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## Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860-1900: representations of music, science, and gender in the leisured home

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**Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900: representations of music, science and gender in the leisured home* (Ashgate, 2000), pp. 340. £45. ISBN 0 7546 0126 9.**

The title and subtitle of this book must intrigue anybody who takes an interest in the cultural background of nineteenth-century literature. The familiarly stereotypical figures of the ‘accomplished’ Victorian girl at her piano, the evolutionary scientist and the domestic hearth where they might meet have often been analysed – and questioned. In fact, Phyllis Weliver’s chapter on sensation fictions shows the seductive, female demon lurking behind the deceptively correct musical performances of two ‘fallen’ heroines. In *East Lynne*, the protagonist, who is to abandon her husband and children to live abroad in shame, starts out playing hymns, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* – namely, that she has just pushed her first husband down a well – is betrayed by marks on her wrist when she is dutifully playing Beethoven to her second spouse. Similarly Trilby, the tone-deaf artists’ model mesmerized into performing as an opera singer, is more than just Svengali’s innocent victim: Weliver convincingly points out certain androgynous characteristics and a personal choice of repertoire that show an unexpectedly independent personality even under hypnosis. Similarly, her nude modelling makes Trilby unsuitable for society at first, but later her beauty serves on stage to attract just that society’s concert-goers. The proverbial female domestic angels and demons may have been far less apart than the cliché suggests.

However: the international diva Trilby ‘La Svengali’, the *grisette* made good, is anything but a figure from a ‘leisured home’. Also the chapter on Rosa Bud’s unexpected resistance to her mesmerizing music-master Jasper in *Edwin Drood* is perceptive but centres more on his frustrated musicianship than hers: neither gender nor the professional status of the ‘women musicians’ under discussion are what the book’s title promises to investigate. The analysis of *Daniel Deronda* concentrates, more pertinently, on Gwendolen and Daniel, although given that professional female musicians *are* discussed, it might have been interesting to see Alcharisi compared with her fellow-professional Trilby. Rosamond Vincy is a classical example of an ‘accomplished’ social-climber-by-music, but for Maggie Tulliver, to whom one of six chapters is devoted, musical experience is almost exclusively passive. ‘Musical women’, as the first chapter goes on to call them, is certainly a better – if still not completely apt – term for this array of very diverse figures.

Unfortunately, similar problems of inconsistency and incompletely substantiated claims recur on different levels throughout the book – not for a lack of things to say but because the text is not completely in control of the many things that could be discussed. This is especially noticeable in the introduction and the two background chapters which deal with mesmerism and evolutionary theories respectively. The word ‘harmony’, for instance, is made to link concepts as diverse as Rameau’s eighteenth-century analysis of thorough bass, neoplatonic ideas of souls vibrating together, mesmerism and Herbert Spencer’s explanation of the origins of music in automatic muscular responses. The chapter on *Edwin Drood* plays with ‘fugue’ as a term for flight, a musical form and a medical condition; the introduction cites – among many others – Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, Lacan and Foucault, Walter Pater, Edward Said, opera, Darwin,

Hélène Cixous and *écriture féminine* as well as statistics on female professional musicians in Britain.

Such an ambitiously broad scope needs not only the wide background reading and close attention Phyllis Weliver undoubtedly brings to them, but also a very stringent presentation, which is sadly missing. The book is harder to read than it should be; numerous inconsistencies make the wide-ranging arguments tiring to follow, despite frequent pointers in the style of ‘as I explained in Chapter 2’. The language is at times inadequate, not to say muddled: ‘If Mesmerism in Dickens is indeed indicative of self-discovery, then what is the larger theme or metaphor that Jasper aspires to in seeking completion through Rosa?’ At other moments, a more focused attention to detail provides rewarding close readings of actual passages, but also leads to pedantry: ‘Captivate means “to charm”, it etymologically comes from “captive”.’ Finally, referring to Schopenhauer’s key concept throughout as *das Will* instead of *der Wille* is a very basic error (and not the only one) which certainly brought out the pedant in this reviewer!

In the introduction, the reader’s attention is drawn to the way in which musicologists have become interested in wider cultural issues beyond mere formal analysis, just as literary studies moved on – somewhat longer ago – from the preoccupations of New Criticism to an interest in ‘Cultural Studies’. This is in fact a very promising development towards a fuller understanding of cultural practices and the ideologies behind their representations, and any work in that direction should be greeted warmly. But while it does need scholars with a sound background in both disciplines (Phyllis Weliver has indeed two degrees), such interdisciplinary work must beware of two temptations: that of facile analogies based on confusing technical and metaphorical uses of certain terms (‘harmony’ is not in all contexts the antonym of ‘melody’), and that of trying to integrate ‘Everything’ which a wider perspective seems to indicate as even marginally pertinent. Otherwise, a certain degree of both simplification and confusion is, like here, inevitable.

The interest of *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction* lies on the one hand in its sound readings of music-related scenes in nineteenth-century novels and on the other in the wide philosophical and musical backgrounds it hints at. To take a willing reader along on such a complex and fundamentally worth-while journey and to maintain her interest, however, the argument and the surface of the text would need to be more carefully tended, both by the writer and a more severe copy-editor.

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