

5 | Women Composers and Feminism

LEAH BROAD

In April 1960, the conductor Kathleen Merritt (1901–85) led an all-woman programme at London's Wigmore Hall. Despite the fact that concerts entirely of music by women composers had been performed in Britain since at least the 1920s, by 1960 it was still unusual to find a woman's name on a UK concert programme. Merritt's concert, therefore, attracted press coverage focusing on her gender, and that of the composers whose music she was performing. In a promotional interview, the *Sunday Times* gave an account of the conductor that today reads very much like a description of a feminist, declaring: '[She] fights not only for women, but for new music by living composers.'¹ Merritt herself, however, was adamant that she was 'not a feminist'.² The *Sunday Times* was quick to reassure readers that 'Merritt has none of the alarming if admirable trappings of women who fight for women's causes.'³

The composers on Merritt's programme were Ina Boyle (1889–1967), Dorothy Howell (1898–1982), Grace Williams (1906–77), Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–94), Ruth Gipps (1921–99), and Antoinette Kirkwood (1930–2014). The *Daily Telegraph* published an extensive review of the concert that represents the critical response in general. It decreed:

The role of the feminine talent in musical composition is a complex issue, not to be embarked upon in a small space. But one aspect of this fascinating subject did emerge – the natural conservatism of women. There was scarcely an emancipated note sounded from one end of the concert to the other. It was as decorous as one always supposes a gathering of ladies to be.⁴

Another lamented that Howell and Kirkwood's pieces had only 'a naive charm that might commend them to unsophisticated players in amateur orchestras', and found the performance merely 'serviceable enough in a home-spun way'.⁵

Merritt's concert, and the responses to it, encapsulate many of the issues presented by approaching feminism in a historical context. As Margaret Walters observes, from the introduction of the term in the 1890s, 'in England, right up until the 1960s at least, the word "feminist" was usually pejorative' and increasingly associated with the campaign for women's

suffrage.⁶ Consequently, many women distanced themselves from the political connotations associated with the term, even when actively promoting women's creative work or leading lives that subverted or resisted the gender expectations of their society. As with so many concepts, historical and contemporary usages of the word are sometimes weakly aligned: it is inappropriate to apply the term 'feminist' to historical composers because they appear to conform to a modern definition. Moreover, feminism is still a contested term. It 'is a very broad church, espousing a wide range of theories, approaches, and methods and including all kinds of dissenters and arguers'.⁷ There is little consensus about how feminism should be defined, what it means to be a feminist, or indeed what the most promising avenues for feminist criticism are.

The critical reaction to the concert, however, demonstrates how sorely needed affirmative 'feminist' action was among musicians. British women had been working as composers for well over a century, yet critics still saw them as a curiosity, made essentialist judgements about their work, and associated them with dilettantism – especially those who distanced themselves from modernism, such as Howell, Kirkwood, and Gipps. Even those who embraced modernism, such as Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–83), were still judged as women first and artists second. Reviewing Lutyens's music in 1966, one critic wrote that 'there has always been an element of dryness about her music, and it doesn't take an anti-feminist to suggest that it may have something to do with her sex'.⁸ The kind of thinking that marginalized women reduced their opportunities to have their compositions heard; at the 1960 Proms, for example, only one work by a woman was performed – Thea Musgrave's *Triptych*. Hundreds of works by British women of the last century still languish unpublished and unrecorded.

For the purposes of this chapter, which examines women composers' relationships with feminism through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I define feminism specifically as a critical engagement with contemporaneous debates about gender-based rights and behaviours. For composers, this might be manifested through the inscription of their own identity and experience into their compositions; through their negotiations with performers, managers, and critics; or through direct political action. My focus is primarily on Britain. For the twentieth century, I explore how Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) and Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979) dealt with feminist issues, the dissimilarity of their approaches indicating that there were many different ways to be both a woman and a composer in twentieth-century Britain. My scope for the twenty-first century is somewhat wider geographically, as while there are still distinctly different

emphases among feminist campaigners according to their locality, global movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have impacted heavily on British feminism and composition, and streaming has made performances worldwide accessible in the UK. The proliferation of explicitly feminist works composed by women in the last twenty years suggests that, despite its nebulosity and historically negative associations, 'feminism' continues to be of relevance for women composers today, with composers actively confronting and challenging violence against women, and the erasure of historical women.

