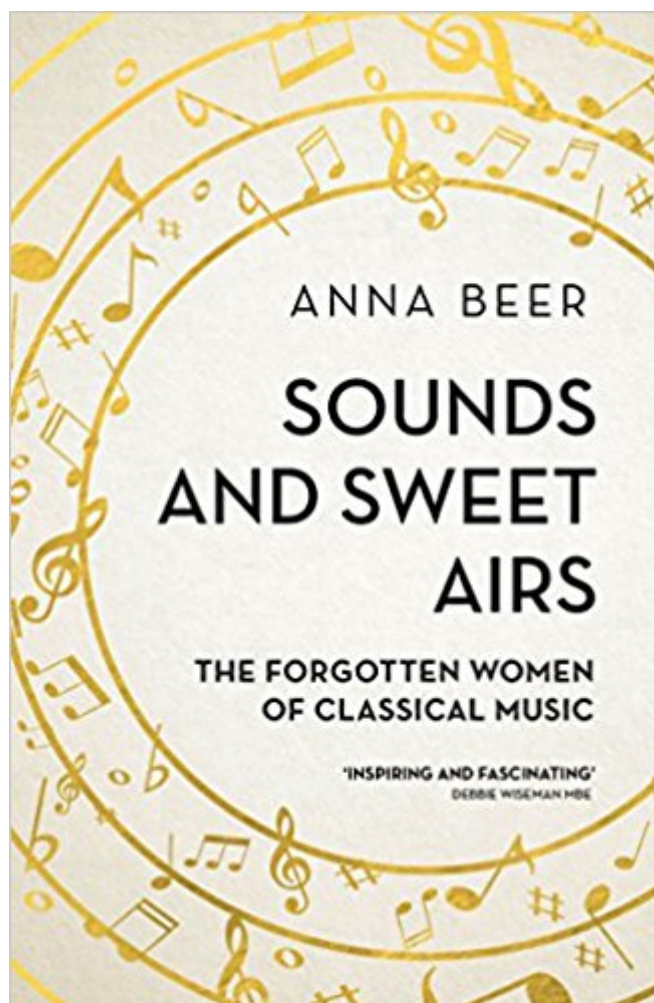


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Sounds And Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women Of Classical Music



Synopsis

Francesca Caccini. Barbara Strozzi. *À*lisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre. Marianna Martines. Fanny Hensel. Clara Schumann. Lili Boulanger. Elizabeth Maconchy. Great composers all, but their musical legacy is still rarely acknowledged. Since the birth of classical music, those women who dared to compose have been patronized, had their sex lives scrutinized and the veracity of their authorship questioned. They worked within a musical culture where beliefs about what women could and could not do determined their every move. Yet, time and again there emerged individuals who would evade, confront and ignore the rules that sought to exclude them from the world of composition. Taking the reader on a journey from 17th-century Medici Florence to London in the Blitz, and beyond, Anna Beer reveals the hidden histories of eight remarkable women, explores the special communities that enabled them to compose their music, and asks tough questions about why we still don't hear their masterpieces performed. A long-overdue celebration of neglected virtuosos, *Sounds and Sweet Airs* presents a complex and inspirational picture of artistic endeavor and achievement that deserves to be part of our cultural heritage.

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Customer Reviews

'Never less than highly readable'. (Classical Music) *À* meticulously researched, engrossing read, vividly bringing its eight subjects to life. It should appeal not only to music connoisseurs but to anyone interested in social and cultural history *À* and women's place in it. *À* (Financial Times) Offers vivid, colourful context on a situation that is echoed back

through the centuries. Readable and wide-ranging, Beer's deft sketches are an elegant introduction to their subjects'. (Spectator) Beer's snapshot lives of women composers are savvy, sympathetic... [an] essential and insightful study of a woman's unsung place in the closed world of classical music. (Wall Street Journal) Beer's writing is lucid, engaging and exuberant, strongly evoking the cultures and atmospheres that surrounded her subjects. The book in general is terrifically enjoyable and accessible, and leaves one hankering for a second volume. (Sunday Times) Absorbing ... [Beer] writes with rich detail and sympathetic insight about [these women's] ambitious, adventurous battles to overcome barriers to creativity. (Publishers Weekly) Rewarding. Beer conveys the sexism and lifelong frustrations some immensely gifted creative artists encountered. (New York Times) Such traits, as Beer laments, are still with us. All the more important, then, for excellent books like this one to remind us of what we are all missing. (Catholic Herald)

Anna Beer is a cultural historian, and the author of biographies of Milton and Lady Bess Raleigh. She is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford. She lives in Oxford, England.

