

Schumann, Holmes & Smyth: A Lineage in Female Authorship

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Abstract

This article looks at the relationship between Clara Schumann, Augusta Holmès, and Dame Ethel Smyth and how their knowledge of one another's place in history informs our understanding of their compositional output. The canonic significance attributed to Clara Schumann and the idea of "the first woman to compose large symphonic works" will be discussed in relation to modern writings on female canons in creative writing. In addition, this essay will present an analysis of the feminist and political implications of Augusta Holmès's opera *La Montagne Noire* and Dame Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers*. How Smyth and Holmès chose to depict the women in these operas will be examined against feminist musicological criticism of the genre and the composers' own politics.

Recommended Music to accompany this article

Holmès, Augusta, *La Montagne Noire*, Paris: February 8, 1895.

Smyth, Ethel, *The Wreckers*, Leipzig: November 11, 1906.

Schumann: Holmes & Smyth: A Lineage in Female Authorship

Clara Schumann has long been heralded as a composer of inventive structure and style, proving ever more popular as Isata Kanneh-Mason champions her work for a new generation.^[1] This essay will detail the impact of Schumann as a predecessor to the creativity of Augusta Holmès and Dame Ethel Smyth. In addition to illustrating these women's integral roles in the development of their own musical output, this essay will present an analysis on the feminist and social implication of Holmès' opera *La Montagne Noire* (1895)^[2] and Smyth's *The Wreckers* (1906).^[3] This essay will begin by contextualising Holmès and Smyth's operatic output in the wake of Schumann being culturally understood as the first woman to create concert music. The role of women in these operas will also be examined in relation to the contemporary discussions on the operatic tradition and misogynistic tropes. The myth of Schumann and the canonic significance attributed to "the first female" will also be examined in relation to these women's creative output. This essay will explore the roles these women fulfilled in developing a female canon, how they existed in the public music-making sphere, and Smyth and Holmès' representations of women in their operas.

False Firsts and Canons

"I once believed that I had creative talent, but I have given up on this idea; a woman must not wish to compose—there never was one able to do it. Am I intended to be the one? It would be arrogant to believe that. That was something with which only my father tempted me in former days. But I soon gave up believing this."^[4]

[1] Isata Kanneh-Mason, "Clara Schumann Was the Beyoncé of Her Day," *The Guardian*, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/12/clara-schumann-was-the-beyonce-of-her-day-she-needs-to-be-heard-more>.

[2] Augusta Holmès, *La Montagne Noire*, Paris: February 8, 1895.

[3] Ethel Smyth, *The Wreckers*, Leipzig: November 11, 1906.

[4] Quoted in Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Oxford: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 57.

This infamous quotation from Schumann's diaries paints a depressing picture of the isolating world of female creative musicianship in the early nineteenth century.^[5] Its poignancy is not only gleaned from the composer's lack of faith in her own creativity, but from the statement's overwhelming falsity.^[6] In contrast to Schumann's pessimism, Virginia Woolf's letter to her friend Smyth presents a similar level of ahistoricism, touting "Why shouldn't you... be the first woman to write an opera?"^[7] Once again this is demonstrably false.^[8] The fact that composers, and wider society, were unaware of prior female compositional output, and that their history was excluded by historians has been discussed by late-twentieth-century feminist musicologists already, and the ignorance on this subject is not necessarily what I find most interesting here. Rather, it is the conscious understanding of their unique place in history that is of most interest. This understanding of being shoehorned into a niche seems to disempower Schumann, feeling that she is ill-equipped to tackle this historic responsibility, and even feigning, depressingly, that perhaps it is not a women's place at all to compose. Smyth's response to Woolf, however, can perhaps be seen as embracing the idea of "the first" (with regard to opera) as despite Smyth personally knowing Holmès and her compositional output, which included four operas at the time of writing, Smyth does not correct Woolf here. Woolf later reveals in a letter to her friend that she had refuted Smyth's romantic feelings towards her, so while a cynic might read Smyth's unwillingness to correct Woolf as an implicit white lie in an attempt to impress a potential romantic partner, I think this more related to Smyth's position as an instrumental first-wave feminist.

