reservations, I left this book with a much new information, many new ideas, a completed library order slip (multiple copies, too) and the hope that it will be read by a much wider constituency than that comprised by specialist music historians. 'Mainstream' historians too often ignore music (although the request for this review is a most promising sign in itself), but in doing so they miss much. Anyone interested in any aspect of women's history or in the wider fields of education, professionalisation, philanthropy and much else will learn from this study. Paula Gillett can have the pleasure of knowing that she has made an

important contribution to Victorian and Edwardian studies and that this will remain a key text for any serious student of the relationship between music and society for the foreseeable future.

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