This recently published book (2016), supposedly introduces the readers to women composers. The book is written by Anna Beer, a British author and lecturer, specializing in biographies.

"Sounds and Sweet Airs" describes eight female composers, representative of historic periods extending from 1587 to 1994, namely the Baroque, the Classical, the Romantic and the Modern and Contemporary periods. The ladies are: Francesca Caccini (1587-1641) from Florence; Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677) from Venice; Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1665-1729) from Paris; Marianna Martines (1744-1812) from Vienna; Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847) originally from Berlin, then from various cities also in Germany; Clara Wieck (1819-1896) from various cities in Germany; Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) from Paris; Elizabeth Maconchi (1907-1994) from Dublin. The above are described in eight chapters, each dedicated to one composer, following an introduction titled "Notes from the Silence". Unfortunately, the composers seem to be randomly selected and just as randomly presented. Let us see how. First, some major figures were left out. Most important among them are: German Benedictine Abbess and multi-talented genius Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179). Her inclusion should have been a must, not just because of her own talent, but because of the times that she represents: the Middle Ages during the 12th century - about three

centuries before the Renaissance, the time when human creativity started to awaken after centuries of undisturbed sleep. Nadia Boulanger is the next major disappointing omission. Not only because she was left out, but also because her little sister Lili was selected instead. There is a 40 plus page chapter dedicated to Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) and practically nothing about her big sister Nadia (1887-1979), big in every sense of the word. At 25, Lili died very young. This means that she did not have the opportunity to develop and express her creativity, after reaching maturity. Nadia, on the other hand, lived a much longer life, and that alone gave her the necessary time to mature and compose. Nadia was multi-talented. In addition to being a composer, she was a conductor and a teacher. She is famous for having taught many of the leading composers and musicians of the 20th century. Nadia also performed occasionally as a pianist and organist. She was the first woman to conduct major orchestras in America and Europe, including the BBC Symphony, the Boston Symphony, the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Symphony orchestras. She conducted world premieres, among them works by Copland and Stravinsky. And the author leaves her out, in favor of her 25 year old sister?!?! Nadia Boulanger and Hildegard Von Bingen are not the only composers conspicuously absent in a book dedicated to female composers. Internet site Wikipedia lists additional prominent female composers: Ethel Smyth (1858-1944); Amy Beach (1867-1944); Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979); Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983); and Sofia Gubaidulina 1931, all belonging to the Romantic and Modern periods. In addition to the above, Wikipedia also lists in chronological order the names of all recorded female composers starting with Greek poet and musician Sappho (born c. 612 BCE in the island of Lesbos), along with their dates of birth and death. The names are too many to count, dozens, and dozens. This means that we may seldom hear about female composers, but their names and published works are all recorded and available. The author neglects to mention these women, and that leaves the readers with the impression that the eight women that she describes are the only female composers whose work has survived. Let us go back to the eight composers and the way in which the author presents them. The title of each of the eight main chapters is the composer's last name; yes, the last name only, without the first name or years of birth and death. The years of birth and death are very basic information in any biography and essential for the understanding of the compositions themselves against their historical backgrounds. In the book, these years are given separately about the beginning and end of the chapter, but not consistently in the same section. In other words, it is not always easy to find the date of birth. More difficult is locating the year of death. As for the way in which the biographies are presented, they seem to have been put together in a hurry, a great hurry. One almost has the impression that the author gathered the information, then threw it on the pages

