
Stop, Look, and Listen!

Musical Diversions and Commentary — by Rodney Flora



January 2022

Issue 08

FORMIDABLE FEMALES - Part 2

Last March I produced the first volume of "Formidable Females" in which I dealt with women composers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With this sequel (or I guess in movie terms this would be called a "prequel") I'm going to talk about women composers from the first of the preceding two centuries. I've had to re-write this introduction more than once as my preconceptions fell away one by one. I began to write about how as one goes further back in time, material, particularly as relates to women composers, becomes harder to find. But as so often happens, the more I look the more I find, so it becomes more and more difficult to generalize.



As always, my concentration is on instrumental music, and music that is freely available online so everyone has access to it.

I'd originally intended to cover both the 17th and the 18th centuries in this issue but as I got started it quickly became apparent that it would grow too big, and take too long. So I've decided to feature women of the 17th century now and of the 18th in a later edition.

Also, although some of these women do come from the privileged upper classes, especially the nobility, that is by no means universally true. And of course, class origins, although they may facilitate greater opportunities, are in themselves no guarantor of natural ability. Some of these women are indeed formidable, though perhaps more for their intellect, talent, drive and dedication than for any specifically warlike tendencies. Not being particularly warlike myself, I find that all the more admirable.

So here are many of the seventeenth century European woman composers I've found that meet the criteria for inclusion here, at least the ones I know of so far. Needless to say this only scratches the surface and if you have the interest to pursue the subject further I urge you to do so. Towards the end of this newsletter I will try to provide you with some additional resources should you wish to delve deeper into the field.

Having said all of that (whew!)... let's get started.

Women Composers of The Seventeenth Century

Into the 17th century much of what we would include as European art music was still heavily influenced and controlled by the religious establishment and therefore largely vocal music based on sacred texts. So, with my concentration on instrumental music in these newsletters that eliminates quite a few composers at the outset. Notable among those that remain (in more or less chronological order) are:



Francesca Caccini (1587 – after 1641)

Thought to have been the first woman to compose an opera (certainly the earliest that has survived) and probably the most prolific female composer of her time, a likely the very first to have had a fully professional career as a salaried musician. She composed at least 15 theatrical works for performance at court as well as a large number of vocal chamber works. Sadly, very little of her music survives. She was apparently highly influential as a teacher and coach as well.

Here are a couple of instrumental pieces, although truthfully they are probably instrumental versions of compositions that were originally vocal.

Beware, this is utterly beguiling music. It may have you up out of your chair and dancing around the room!

Romensca

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIYvV4CIAow>

Ciaccona

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NmkQF5wKKY>



Leonora Duarte (1610 – 1678?) was a Flemish composer and musician, born in Antwerp. She belonged to a wealthy Portuguese-Jewish family who were *Converso*, meaning they outwardly acted as Catholics while secretly maintaining their Jewish faith and practices. She was baptized on 28 July 1610.



Having been one of the six siblings, in the well known musical family of the Duartes, Leonora composed Seven Sinfonias which are apparently the earliest music written for viol by a woman in the 17th century. The painting above is of the Duarte family, but I'm not sure which of the daughters (seated) is Leonora.

Here is a link to the first of those Seven Sinfonias:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLNhoE9UrmE&list=PLwYJdoq91KNe5NzHh8E5Dz6XD18g0JLte&index=1>



Isabella Leonarda (1620 - 1704)

Last year was the 400th anniversary of the birth of early Baroque Italian composer Isabella Leonarda. I introduced her in my October 2020 newsletter so I will re-cap that information here. She was a cloistered nun and eventually Mother Superior of her convent, but this seeming limitation actually freed her to use her musical gifts in ways that would have been otherwise unavailable to her as a woman in 17th century Italian society.



