
This study focuses in detail on instrumental chamber music produced by women in the early twentieth century, a particularly fertile and under-represented period with regard to this topic and it draws on aspects of women’s history, British music history and feminist musicology. It argues that the Cobbett competitions instigated by Walter Wilson Cobbett in 1905 and the formation of the Society of Women Musicians in 1911 contributed to the explosion of instrumental music, including phantasies, written by women in this period. It highlights women’s place in British musical society leading up to and during the First World War and investigates the relationship between Cobbett, the Society of Women Musicians and women composers themselves. Chamber works for a variety of instrumental combinations by six composers, Adela Maddison (1866-1929), Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), Morfydd Owen (1891-1918), Ethel Barns (1880-1948), Alice Verne-Bredt (1868-1958) and Susan Spain-Dunk (1880-1962) (all at different stages in their compositional careers at this time) are analysed. This is undertaken particularly with reference to their formal procedures, an issue much discussed by contemporary sources. The individual composers’ reactions (or lack of them) to the debate instigated by the Society of Women Musicians on the future of women’s music is considered in relation to their lives, careers and chamber music itself. As the composers in this study were not a cohesive group, creatively or ideologically, the dissertation draws on primary sources, especially the archives of the Society of Women Musicians and Marion Scott, as well as the writings of contemporary commentators, to assess the legacy of the chamber works produced.

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This is the first full-length study of British women's instrumental chamber music in the early twentieth century. Laura Seddon argues that the Cobbett competitions, instigated by Walter Willson Cobbett in 1905, and the formation of the Society of Women Musicians in 1911 contributed to the explosion of instrumental music written by women in this period and highlighted women's place in British musical society in the years leading up to and during the First World War. Early twentieth-century Britain offered women composers a very particular set of circumstances, both social and musical, in which to create their works. The main purpose of this book is to uncover some neglected works and place them in the context of early twentieth-century British music. Classical music, one of the earliest forms of music in British history, was dominated by likes of composers such as Arthur Sullivan, Gustav Holst, Edward Elgar, Hubert Parry, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten in the early 20th century. The nation is also known for its legacy in folk music which was revived in the mid-20th century, keeping folk music an important subculture within society. British music has been influenced by the musical traditions of other European countries as well as by the distinct traditions brought by immigrants from countries like Jamaica and India. In the con