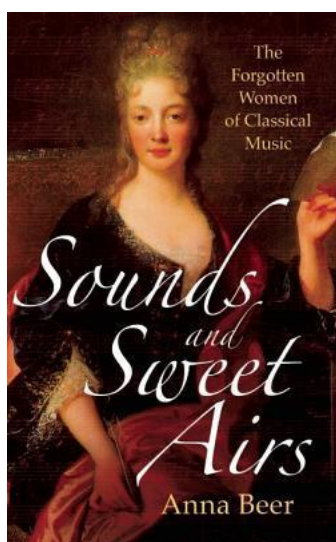




We Read



Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music by [Anna Beer](#)

2016, 304 pages

Reviewed by BJ Nicoletti

This book is an interesting and reasonable read that is [relevant to the times and long overdue](#). In short, it tells the story of eight female composers who, like many women in the arts and otherwise, were left out in the telling of history. It was a pleasant, accidental discovery from a browse through the Eugene, OR Barnes &

Noble! It can be read front to back or easily appreciated by selecting any chapter that draws one's attention. I recommend picking it up somewhere for your fall or winter reading list. It is out on paperback for \$16 and available through Kindle for \$8. My local libraries don't carry it.

The time period focuses on late 1600's through early 1900's. Out of the eight composers, I was only familiar with one, Clara Schumann. The other seven are: Francesca Caccini; Barbara Strozzi; Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre; Marianna Martines; Fanny Hensel; Lili Boulanger; and Elizabeth Maconchy.

My favorite of the chapters was the one about Fanny Hensel, otherwise known as Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of Felix Mendelssohn. Like her brother, she too was recognized early on as extraordinarily gifted in music. Yet, ...

The girl reaches the age of fourteen and suddenly everything changes. Her banker father returns from another business trip to Paris, carrying special gifts for his talented daughter and son: for her, a necklace of Scottish jewels; for him, the writing implements so that he might compose his first opera. The boy will find a public stage for his talent. The girl will find bejewelled happiness at home. And

so it came to pass. The boy, Felix Mendelssohn...would be celebrated as one of the century's great composers, conductors, and performers. The girl, Fanny...would remain a private figure, lost to music history for a century and a half. Sounds and Sweet Airs, by Anna Beer

A quick search of iTunes and Spotify streaming services revealed some recorded content for these composers. For those members with iTunes streaming services, here is a playlist pulled together by a subscriber who focused on the women mentioned in the book – [Sounds and Sweet Airs Playlist](#).

A search of these composers at [All Music](#), Grove Music (a free benefit if you are member of the National Flute Association) or Wikipedia provides a brief account of their contributions. However, their respective chapters in *Sounds and Sweet Airs* bring them to life, including, remarkably, with photographs.

“Above all, these composers were pragmatic. They did not seek out, or seek to create, a female tradition, nor did they wait for a female teacher or mentor. They invariably worked with, and within, a male-dominated musical culture.”

“If it is, and remains, against the odds to be a woman composer, then the ways which individual women have beaten those odds bears telling.”

“Working in landscapes of belief that would silence the vast majority of women, these eight composers each found a way to express their exceptional talent, often within an exceptional community.”

“Brought together, their stories provide a complex and inspirational picture of artistic endeavour and achievement across the centuries, which deserves to be, but is not currently, part of our cultural heritage. We are the poorer for it.”

Sounds and Sweet Airs, Anna Beer

Sheet music for seven of the eight can be found, not to anyone's surprise, at [Hildegard Publishing](#), a publishing house whose “mission is to seek out and publish compositions by women composers which display the highest level of excellence and musical merit. Because works by women composers have been historically overlooked and undervalued, our hope is to make these gems more widely available for concert performance.” To my knowledge, none wrote specifically for flute that we know of. However, many of their works are female vocal or for violin, which are often readily “readable” for the flute or arranged for flute. Perhaps one of us will listen more deeply and something will catch our ear as interesting to try on our flute. Some of the vocal music is “opera aria luscious,” rarely an unattractive choice for the flute voice.

❖ Here is the Goodreads Review for this book – [Sounds and Sweet Airs](#) by Anna Beer

❖ A piece on NPR about the book: [NPR Sounds and Sweet Airs](#)

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