Although her vocation was religious she didn't write only vocal music, she wrote some instrumental music as well, and it's all quite good. Late Renaissance/Early Baroque music can sometimes drone on a bit, but her music is lively, lyrical, and melodically inventive. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

There are a number of celebrations of her 400th anniversary available on line. Some are just music, others include some biographical narrative too.

Isabella Leonarda: A 400th Birthday Celebration by Pacific Music Works. Includes commentary.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5rU9-xW2E0>

Isabella Leonarda – 400 years in 2020. This is an all music celebration by a Finnish early music group.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaCL3_fJJuE

A Celebration of Isabella Leonarda 1620 - 2020. By Cappella Artemisia. Includes commentary.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_y7V0VOdmI

For a briefer purely instrumental sample here is her Sonata Prima, Op. 16 no. 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXHmS--6iS0>

And this links to all 12 of her Sonatas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18CoUmj5uk8&t=2299s>

And of course, as with any (well, most) of the composers featured in these newsletters, you can probably find more of their music by simply searching the name on YouTube. I only scratch the surface here and I encourage you to explore further on your own.

Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre

Without a doubt one of the most significant and accomplished female composers of her time, Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre (née Jacquet) was born on March 17, 1665, into a musical family in Paris. A successful family of artisans; masons, musicians, composers, and instrument makers, her grandfather, Jehan Jacquet, and her father, Claude Jacquet, were harpsichord makers. Rather than just teaching his sons, Claude Jacquet taught both his sons and daughters how to survive and thrive in the world. This upbringing, support from her father, and her family's rich history of musicianship was a major stepping stone for her musical career.

She received her initial musical education from her father. At the age of five, the King took notice of her when she performed, evidently as a child prodigy, at his palace of Versailles. This eventually led to her becoming a musician in the court of Louis XIV, the Sun King.



Jacquet de La Guerre was one of the few well-known female composers of her time, and unlike many of her contemporaries, she composed in a wide variety of forms. Her talent and achievements were acknowledged by Évrard Titon du Tillet, a well-known biographer of the French poets and musicians of his time, who accorded her a place on his *Mount Parnassus* when she was only 26 years old, next to Lalande and Marais and directly below Lully. A quote from Titon du Tillet describes her: "...marvelous facility for playing preludes and fantasies off the cuff. Sometimes she improvises one or another for an entire half hour with tunes and harmonies of great variety and in quite the best possible taste, quite charming her listeners." (*Le Parnasse françois*, 1732)

Here are her magnificent Harpsichord Suites 1 - 6

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVaiR0P_gOI&list=PLr0MsaDpKsY9eGXWc7D1wtoo_LmaRgGTE&index=1

Her lovely Trio Sonata No. 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJvFUeyQYZE>

and Trio Sonata No. 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkSKQC1VWBg>



The subject of **French Baroque harpsichord** music affords me the opportunity to touch upon an interesting sub-topic, namely *Notes inégales*.

If you have listened to much English or German harpsichord music (e.g. Handel or Bach) you will notice a degree of "regularity" to it. That is it tends to be rather strictly "on the beat", as it were. Now some would say it can sound almost mechanical, but I wouldn't go that far. The best playing always



contains a good deal of expression and "shaping" of the line, even if it is often quite subtle, and is never merely mechanical. But the distinctly French *Notes inégales* goes further. It is more freely expressive, there is more obvious push-pull, a greater elasticity, or ebb and flow to the rhythm. Hopefully you will notice it (and enjoy it) in the harpsichord suites by Jacques de la Guerre and other French composers as well.

Mystery, thy name is (wait for it)... **Mrs Philharmonica!** That was the evocative pseudonym of an early 18th century English female, Baroque composer. Presumably born in the latter years of the 17th century (and so included in this list of 17th century composers) she flourished as a composer in the years around 1715. She published a collection of 6 trio sonatas for two violins with 'cello obbligato and continuo, as well as a set of 6 divertimenti for 2 violins, 'cello or harpsichord (or organ) with Richard Meares in London about 1715. Her actual identity remains entirely unknown, and opportunities to hear her music are few indeed.