Ethel Smyth and Feminist Action

In her polemic *A Final Burning of Boats*, Smyth observed that 'wretched sex-considerations were really the determining factor of my own life'.⁹ Outspoken in her condemnation of gender prejudice, Smyth and her two-year involvement with the suffrage campaign have made her one of the most famous women composers of the twentieth century. Consequently, there is a rich feminist literature on Smyth and her music, even though she remains on the outskirts of 'mainstream' musicology. She does not appear, for example, in Richard Taruskin's *The Oxford History of Western Music*; and she is frequently omitted, or relegated to a marginal position, in studies of British music of the period not explicitly dedicated to women.¹⁰

Of all the composers in this chapter, Smyth is the most overtly linked to what would have been recognized as a feminist cause in her own day. Despite her initial reservation about joining women's suffrage groups, from 1910 to 1912 she joined the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), becoming a close friend – possibly lover – of Emmeline Pankhurst.¹¹ She was jailed alongside Pankhurst in 1912, serving time in Holloway for allegedly smashing the window of Sir Lewis Harcourt. And during these years she continued to compose, penning a number of works on suffrage themes, and/or dedicated to those in the suffrage movement, such as the *Songs of Sunrise* (including 'The March of the Women', which became the WSPU anthem), her three songs of 1913, her opera *The Boatswain's Mate*, and the final movement of her String Quartet in E Minor.¹² She also wrote prolifically, both during and after her involvement with the WSPU, offering invaluable insight into her opinions on debates about women's rights.

Much of the theoretical literature on Smyth relies on the belief that she composed autobiographically in some way. Notwithstanding the difficulty

of directly linking composers' lives and works, the assumed close relationship between Smyth's life and works, both musical and literary, has resulted in sympathetic and critical readings by scholars including Christopher Wiley, Elizabeth Wood, Hannah Millington, and Amy Zigler.¹³ The assumption that Smyth's life and music are in some way connected has been a long-standing line of argument. As early as 1922, Sydney Grew wrote of her that 'one cannot readily detach her own living personality from her music. Smyth and her music are in every respect one and the same'.¹⁴ For certain works, at least, Smyth's dedications and thematic choices suggest a close parallel between her life and music, which is further reinforced by her letters. Her opera *The Boatswain's Mate*, for example, was composed in Egypt while she was corresponding with Pankhurst. Not only is the opera broadly on the topic of women's rights but also, as Elizabeth Wood has shown, there are moments which are an 'operatic representation of Mrs. Pankhurst's actual experience'.¹⁵

Even in pieces not immediately and obviously connected with women's rights, Smyth may have used her music as a form of feminist activism. Her song 'The Clown' is the first in her 1913 set, the second and third of which are sets to poems by the activist Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and dedicated to Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst respectively. The latter two songs have therefore received a considerable amount of scholarly analysis, investigating what light these works might shed on Smyth's relationships with these two women, and on her wider beliefs about suffrage more broadly.¹⁶ 'The Clown', however, has no dedicatee, and sets a text by Maurice Baring, a known anti-suffragist. As a result, this song has received relatively little critical attention.

The details of Smyth and Baring's relationship, however, suggest that 'The Clown' also had a feminist intention. In her biography of Baring, Smyth documents that his views on suffrage caused 'a grim conflict . . . between Baring and myself. [. . .] In fact, a friendship I greatly valued, and which otherwise – of that I was certain – would stand firm to the end of my life, was tottering'.¹⁷ Smyth therefore took it upon herself to convert Baring to the cause. This was not just for the sake of their friendship, but also because one of her strategies for increasing support for women's suffrage was to convert influential figures within anti-suffrage communities. In this case, Baring was a prominent Roman Catholic, and Smyth hoped that changing his mind would lead to further pro-suffrage conversions within the Church.

'The Clown', then, may have been part of Smyth's conversion strategy, using the clown in Baring's poem as a metaphor for the suffragettes.

Baring's text describes a clown dancing in chains, longing for freedom, because in their heart is 'a dancing spark'. The poem opens with a particularly striking image: 'There was once a poor clown all dressed in white | And chained to the dungeon bars.' In an overt way, the clown could be read as a suffragette, fighting for freedom. White was one of the WSPU's colours, and images of suffragettes chained to railings were well known by 1913. Suffrage literature frequently invoked prison or slavery metaphors, referring to women as being 'chained' and 'imprisoned'. For Smyth there was additional personal meaning in the poem's images of prison cells, given that she herself was imprisoned. The speaker's perspective changes during the text; the first half is in the third person, but the third stanza shifts to first person, encouraging empathy and identification with the clown. Possibly, then, this song has both public and private meanings, as had so many of Smyth's works: publicly, 'The Clown' allows listeners to hear it from a suffragette's perspective, and it provides thematic continuity within the song set, linking to the images of chains and freedom that recur in 'On the Road'. Privately, this song can also be read as a personal plea to its librettist, inviting Baring to see in his own words a stance sympathetic to women's suffrage.