without worrying about any kind of organization. There is not a preset scheme, nor a coherent story that one can follow, for example, the composer was born in [unclear], grew up in [unclear], worked for [unclear]; composed these many works, most prominent among them being [unclear]. She died in [unclear], on [unclear]. There are no organized lists of the major works by each composer. Sometimes the author concentrates on one work, not necessarily her best or most popular, while neglecting the rest. She candidly admits to having done that. In addition to the main body, there is an Endnote, reflecting on [unclear] "how to be a great composer [unclear]" and concluding that the composer has to be a man. A playlist of works by each of the eight composers follows, but the author makes it clear in the very title that such is: [unclear] "A Highly Personal Playlist [unclear]". In other words, not all works are mentioned, only the few with which she is familiar. Consistent with the already noted lack of organization, the eight composers in this chapter are not presented in the same chronological order as they are in the text. There are spelling mistakes for some of the musical compositions whose title is presented in a foreign language. A Glossary, Further Reading, References, Acknowledgements and Index conclude the book.

The biographies are informative both as regards the composer's personal lives and their compositions. It is also a very readable book.

Interesting to read some of this, but if you already know quite a bit about female composers, you won't learn a lot that you don't already know. It gives short synopses of the "usual" historical female composers Caccini, Strozzi, de la Guerre, Martines, Hensel, Schumann, Boulanger and, a composer of more recent vintage, Maconchy. The book is, however, well-written. And if you don't know much about these composers, the stories of their lives and accomplishments are engagingly brought to life.

Excellent

Well written and stories we should all know about gifted composers whose music we should be hearing.

It took me longer than normal to get through Anna Beer's new book *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The*

Forgotten Women of Classical Music. This isn't because of any defect in Beer's writing. Just the opposite: each chapter sends me off discovering a new composer, which gets me immersed in new worlds of music, history, sociology and gender politics. Beer begins with a couple of 17th century Italian composers, each of whom managed to build significant musical careers through talent and shrewd politics. This music is clearly as advanced as anything else being produced in Florence in the first half of the 17th century. Caccini's gifts as a singer and a father who was a fine composer in his own right were two advantages, but there were minefields of class and gender and local politics that Francesca had to navigate before she was able to attain some measure of success. Caccini's body of works isn't as large as it should be, nor was she able to completely fulfil her potential, but what we have is really remarkable, and it's showing up in a significant recording legacy today. A few decades later Barbara Strozzi walked her own fine line to win some (fleeting) fame and modest fortune in Monteverdi's Venice. All of Strozzi's obstacles and her hard-won triumphs are entertainingly detailed by Beer. This is fine story-telling based on significant primary and secondary scholarship. There's an extraordinary aria entitled *Lagrima Mia*, from Strozzi's 1659 cantata *Diparti di Euterpe*. It's telling that this pupil of Francesco Cavalli can match this aria against the best works of her teacher. Of the other composers in Beer's book, my personal favourite is Clara Wieck Schumann, whose reputation is growing as her compositions become more widely known. Nearly shouldered out of the music books altogether by Robert Schumann on the one hand, and Johannes Brahms on the other, Clara's music dovetails so easily into her husband's, but there's a distinctive voice here. One of my favourite pieces is a lovely *Larghetto* from the four *Pieces Fugitives* she wrote in 1840. *Fugitive pieces* is a fitting title for music by all eight of the composers in this book. Whether they were mansplained or ignored or openly despised, these strong-willed renegades kept their heads down and produced excellent, sometimes great music that deserves more attention. *Sounds and Sweet Airs* is a major step in bringing these outlaws into the light. It was a bit of a disappointment that there is little mention of composers after Elizabeth Maconchy, who died in 1994, and stopped writing music in 1985. I understand that even the eight chosen composers Caccini (born in 1587) Strozzi Jacquet de la Guerre Martines Hensel Schumann Boulanger Maconchy (died in 1994) represent a huge historical range to master with Beer's high scholarly standards. But I hope that the popularity of Beer's book makes people aware of women composers other than the Anna Beer Eight (Grazyna Bacewicz for one), and especially composers alive and working today: like Lydia Kakabadse, Kate Moore, Sadie Harrison and Cristina Spinei.

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