The poignancy of Woolf's ignorance is further emphasised by Smyth's active and well-documented interest in the music and life of Holmès – whose ground-breaking opera *La Montagne Noire* premiered over twenty years before Smyth's *The Wreckers*.

^[9] However, the reality of who was or wasn't truly "the first" are irrelevant (if symptomatic of a larger problem): it is the "temptation," (as Schumann so tellingly puts it) the allure of being "the one," "the first" woman (as far as they or their contemporaries are aware) to excel in an area of compositional practice and the canonic significance promised by doing so.^[10] When comment-

[5] For a broad overview of the double standards relayed by critics at the time, see Claudia MacDonald, "Critical Perception and the Woman Composer: The Early Reception of Piano Concertos by Clara Wieck Schumann and Amy Beach," *Current Musicology* 55 (1993): 24-55.

[6] For a wide and encompassing overview of women in western music, see Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, eds., *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 90-161.

[7] Quoted in Christopher Wiley, "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2013): 263.

[8] This foible proves just as monumentally false as Schumann's, with operas written by: Holmès (as mentioned); Pauline Viardot; Tekla Griebal Wandall; and Cecile Chaminade all performed within sixty years of Woolf's letter. This is of course to say nothing of the operas also written by: Felicity Casella; Marie Grandval; Amalie, Princess of Saxony; Maria Antonia Walpurgis; Wilhelmina, Princess of Prussia; Mlle Duval; Jacquet de la Guerre; and Francesca Caccini, spanning a timeframe between 1625 and 1865. For a visual representation of women's history in music, see "Women in Music Timeline," *Oxford Music Online*, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/page/women-in-music-timeline> (Accessed 20 February 2020).

[9] Wiley, "Music and Literature," 271.

[10] Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" theory proves uniquely inapplicable as (to their knowledge) there is no "great" woman for them to Oedipally (or rather, in the manner of Electra) symbolically "destroy." See this author, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

ing on contemporary authorship Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar remarked that as a consequence of the literary canon's lack of women, "today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging."^[11] Holmès and Smyth were certainly aware of an emerging musical tradition – as mentioned Smyth knew of Holmès' work, Holmès had been introduced to Schumann, etc. – in addition to partaking in active discussions around feminism and its associated lineages.^[12] Therefore perhaps it is more interesting to analyse this sentiment from the perspective of Schumann. It is more than apparent that Schumann has no reference to an "emerging female tradition" (despite conscious efforts during her lifetime to highlight female musical histories).^[13] So what does this make of Gubar and Gilbert's theory? Schumann's reference to her own "arrogance" implies a self-awareness of the monumentality and symbolic significance her presence in the musical canon would possess, whereas Gubar and Gilbert's idealistic portrayal of a woman assisting a canon already in motion glosses over the anxiety of being the true "first" (or at least, "true" to her knowledge). This anxiety is a product of a false canon, littered with hidden, forgotten "firsts." This narrative allows a disproportionate number of women to take on the role of the revolutionary "first," creating a looping sense of history as female stories are told from a sense of novelty, and rarity again, and again, and again.

Opera, and the Transformation of Mezzos

Opera and its notoriously poor treatment of women has been long debated and discussed in musicological writings.^[14] Catherine Clément's landmark text *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (1988) holds a critical lens to the nineteenth-century fad of soprano femicide with analysis on how composers orchestrated these heroines' deaths to be musically and thematically necessary.^[15] Meditating on the most popular and well-known operas of our time, it is unsurprising that no women composers' works feature in Clément's text. The lineage of Schumann-Holmès-Smyth nevertheless bears witness to the adoption of large-scale form in female composers' repertory. The earliest women composer Smyth and Holmès cite in their writings is Schumann, with Smyth citing her directly as

[11] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 50.