However, an assumed connection between Smyth's life and works is not unproblematic. While it can be interpreted as a powerful way in which Smyth engaged musically with feminist issues, it has also been used as a way to belittle her and write her out of history. In obituaries, for example, her larger-than-life personality was used as a way to marginalize her musical contributions. The *Musical Times* declared that 'she will ultimately rank as a brilliant author and remarkable character who also made some stir by composing music on an ambitious scale for a woman'.¹⁸ The author criticized Smyth's extensive travelling, participation in sports, and numerous friendships, stating that 'she would have made a stronger mark in the artistic world had she stuck more closely to the job of composing'.¹⁹ And some critics maligned her explicit engagement with feminist themes. At the 1911 premiere of her *Songs of Sunrise*, the *Times* dismissed them as 'political tracts' that were 'artistically very far below the level maintained in Miss Smyth's other compositions'.²⁰ The *Daily Telegraph* concurred that 'the concert would have gained in dignity had these effusions been omitted', arguing that they undermined Smyth's claims to be a 'serious' composer.²¹ Critics repeatedly discouraged Smyth from feminist activity by dividing her music into the categories of either 'political' or 'important', a strategy commonly invoked to trivialize women's political work. Ultimately, though, Smyth's highly publicized involvement with the

suffrage campaign motivated some of her most popular works and brought her enduring fame, as well as opening up a space for women composers to engage critically with feminist issues through their music.

Rebecca Clarke in Feminist Analysis

The composer and violist Rebecca Clarke's feminist involvement was far more ambivalent. She played viola in Smyth's songs under the composer's baton at an 'At Home' concert of the Women Writers' Suffrage League in 1911, but this was a rare instance of Clarke appearing at a suffrage event. Unlike her friend and colleague, the cellist May Mukle (1880–1963), who may well have facilitated Clarke's appearance at the 'At Home' concert, Clarke never publicly affiliated herself with the suffrage campaign. Nor did she participate in all-women organizations like the Society of Women Musicians (SWM), founded in 1911. Where Smyth found uplift and empowerment in women's rights groups, they made Clarke feel belittled and marginalized. She attended some of the SWM's first meetings, but later distanced herself from them. She occasionally spoke and performed at their concerts when invited, but a 1920 event at which she performed prompted her to comment that she 'couldn't help wishing I wasn't either a woman or a musician'.²²

Similarly, she was mortified at the response to her being accepted in the string section of the Queen's Hall Orchestra in 1913. In the early twentieth century, professional orchestras in the UK did not employ women. Thus Clarke and the five other string players hired alongside her were making history. Accordingly, their appointment was covered extensively in the suffrage press as a breakthrough for women's rights. *Common Cause's* illustrated article called it 'a red letter day', stating optimistically that it would 'do much to vanquish prejudice and win a fair field for women throughout the musical world'.²³ Clarke recalled that the publicity generated by the appointments meant that when the women walked on stage for their first performance, 'a man, who was evidently a feminist, up in the gallery of Queen's Hall, cheered when I came in, as much as to say, "well, good enough, they've got some women."' It made her feel 'as if I could have dropped into the floor', because she 'knew how the orchestra were annoyed at having women, they thought it was a fearful comedown'.²⁴

Made acutely aware of her position as a woman, Clarke instead tried to put herself in situations where her gender was not foregrounded. Ironically, one way she did so as a performer was to play in all-woman ensembles,

surrounding herself with women who considered it both achievable and unexceptional for women to have successful musical careers. For example, the piano quartet Clarke established in 1927, the English Ensemble, comprised herself and Mukle, with the violinist Marjorie Hayward (1885–1953) and pianist Kathleen Long (1896–1968). They never, however, advertised themselves as an all-woman group. Equally, when Clarke performed in mixed ensembles, such as the Aeolian Players, they made no mention of her gender. Clarke preferred to showcase women's excellence without exhibition or comment. There is only one recorded instance of her explicitly advocating for another woman, when she suggested Mukle as a soloist to the patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (1864–1953) in 1919, externalizing views that she usually kept private. She wrote that 'a great cause is served in putting the work of women executants on an equal footing with that of men, – that is, only when it really *is* equal', and that Mukle was 'one of the very finest artists on *any* instrument, quite irrespective of sex'.²⁵

