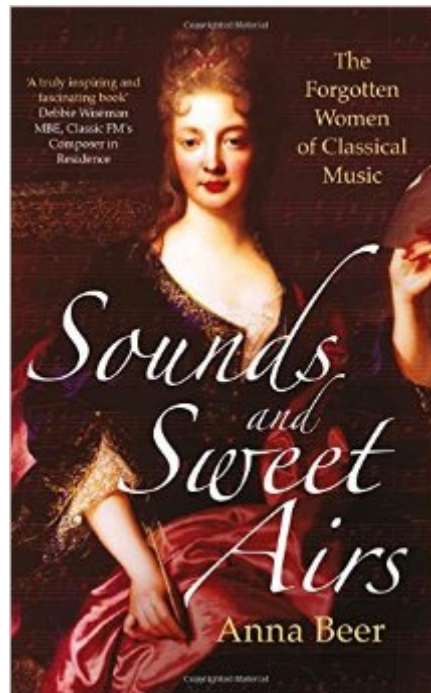


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Sounds And Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women Of Classical Music



Synopsis

As Heard on NPR's Weekend Edition “Absorbing ... [Beer] writes with rich detail and sympathetic insight about [these women's] ambitious, adventurous battles to overcome barriers to creativity."— Publishers Weekly" Savvy, sympathetic ... essential and insightful study of a womanâ™s unsung place in the closed world of classical music."—The Wall Street Journal

SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS reveals the hidden stories of eight remarkable composers, taking the reader on a journey from seventeenth-century Medici Florence to London in the Blitz. Exploring not just the lives and works of eight exceptional artists, historian Anna Beer also asks tough questions about the silencing of their legacy, which continues to this day. Why do we still not hear masterpieces such as Henselâ™s piano work "The Year," Cacciniâ™s arias and Boulangerâ™s setting of Psalm 130? A long-overdue celebration of neglected virtuosos, SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS presents a complex and inspirational picture of artistic endeavour and achievement that deserves to be part of our cultural heritage. The featured composers are Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Å%lisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Marianna Martines, Fanny Hensel (nÃ©e Mendelssohn), Clara Schumann, Lili Boulanger and Elizabeth Maconchy.

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Customer Reviews

The subject matter of this book is what first drew me; obscure female figures from history are always a win. The author goes into lots of detail of their lives, giving us figures that felt real and that we got to know. However, sometimes the author could go into TOO much detail. I felt I was drowning at

times in scene descriptors or tangents that supplemented the women's stories. From the introduction, it sounds like the author faced much the same challenges that her subjects did as she researched their lives. Facing down the idea that a woman's place was under a man and not in the musical world showed through quite clearly, even in the 20th century. Yet, Beer gives us eight women who didn't let those attitudes and society stop them from doing what they loved. Faced with family tragedy, pressure to conform, and the vagaries of patron support, each woman shows us the guts it took to face the world down and create. The amount of detail incorporated into this book was both a blessing and a curse. The author spends a huge amount of time giving us small details into the lives of her subjects: the intimate relations, the dramatic works that launched some of them, honeymoons, romantic letters, and illnesses. All made for vivid reading and creating a connection between these women and the readers. However, I found that at times the author could get too wordy and detailed with her extras. While they added depth to the women portrayed, sometimes the extras would overpower their story in their vivid glory. The early works that shaped Caccini are a prime example. The various plays and musical events she took part in are relevant, yes, but the amount of them talked about and the abundant details used seemed excessive to me.

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.

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