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The Sound Of Forgotten Music

Karen McAulay uncovers some of the great female composers who have been lost from history.

Five years ago, an English schoolgirl hit the headlines when she asked exam board Edexcel to include women composers in the A-Level Music syllabus.

Jessy McCabe set up a petition, and five women’s compositions were added to the Music syllabus as “set works”, with twelve pieces recommended for further listening.

This maybe doesn’t sound like much, but it’s a huge step forward in a world where women composers have historically had a raw deal.

If you read historical novels, you’ll know a well-bred young lady was expected to have musical accomplishments.

It added to her marriageability and gave her something else to do besides embroidery and drawing!

Playing the harpsichord, harp, guitar or flute and accompanying your friends and relations was socially desirable, but an “amateur” didn’t play in public concerts; a genteel lady amateur still less so.

That was for paid professionals, along with teaching music and – if they were men – perhaps publishing their compositions.

Paid musicians often depended on wealthy patrons to ease their career along.

There wasn’t much music published by women in Bach and Mozart’s days. It doesn’t mean the ladies weren’t composing, but their chances of publishing were very limited.

However, a brilliant 17th-century Italian singer and composer called Barbara Strozzi did publish eight books of her music.

Barbara was illegitimate, but the man who adopted her may have been her father. A famous poet himself, he nurtured her musical talent to enable her to earn a living.

Isabella Leonarda was another 17th-century Italian composer who came from a wealthy family and spent her adult life in a convent – allowing plenty of time for composing – and later published a lot of music.

She wrote most of her compositions after the age of fifty – a great example for older female musicians!

The French harpsichordist and composer Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre was from a younger generation, and her background was different again.

She came from a family of musicians, was accepted into the French court as a teenager, and married a
French organist when she was nineteen.
Such were her talents that she continued performing and teaching, and was publishing her own music by the time she was twenty-two.

If you have young musicians in your family, they’ve possibly never heard of these early female composers.
Likewise, quite a few 19th-century women performed, taught and composed music, but simply aren’t known today.
The indomitable Sophia Dussek (née Corri) married a musician called Jan Ladislav Dussek, who entered into partnership with her music publisher father.
Sophia and Jan both composed harp music – amongst other things – but when the family firm got into financial difficulties, Jan disappeared off to Europe.
Sophia continued teaching and composing to support herself and her daughter, starting a music school after she remarried.
In what can only be described as karma, she then proceeded to sell Jan’s compositions for profit.
And her own music was good – it’s a shame it’s not better known.
All musicians have heard of Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann – two stalwarts of the mid 19th century – but I wonder if they’ve played anything by Fanny Mendelssohn (Felix’s equally talented sister), or Clara Schumann?
Poor Clara had a dreadful time during her husband’s tragic mental illness.
She continued to perform and teach, but she lost confidence in her ability to compose.
The author Janice Galloway has written a biography, entitled “Clara”.
The late 1850s saw the births of three composers who certainly deserve to be better known today.
Pianist Cécile Chaminade was born in Paris in 1858, and in the same year, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser was born in Perth to a musical family rivalling the von Trapps for their worldwide singing tours.
Marjory became a song-collector, arranger and composer.
Her “Erlskay Love Lilt” is the most famous song from her “Songs From The Hebrides” collections; anthologies not necessarily appreciated by Gaelic singers these days, but beautiful and very influential in their day.
Like Sophia Dussek, Marjory became the breadwinner when her headmaster husband died relatively young.
She even contributed to the composition of an opera.
The year 1858 saw the birth of Dame Ethel Smyth, another forgotten British composer.
Her best-known song nowadays is the suffragette song, “The March Of The Women”, but she composed a wide range of pieces and was certainly a force to be reckoned with!
Meanwhile, in America, two important women composers were born just a few years later – Amy Beach and Florence Price.
Both left behind an impressive legacy, all the more remarkable in Florence’s case because, if white women struggled to make their voices heard, it was even harder for a woman of colour.

Florence was a pianist, organist and music teacher.
She wrote a wide range of music, including music for symphony orchestras, piano music, songs and arrangements of spirituals.
Amy Beach’s output was similarly extensive.
When you listen to their music, it’s shocking that they’ve been overlooked, simply because they were women.

One woman composer stands out for rather different reasons, and that is the enigmatic Rosemary Brown, the clairvoyant school dinner lady.
Rosemary claimed to take down music at dictation from dead (male) composers who visited her when she was in a trance.
Scholars were divided as to whether she was genuine – in which case, her activities were extraordinary – or a fraud, which meant she must actually have been very skilled in her own right!
Perhaps not the role model we should aspire to, though.
As we all know, it is still challenging for women to make their way in what can seem an unequal world.
It’s good to know that others have trod the path before us – and we owe it to them to remember their contributions!