Clarke adopted the same stance with regard to her composition. When interviewed in 1922, she told the interviewer that music 'has nothing to do with the sex of the artist. I would sooner be regarded as a sixteenth-rate composer than be judged as if there were one kind of musical art for men and another for women'.²⁶ Nevertheless, this has not deterred feminist theorists from analysing the ways in which Clarke's gender may have impacted on her composition. Exploring the possibility of a musical *écriture féminine* (writing that is determined by the female body), Sally Macarthur's analysis of the first movement of Clarke's Piano Trio argues directly contra Clarke that her compositional style has 'something to do with the sex of the composer'.²⁷ Macarthur notes that the movement's 'high points are not where one would expect to find them', and that 'unlike a typical sonata form movement, this one's reliance on a stream of gestures has meant that its overall effect is that of a start/stop nature'.²⁸ Consequently, Macarthur concludes that 'it is possible that a female composer, inhabiting a female body, conceives of her musical proportions differently than does a male composer'.²⁹

While this might be a possibility, it also possible that Clarke's structural innovations may have been influenced by Beethoven, another of her favourite composers.³⁰ As David Greene has demonstrated, Beethoven also places climaxes in places other than at the end of the development or recapitulation (the positions which Macarthur takes to be normative). The opening movement of the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, Op. 106 plays with multiple points of climax, including at the start of the recapitulation and in the coda.³¹ Indeed, such formal innovation is a preoccupation in analysis of

Beethoven's works, as demonstrated in the case of pieces such as the 'Moonlight' Sonata, Op. 27 no. 2, the 'Appassionata' Sonata, Op. 57, and the String Quartet in C# Minor, Op. 131, to select just a few examples. How, then, can this be reconciled with a model of analysis that posits an essentialist relationship between a composer's sex and their conception of form? Furthermore, if it is true that the movement's 'start/stop nature, generated from musical phrases that behave like bodily gestures', is determined by Clarke's sex, it is difficult to explain why Mozart, a composer with whom Clarke was well acquainted, also employs gestures that produce a start/stop effect, as in the first movement of his Piano Sonata in F Major, K. 332, for example.³² As Barbara White has noted: 'Positing an *écriture féminine* allows us to celebrate certain aspects of women's work. But in fetishizing difference, we risk fortifying the already forbidding walls surrounding the female composers' ghetto.'³³ Furthermore, essentialist analytical approaches positing a direct link between biological sex and musical style sit uncomfortably with third- and fourth-wave feminisms adopting trans-inclusive definitions of womanhood, which do not equate sex and gender identity.

I suggest that a more fruitful avenue for interpreting Clarke's creation of phrases that do indeed behave like bodily gestures might be found through reading her memoir. Written when Clarke was in her eighties, the memoir is, at least in part, a story of sexual awakening. Clarke talked about how sexually naive she was in her schooldays, recalling her shock at the realization that her father had affairs and had invited one of his lovers to stay in their family home, and she frankly shared her experiences of sexual harassment both by strangers and by those known to her. Importantly, she also described her relationship with music as follows: 'I do not know how it is with others, but for me the dividing line between music and sex is so tenuous as to be almost nonexistent. Even when listening to music a mutual glance of shared recognition can induce a momentary shiver of something very much like a kind of rarefied sex.'³⁴ She describes composition in terms associated with sexual desire and pleasure, calling it an 'obsession', and saying that when she was composing well she was 'flooded with a wonderful feeling of potential power – a miracle that made anything seem possible', and that this feeling was 'a glorious one. I know of almost nothing to equal it.'³⁵ But she also writes most explicitly about performance as the source of her association between music and sexual desire, describing how she developed a crush on her uncle's lodger, because they played the Bach D minor Concerto for Two Violins together. She explains that playing this concerto was 'a rather dangerous procedure for me, for the slow

movement invariably stirred me to such a degree that [...] I was apt to fall slightly in love' with anybody with whom she performed it.³⁶