[12] For Holmès, see Jann Pasler, *Writing Through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 218-48. For Smyth, see Christopher Wiley, "When a Woman Speaks the Truth About Her Body": Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/Biography," *Music and Letters* 85, no. 3 (2004): 388-414.

[13] See Mme de Bawr's first attempt at authoring a female history of music, complete with critiques of contemporary composers: Alexandrine Sophie Bawr, *Histoire de la musique* (Paris: Audot, 1823).

[14] For a rounded perspective, see Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Besty Wing (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1988); Ruth A. Solie, ed., *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (London: University of California Press, 1993), 225-59.

[15] Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, 50-71.

the earliest composer of large-scale form (something Smyth placed utmost importance in).^[16] While Schumann's oeuvre predominantly consists of chamber works, she was clearly viewed by Smyth and Holmès as pivotal precedent to women composers creating in a public male-dominated sphere where the "sexual aesthetics" of their participation was a seemingly improper, a precedent even more important when delving into the coveted genre of operatic writing.^[17] How these composers engage with the women in their texts through their music and themes reflects the transformation of feminist thought through fin-de-siècle Europe and its impact on further social and personal values.

"This narrative allows a disproportionate number of women to take on the role of the revolutionary "first," creating a looping sense of history as female stories are told from a sense of novelty, and rarity again, and again, and again."

Holmès' only publicly performed opera *La Montagne Noire* at first appears to teeter dangerously on the edge of the shadow of femicide. The libretto – which Holmès is also the author of – tells a story set in the seventeenth-century Balkans, with a forbidden love affair between Mirko, a Montenegrin soldier and Yamina, a Turkish slave, camp-follower and prisoner in Montenegro. Yamina plays the role of the seductress,^[18] luring Mirko away from his fiancée Helena and convincing him to join her in the life of the "infidel." The story of the "exotic," sexually powerful woman (who sings in the mezzo-soprano register) stands very comfortably in operatic convention conflation. Ideas of the "exotic" and the feminine often come together under this banner.^[19] During the final battle scene Yamina runs on stage, brandishing gold and jewels she has stolen from the Turkish camp amidst the chaos. When Mirko reaches out his hand shouting her name she retorts, "Moi?... J'ai peur!" before leaving Mirko and fellow soldier Aslar

[16] Wiley, "Music and Literature," 272.

[17] On sexual aesthetics and their consequences, see Eugene Gates, "Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don't: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31, no. 1 (1997): 63-71.

[18] Karen Henson, "In the House of Disillusion: Augusta Holmès and 'La Montagne noire,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9, no. 3 (2020): 233-62.

[19] See Rebecca Larissa Rockwood, "Augusta Holmes: 'Les Argonautes' and 'La Montagne Noire,'" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2002); Sanna Iitti, *The Feminine in German Song* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 61-80.

to die on the battlefield. As she leaves the stage Mirko continues to call after her, while Aslar continues to chastise his friend's foolishness in trusting her (See Example 1).

MIRKO (tendant les bras à Yamina.) *f* Ya - mi - na!

ASLAR *f* Vois! elle fuit, la misé - ra - - - ble! *ff* Ya - mi - na!

YAMINA *più f* Moi?.. J'ai *ff* Ya - mi - na! Ya - mi - na!

Y. (elle sort.) peur! *ff*

M. Non!

ASLAR *f* Pour la dernière fois, viens! *ff*

Example 1. *La Montagne Noire*, Act IV Scene II, 385-386.

