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Laura Seddon, *British Women Composers and Instrumental Chamber Music in the Earliest Twentieth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 248. ISBN 978 1 4094 3945 5 (hb).

Historians of music by women face both practical and conceptual challenges, from misguided assumptions about the creative powers of women to the problems of working with music that is often unpublished, unrecorded, and which has been bypassed in terms of serious critical discourse. Laura Seddon's excellent and important book engages with a previously neglected tranche of British repertoire, focusing on instrumental chamber music by composers whose names are less familiar to most than Dame Ethel Smyth (though her music is also discussed): Edith Swebstone, Adela Maddison, Ethel Barns, Susan Spain-Dunk, Morfydd Owen, and others. Seddon outlines the critical context for these issues in her introduction, in which she also justifies the examination of instrumental chamber music (rather than vocal music, for example, and excluding solo piano music) on account of the rise of

interest in this genre in the early part of the twentieth century, and on account of what she identifies as particular ‘stylistic adventurousness’ (p.2) in women’s chamber music.

A driving factor in the shape of a woman’s opportunity to be a composer, or even to compose at all, was her socio-economic position. Class, as Seddon shows, affected practicalities (such as whether Dorothy Howell could take a train to London independently during her training at the Royal Academic of Music) as well as opportunities for musical education. Piano lessons were almost obligatory for young women of the middle and upper classes. Approximately half of the women composers in Seddon’s research married, some finding positive support from their husbands for their creative activities; those who did not marry sometimes preferred to partner with other women, though the sexual preferences of women in this period are often difficult to establish and were, in any case, not necessarily fixed. Most women accessed higher education at London conservatories, especially at the Royal Academy of Music, making the capital the most obvious location for the foundation of the Society of Women Musicians (SWM).

Chamber music was viewed as a ‘purifying force’ in society at this time, and women such as Barns, Katherine Eggar and Alice Verne-Bredt were more prominently involved in its rise than history remembers. Composition competitions played a key role in encouraging new work, as did music societies, and these social

networks fostered particular types of musical engagement such as shared appreciation of older works as well as performance and discussion of new pieces. Between 1911 and 1920, the SWM had 423 (female) members, mainly amateurs, and 49 male associates. Chapter 3 explores the SWM from its inaugural meeting at the Women's Institute in London to its disbandment sixty years later. Drawing on archival sources, Seddon demonstrates how the organisation provided a dedicated space for discussion, offered business advice and networking opportunities, and – perhaps most crucially – allowed music to be tested in front of a critical audience. The tone here is documentary at first, but becomes more engaging when the impact of the First World War is discussed, a period that had a great impact on the aspirations that women had for their social roles as well as for their creative achievements. How torn some must have felt to have heard Eggar argue for the central importance of songs, which could enhance poetic sentiment and express ideas more deeply than 'mere' instrumental music. Thankfully, women were not discouraged from this enterprise, and continued to strive for artistic excellence in diverse genres, as can be evidenced in the instrumental works produced for the competitions such as that instituted by Walter Willson Cobbett.

Seddon seeks to evaluate of the extent to which music by women conformed to ideals that had developed by historical and contemporary male composers through her analysis of six chamber works, including sonatas and phantasies. A barometer for

compliance is each composer's approach to sonata form, whose theoretical description has often been steeped in gender-inflected language; Seddon also speculates on which theoretical writings women would have accessed in their preparatory studies. Whether the author's analyses of sonatas and phantasies reveal women composers to have explored a distinctly female aesthetic – something that she acknowledges would have required a far more extensive study – these chapters present detailed considerations of works that show imaginative divergence from the templates available, such as in the incorporation of freer forms and idiosyncratic approaches to repetition and tonality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Seddon finds that in such departures, what might now be perceived as creative challenges to a male aesthetic were then open to criticism as musical corruption, weakness, or immaturity.

In 1911, Eggar addressed the new Society of Women Musicians, lamenting how 'many a composer has given up composing simply because she never gets a hearing' (p.187). Seddon's book makes significant strides towards hearing the contributions made by women musicians; I hope that it will stimulate further discoveries, editions, publications, recordings and performances so that their creative voices can be fully appreciated.

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