Where sexual desire is concerned, Clarke did not talk about harmony, structure, or thematic elements within works – these are only relevant insofar as they facilitate lived experiences between players and listeners. Rather than focusing analytical attention on these elements, then, we might instead look towards gesture in Clarke's music as a means of expressing female desire, following Suzanne Cusick's call for analysts to acknowledge 'the bodies whose performative acts constitute the thing called music'.³⁷ Clarke's 1921–22 song 'The Seal Man', for example, uses theatrical techniques and gestures that foreground the performers and their bodies. By allowing both singer and pianist to explore a wide range of timbres and physical gestures, it expresses desire through the bodiliness of the performers themselves, and the intimacy of expressive interaction between singer, pianist, and audience. The song's text comprises an extract from a short story by John Masefield about a woman who falls in love with a man who is half-seal. She follows him into the sea and drowns. As Deborah Stein notes, Clarke cut the end of Masefield's original text, in which the seal man weeps over his dead lover's body, thereby throwing the emphasis on to the woman. Clarke's abridgement of the tale makes it a song that is first and foremost about desire, told from the woman's point of view.

The way Clarke structures the song is extremely theatrical. She alternates between lyric and quasi-recitative sections to differentiate between the voice of an old woman, who narrates the tale, and the reported direct speech between the woman and the seal man, thereby creating two different musical personas or characters. When the seal man speaks, the piano part stops, so the emphasis is on the vocalist and their body. To call these sections recitative, however, is a little misleading – it is closer to a semi-spoken, melodramatic voice, especially when compared to the woman's 'speaking voice', which is set much more lyrically. In the theatre, the melodramatic voice has well-established associations with the supernatural, making it appropriate for the text of the ghostly seal man, but, as Jacqueline Waerber argues, the melodramatic voice also 'magnifies its aural quality – its "grain" – and its presence acquires devastating potential as pure signifier'.³⁸ These half-spoken, half-sung sections are where both the grain of the individual singer's voice, and the differences between interpretations, are most perceivable. And by setting these sections in such an overtly theatrical way, Clarke provides the opportunity for the singer to incorporate physical gestures as part of their characterization of the seal man and the woman. Such gestures again foreground the body and take up

time, meaning that different singers' pacing of the melodrama sections vary wildly. Amy Petrongelli's 2016 performance, for example, demonstrates how the singer can use movement in these moments – she holds out her hands to the audience, then clasping them to her heart.³⁹ This is a very intimate gesture, almost an invitation, building up a physical rapport between singer and audience.

The piano part has similar moments of theatricality that foreground the performer's body. Elisabeth Le Guin has written convincingly about the importance of theatrical gesture and visuality in the music of Boccherini, and I argue that in light of Clarke's statements about music and sexual desire a similar importance can be attributed to theatricality in her music.⁴⁰ The piano part covers a vast range of the instrument – in the first six bars alone the pianist traverses a full six octaves. This is one of Clarke's most virtuosic piano parts, and the singer and pianist are in a process of constant negotiation, perhaps power play, as it is easy for the pianist to overwhelm the singer, particularly at moments of musical climax. The potential for imbalance between the piano and vocal parts was commented on by contemporaneous reviewers at the song's premiere. The *Daily Telegraph's* review criticized Clarke's writing: 'The composer has not been just clever enough, and the Lisztian waves give the lady so pianistic a drowning that the imaginative atmosphere, which Mr. Goss worked so gallantly to sustain, is completely nullified a few bars before the end. How much more cunning to have allowed the voice to finish alone!' Perhaps so. But Clarke may be doing something different here, and she wants the singer to be 'drowned', as the reviewer put it, by the piano part. Throughout the song the piano represents the sea, the place where, in this tale, both death and desire are subsumed. So it seems fitting that it is the piano part, the sea, that concludes the song.

Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

The circumstances in which many women composers are working today are, in some ways, almost unrecognizable in relation to those of composers like Clarke and Smyth. Although some elements have proved remarkably resistant to change, particularly where 'classical' music is concerned, the sheer number of women working globally as composers over the last few decades has resulted in an extraordinary variety of different engagements with feminism.⁴¹ Public discourse around women's rights has progressed to the point where composers can openly discuss how their work critically

engages with contemporary feminism, and the digital emphasis of fourth-wave feminism has facilitated the emergence of cross-continental movements such as #MeToo.