To begin, the opera appears to tap into routine topoi of exoticism and dangerous female sexuality. There are already an abundance of similarities with Georges Bizet's *Carmen*: the mezzo-soprano lead; the exotic location; our female lead being "foreign" even with regard to the opera's "foreign" setting;^[20] a militaristic love interest; and social status (*Carmen* works a low paid job in a cigarette factory, is discriminated against by the law and threatened with prison time).^[21] The most prominent difference is of course their endings: Clément's self-proclaimed "favourite" dies alone, murdered by her former love, whereas Yamina – free and indiscriminately wealthy – awaits her life of prosperity offstage. Meanwhile our male protagonists are martyred in battle. However, the feminist scholar is left in an uncomfortable position when analysing Yamina: James Parakilas remarked it could "scarcely" be called a feminist opera, while acknowledging the "striking" gendered inversion of its denouement.^[22] While the feminist implications of whether it is more problematic to vilify or kill a female character prove contentious to Parakilas, it is the self-sacrifice of the Christian Montenegrin soldiers that the final scene truly spotlights. Holmès' feminism was deeply rooted in patriotism as was that of many French republican feminists at the time.^[23] The role of motherhood became valued by far-right leaders such as Paul Déroulède who viewed such practices as integral to the development of the French army. Jann Pasler illustrates how these ideologies influenced not only Holmès' compositions and their reception but also their production – as she described the ideal *Ode Triomphale* (1889) performance being executed with white, blond performers: the character Amphitrite is supposed to be represented as "very white, and very blond;" the character Apollo is "very all, very young and very blond;" the character that plays the Sea is also "a young blond woman;" the two romantic protagonists of the work are also "blond, white, and beautiful." Pasler describes this as an example of Holmès "promot[ing] white and blond women as the ideal of French society."^[24] An understanding of Holmès' nationalism and racism helps us understand another hypothesis for Yamina's vilification outside of Parakilas's "un-feminist" argument – as a symptom of her far-right tendencies, not an anomaly in her feminism.^[25]

One of Smyth's most famous works, *The Wreckers* plays an interesting counterpart to both Holmès' nationalism and her feminism.

[20] Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, 30-44.

[21] Both operas also co-incidentally premiered at the Opéra-Comique and were published by Choudon.

[22] James Parakilas, "The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter," *The Opera Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1994): 43-69.

[23] Pasler, *Writing Through Music*, 222-23.

[24] Pasler, 242.

[25] Iitti, *The Feminine in German Song*, 61-80.

The Wreckers revolves around an adulterous affair between Thirza and Mark, who live in a religious Cornish town of wreckers (people who scavenge goods from wrecked ships). In this depiction of wrecking, the Cornish residents deliberately target passing ships, luring them onto the rocks to plunder.^[26] Shortly after Mark begins luring the ships away from the dangerous rocks and people, Thirza too becomes complicit in their community's betrayal. The couple make plans to run away together in the midst of their rebellion. However, when a show trial takes place prosecuting an "innocent" citizen for Mark's noble intervention, Mark confesses. Thirza too professes her share of guilt; and despite Thirza's husband and Mark's admirer attempting to respectively excuse their actions or lie to protect them, they are both consequently sentenced to death by drowning.^[27] Suzanne Robinson has read this opera as a critique of imperialism, a portrayal of a principled (Mark and Thirza) over fundamentalist (Cornish community) Christianity, and a championing of "sexual anarchy" – particularly with concern to women. Robinson states "[i]n Thirza and Mark she created modern heroes whose attitude to the church, to Christianity, to marriage and to femininity cast their opponents as relics of a bygone era of prudery and conservatism."^[28] The symmetry between Mark and Thirza in Act III add to these idealisations a vision of marriage of equal partners. They are both sentenced to death by the same means and they both reject the feeble attempts of their admirers to save them. It is only in comparison to what has come before that this power dynamic bears significance for the operatic canon, whether the imbalance be between: who lives and who dies (*Carmen* and *Don José*); the prisoner and the captive (*Tristan and Isolde*); the vilified "exotic" and the martyred soldier (*La Montagne Noire*); the artist and his muse (*La Bohème*). The operas listed all end tragically, with a combination of dead men and women and the power dynamics that are produced from that. *The Wreckers* ends tragically, but its portrayals of its characters as equally consenting, equally complicit and ultimately equally punished for their rebellion. Smyth pre-emptively prescribed the cure for Clément's dead rebellious women as an equal contribution of dead rebellious men.