Resisting violence against women is a core concern of both third- and fourth-wave feminism,⁴² and, indeed, an increasingly common theme in contemporary compositions by women. Within works that address sexual violence, composers frequently use theatrical and virtuosic techniques that foreground the body, as Clarke does in 'The Seal Man'. Here, though, virtuosity is weaponized, and the physicality of the performance is used to articulate pain or difficulty. Shelley Washington's 2016 *Big Talk*, for example, was composed 'as a personal response to the repulsive prevalence of rape culture'. The composer describes the work, written for two baritone saxophones, as 'an endurance piece that incorporates all aspects of the body', emulating the 'everyday endurance of a constant barrage of physical and verbal abuse'.⁴³ The piece is deliberately exhausting for both performer and listener, with a propulsive rhythmic drive and energy that gives it an 'unrelenting, churning' quality.⁴⁴ Similarly, in Jasmin Kent Rodgman's string quartet *where the conflict ends* (2020), she instructs the players to make 'white-noise vocal sounds that eventually become a [...] blood-curdling scream', using 'visceral sounds' as an 'expression of frustration' against 'the violence of being silenced'.⁴⁵

In Özden Gülsün's 2020 song cycle *Al kan Kuşak* (*The Bloody Red Belt*), however, the singer is foregrounded as a way of creating intimacy between performer and audience, and humanizing the women about whom they sing. The work, a cycle of seven songs set to a poem by Didem Gülçin Erdem, is a commemoration of Turkish women killed as a result of patriarchal violence. Özden Gülsün wrote that one of her motivations was to 'share my grief and anger as a woman living in Turkey'.⁴⁶ The poems alternate between fictionalized accounts of murdered women's stories, and sections of 'anger and resistance' focused on protest marches held in Turkey to raise awareness about patriarchal violence.⁴⁷ In the latter sections the voice is used in a comparable manner to *where the conflict ends*, with the singer instructed to scream as recordings of the marches are played, creating a clamour of shouting voices. But in the narrative sections, although the material makes considerable demands of the singer (the piece covers a full coloratura range, reaching up to e), the tone is elegiac, not aggressive. Chelsea Hollow, the soprano who commissioned, premiered and recorded the work, writes that despite this music's theatricality, it should 'be treated with the intimacy of a recital setting [...] There isn't a costume and character; the singer is a human presenting a perspective'.

For her, the drama and virtuosity in the work are essential for communicating ‘genuine humanity’, physicality conveying empathy as well as anger.⁴⁸

Resistance to the silencing of women has also been manifested in the form of compositions that directly refer to historical composers and engage in dialogue with their works, thereby contributing to the ongoing recovery of women’s voices. Particularly in a career where women have been so marginalized, the establishment of a lineage, precedents, and role models is of paramount importance – an issue that Smyth in her time recognized, stating that she penned so many memoirs because she wanted other women to ‘realise that they are not as alone as they perhaps believe’.⁴⁹ She felt this was especially important for composers, because of the ‘temptation to pretend that woman are non-existent musically, to ignore or damp down our poor little triumphs such as they are’.⁵⁰

Clara Schumann has, unsurprisingly, provided a focal point for this kind of composition: Gabriela Ortiz’s *Clara* (2022) reflects on the relationship between Clara and Robert. The composer stated that the piece ‘signals my gratitude to all the women who, in their time, challenged the society they were raised in by manifesting their artistic oeuvre’.⁵¹ Even here, though, programming habits that have pushed women’s creative work to the margins persist: although the focus of Ortiz’s work is ostensibly on Clara, the piece was premiered alongside Robert’s First and Second Symphonies, with no music by Clara herself, once again foregrounding Robert and his music within Clara’s story. This is a narrative that Chloe Knibbs aimed to subvert in her 2019 *Clara*, a three-movement choral work that foregrounds Clara as composer and pianist.⁵² ‘It seems odd that [Robert] should have so much of her narrative’, Knibbs argues, so she makes no reference to him throughout her composition, instead emphasizing Clara’s personality, independent of her husband.⁵³ The first movement, for example, sets fragments of Clara’s diary – and where she expressed reservations about composition, Knibbs splits the choir to create a sense of internal struggle. ‘I wanted to get this idea of a dialogue going, and not really resolve it’, Knibbs says, allowing a space for Clara to be conflicted and unsure of herself without it diminishing her achievements as a musician. ‘The way she talks about her professional life felt very emotional and colourful and passionate’, Knibbs observes, aiming to convey something of Clara’s multifaceted personality in her work.⁵⁴

Both intentionally and involuntarily, the lives and music of women composers have been, and continue to be, closely interwoven with the history of feminism. Historical women have been the instigators of feminist

action, the subjects of feminist analysis, and now the inspiration for feminist composition. It remains important to differentiate, though, between feminist composition and compositions by women, lest the two become equated. A woman composing might once have constituted a feminist act of itself, but women's compositions can only be accorded the kind of nuance automatically afforded their male counterparts if they are not automatically assumed to be concerned with gender issues. Clarke, for example, did not intend her music to be construed as feminist, and resented being thought of as such purely because of her gender, even if her career had many elements that can be considered feminist. This, in turn, allows explicitly feminist compositions to stand more convincingly as political statements and interventions, drawing attention to the ongoing need, still, for women to resist their artistic erasure.

Further Reading

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Notes

1. J. E., 'Women Make Music', *Sunday Times*, 24 April 1960.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Donald Mitchell, 'Too Decorous Women Composers: Gauche Works', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1960.

5. 'Women Composers of Today', unknown newspaper, 1960. Clipping held at Dorothy Howell Trust (DHT).
6. Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
7. Rita Felski, *Literature after Feminism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.
8. Stephen Walsh, 'Music Last Week', *The Listener*, 8 December 1966, 869. Quoted in Annika Forkert, 'Magical Serialism: Modernist Enchantment in Elisabeth Lutyens's *O Saisons, Ô châteaux!*', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 14/2 (2017), 271–303, at 272.
9. Ethel Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats Etc.* (London: Longmans, 1928), 15.
10. Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For British studies see for example Meirion Hughes and R. A. Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840–1940: Constructing a National Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) or Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). For literature on Smyth see, for example, Christopher St. John, *Ethel Smyth: A Biography* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1959); Louise Collis, *Impetuous Heart: The Story of Ethel Smyth* (London: William Kimber, 1984); Elizabeth Kertesz, *Issues in the Critical Reception of Ethel Smyth's Mass and First Four Operas in England and Germany*, PhD diss. (University of Melbourne, 2001); Elizabeth Wood, 'On Deafness and Musical Creativity: The Case of Ethel Smyth', *Musical Quarterly*, 92/1/2 (2009), 33–69; Hannah Millington, "'1910": Ethel Smyth's Unsung Suffrage Song', *Musicology Review*, 10 (2021), 55–76; Amy Zigler, "'What a splendid chance missed!": Dame Ethel Smyth's *Der Wald* at the Met', *Opera Journal*, 54/2 (2021), 109–63; and Leah Broad, *Quartet: How Four Women Changed the Musical World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023).
11. For more on this relationship, see Rachel Lumsden, "'The Music between Us": Ethel Smyth, Emmeline Pankhurst, and "Possession"', *Feminist Studies*, 41/2 (2015), 335–70.
12. For analysis of these works see Elizabeth Wood, 'Performing Rights: A Sonography of Women's Suffrage', *Musical Quarterly*, 79/4 (Winter 1995), 606–43, at 615.
13. Christopher Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks the Truth about Her Body": Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/Biography', *Music & Letters*, 85/3 (2004), 388–414; Christopher Wiley, 'Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and "The First Woman to Write an Opera"', *Musical Quarterly*, 96/2 (2013), 263–95; Elizabeth Wood, 'The Lesbian in the Opera: Desire Unmasked in Smyth's *Fantasio* and *Fête Galante*', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 285–305; Hannah Millington, "'I Unearthed in My Loft a Cantata": Contextualising

- Ethel Smyth's *Song of Love* Op. 8'; and Amy Zigler, "'Perhaps What Men Call a Sin . . .': An Examination of Ethel Smyth's *The Prison*' (both given at the Third International Conference on Women's Work in Music, Bangor, September 2021), the latter published as "'Perhaps What Men Call a Sin . . .': An Examination of Ethel Smyth's *The Prison*', in *Women Composers in New Perspectives, 1800–1950: Genres, Contexts and Repertoire*, ed. Mariateresa Storino and Susan Wollenberg, *Speculum Musicae*, XLIX (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 213–34.
14. Sydney Grew, *Our Favourite Musicians* (London: T. N. Foulis, 1922), 100.
 15. Wood, 'Performing Rights', 615.
 16. See Lumsden, 'The Music between Us'.
 17. Ethel Smyth, *Maurice Baring* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1938), 45.
 18. 'McN', 'Dame Ethel Smyth, April 23, 1858–May 9, 1944', *Musical Times*, 85 (July 1944), 207–12, at 212.
 19. *Ibid.*, 208.
 20. 'Dr. Ethel Smyth's Concert', *The Times*, 3 April 1911.
 21. 'Miss Smyth's Concert', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 April 1911.
 22. Rebecca Clarke, Diary, 9 July 1920. Unpublished document quoted courtesy of Christopher Johnson.
 23. 'Women in Orchestras', *Common Cause: The Organ of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*, 24 October 1913.
 24. Rebecca Clarke, quoted in 'Musicologist Ellen D. Lerner Interviews Rebecca Clarke', in *The Rebecca Clarke Reader*, ed. Liane Curtis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 214.
 25. Rebecca Clarke to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, 28 September 1918. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.
 26. W. H. Haddon Squire, 'Rebecca Clarke Sees Rhythm as Next Field of Development', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 December 1922.
 27. Sally Macarthur, 'Sexing the Subject of Music Analysis', *Feminist Aesthetics in Music* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 81–105, at 96. On Liane Curtis's careful investigation of the context in relation to which Clarke's use of sonata form might best be judged, see Chapter 2. See also, on Chaminade's subversive sonata form structure, Susan Wollenberg, 'New Paths to Analysis: The Case of Women Composers', in Xavier Hascher, Mondher Ayari, and Jean-Michel Bardez, eds., *L'analyse musicale aujourd'hui / Music Analysis Today* (Sampzon: Éditions Delatour France, 2015), 291–312.
 28. Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics*, 95.
 29. *Ibid.*, 96.
 30. See Rebecca Clarke, 'The Beethoven Quartets as a Player Sees Them', *Music & Letters*, 8/2 (1927), 178–90.
 31. David B. Greene, *Temporal Processes in Beethoven's Music* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science, 1982), 112.
 32. Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics*, 93.