[26] Find biographic similarities highlighted through: Elizabeth Wood, "Lesbian Fugue: Ethel Smyth's Contrapuntal Arts," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 164-84. And direct conflation of Smyth's voice and her Mezzo Thirza can be found in Elizabeth Wood, "Sapphonic," in *Queering the Pitch: A New Gay and Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C Thomas (London: Routledge Francis Taylor Group, 2006), 45-102.

[27] Suzanne Robinson, "Smyth the Anarchist: 'Fin-de-siècle' Radicalism in 'The Wreckers,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 20, no. 2 (2008): 149-80.

[28] Robinson, 179.

To Conclude

As previously touched upon, Schumann was far from being the first female composer of large-scale forms, but as we can see the truth of that was in fact unimportant for the composers Holmès and Smyth. Regardless of their opinions on her, she is mythologised as an epicentre, a springboard for fin-de-siècle female creatorship.^[29] And while this falsity had its benefits then, what of its consequences now? The lie that the nineteenth century is when women become "active" in music history is perverse and it is echoed incessantly. Nicholas Cook's *A Very Short Introduction* (2000) and Donald Jay Grout's *A History of Western Music* (2019) are just two examples of rudimentary pedagogical texts that peddle this story.^[30] *Women in Music* (1982) by Carol Neuls-Bates is just one example of a contradictory narrative, in one chapter illustrating the pervasiveness of composers in Europe's abbeys – hypothesising that their reasonable creative freedom stemmed working outside the legally and societally restrictive role of marriage.^[31] This hypothesis works alongside all women who existed outside of what can be defined as "a traditional marriage" for their time: Barbara Strozzi as a concubine and possible courtesan; Holmès' as an unmarried woman with children born outside wedlock; Smyth as a lesbian; Schumann could even exist on this list as the primary bread-winner in her household.^[32] But what impact does excluding the Barbara Strozzi, and Isabella Leonardas from our history books and "introductions" have? It implies by omission that at best that they are irrelevant and at worst they did not exist. Moulding a narrative where women composers are only cited alongside the artifice and unnatural assertions of the industrial revolution creates implicit teleological associations. Men have been written as something that was always essentially creative, whereas for women it is something they have become. The implication is that this is not a natural process. This issue is largely unique to music among the arts; literature witnessed the "Sappho renaissance" in 1800s Europe and its effects and influences of women writers have been well documented.^[33] She was viewed as a figure of antiquity who appeased the trope of the romantic sublime,^[34] while simultaneously igniting scholarly controversy and scandal into the discussion of (what was perceived as) female sexual "im-

[29] Wiley, "Music and Literature," 278.

[30] Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 104-8. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 10th ed. (London and New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2019).

[31] Bowers and Tick, *Women Making Music*, 116-62.

[32] Beth L. Glixon, "New Light on the Life and Career of Barbara Strozzi," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1997): 311-35; Anna Beer, *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), 205-42.

[33] Susan Gubar, "Sapphistries," *Signs* 10, no. 1 (1984): 43-62.

[34] Margaret Reynolds, *The Sappho Companion* (Random House, 2010), 252, 311.

morality” – all while under the palatable guise of natural antiquity, a teleological marker.^[35] The terrible irony here lies in the field of art. She was routinely painted, drawn and sculpted with a lyre or another instrument that was en mode. Sappho has always been portrayed as a musician, but rarely is she prescribed her own authorship as a writer of lyric poetry. Sappho as a composer is delegated to niche areas of feminist musicology (even the University of Oxford’s extensive *Women in Music Timeline* begins as late as 810 AD)^[36] but alas the era where her admission to the musical canon would hold the most prominence has surely passed. Nevertheless, there is something poetic in gaps left in her Fragments, a symbolic reminder of the lack of our incomplete histories and the consequences of their absence.

Sappho, *Fragments on Love and Desire*

VIII

.....but you have forgotten me...

[35] Reynolds, 134-49.

[36] “Women in Music Timeline,” *Oxford Music Online*.

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