33. Barbara A. White, 'Difference or Silence? Women Composers between Scylla and Charybdis', *Indiana Theory Review*, 17/1 (1996), 77–85, 80. See also Ellie M. Hisama, who argues that 'there is [...] no biological imperative for women to compose one way and men another', even if the gendered world in which women lived resulted in their composing slightly differently to men. Ellie M. Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.
34. Rebecca Clarke, *I Had a Father Too: or, The Mustard Spoon*, 142. Unpublished document, quoted courtesy of Christopher Johnson.
35. *Ibid.*, 159.
36. *Ibid.*, 142.
37. Suzanne G. Cusick, 'Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem', *Perspectives of New Music*, 32/1 (Winter 1994), 8–27, at 16.
38. Jacqueline Waeber, 'The Voice-Over as "Melodramatic Voice"', *Melodramatic Voices: Understanding Music Drama* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 215–35, at 222.
39. Amy Petrongelli and Blair Salter, 'The Seal Man' (accessed 16 June 2022). www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MaY9nrORFI.
40. See Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
41. On resistance to change, see for example data from DONNE: Women in Music, showing that only 7.7 per cent of compositions performed by orchestras worldwide in the 2021–22 season were written by women. DONNE: Women in Music, *Equality and Diversity in Global Repertoire* (September 2022).
42. See, for example, works like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (discussed – and contextualized – further by Gascia Ouzounian in Chapter 14), in which audience members are invited to cut pieces of clothing from the performer's body.
43. Shelley Washington, *Big Talk* programme note (accessed 18 July 2022) www.shelleywashington.com/music-1.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Jasmin Kent Rodgman, quoted in 'VQ Chat Live' (accessed 18 July 2022) www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYZKSvuBT0U, and Jasmin Kent Rodgman, *where the conflict ends* programme note (accessed 18 July 2022) www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/where-the-conflict-ends-villiers-quartet-concert.
46. Özden Gülsün, private correspondence with the author, 17 March 2022.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Chelsea Hollow, private correspondence with the author, 10 March 2022.
49. Smyth, *A Final Burning*, 15.
50. *Ibid.*, 38.
51. Gabriela Ortiz, quoted in Dorothée Jourdain, 'The world premiere of "Clara" by Gabriela Ortiz, reviewed by New York Classical Review!', *Latitude 45 Arts*

(accessed 19 July 2022) www.latITUDE45arts.com/post/the-world-premiere-of-clara-by-gabriela-ortiz-reviewed-by-new-york-classical-review.

52. *Clara* was commissioned on the Making Music's Adopt a Composer Scheme in 2018/2019 and was delivered in partnership with Sound and Music and BBC Radio 3. The project centred around a collaboration with West Midlands-based choir Ex Urbe, conductor Benjamin Hamilton, and harpist Angelina Egerton.
53. Chloe Knibbs, interview with the author, 3 March 2022.
54. *Ibid.* Clara Schumann has not been the only composer to prompt works in response to historical musicians – see also Knibbs's *Ruins* (inspired by the nineteenth-century French composers Clémence de Grandval, Marie Jaëll, and Augusta Holmès), and Amble Skuse's *Balancing Act* (based on the names of over 1,000 women composers), for example.