Here are a couple of allegro movements from sonatas 2 and 4.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGlygSFbNGE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5RlnqTdk8E>



Julie Pinel (fl. 1710–1737) was a French composer and harpsichord teacher based in Paris, born in the late 17th century into the Pinel family of lutenists and court musicians. Little else is known about her and although not as completely anonymous as Mrs. Philharmonica, no known portrait exists, just the title page attribution on her few published works.

Violin Sonata (three movements)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEqaZYkdGdA&list=OLAK5uy_k-51grK5U79QJwUNL_F0ul5N86ntP5wdk&index=17

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vz2PGUqpVG4&list=OLAK5uy_k-51grK5U79QJwUNL_F0ul5N86ntP5wdk&index=18

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOShbKvuGow&list=OLAK5uy_k-51grK5U79QJwUNL_F0ul5N86ntP5wdk&index=19

The following capsule biographies of several of the women I've mentioned here are so amusingly and charmingly done I simply had to include them. Make sure you have subtitles turned on when you watch them...unless your French is a good deal stronger than mine!

Isabella Leonarda

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBeWfvjJd4M>

Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EF5dKP2bY9M&t=11s>

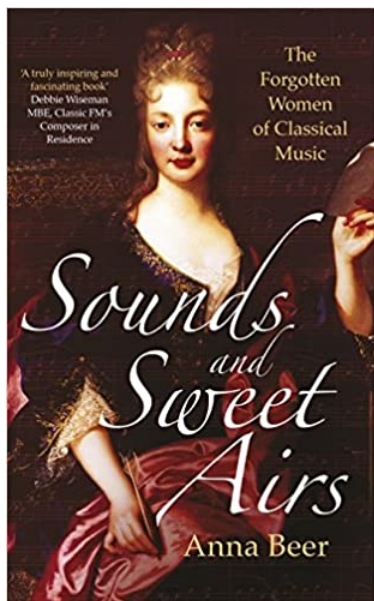
Julie Pinel

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_LXAHBXojg

Some Books to Consider...

These are books that I have consulted in putting this newsletter together. You may wish to consider some of these if you are interested in further reading on the subject of women composers of all centuries.

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 Hensel's piano work "The Year," Caccini's arias and Boulanger's setting of Psalm 130?

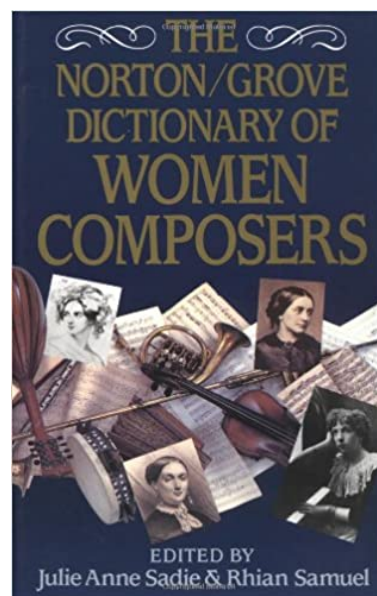
A long-overdue celebration of neglected virtuosos, **SOUNDS AND SWEET AIRS** presents a complex and inspirational picture of artistic endeavor and achievement that deserves to be part of our cultural heritage.

The featured composers are Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Marianna Martines, Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn), Clara Schumann, Lili Boulanger and Elizabeth Maconchy.

The **Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers** is a real resource. Something that perhaps belongs on your reference shelf. Although the other books I mention here deal with selected composers, the Norton/Grove is quite comprehensive. Almost anyone you would want to find out more about (or just find at all) can be found here.

The few in earlier times who gained some renown were as often as not the sisters, daughters, wives, or muses of well-known men—the surnames of Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann speak for themselves. Even with the present-day increase in their number, women composers have largely failed to draw the attention of the public.

In recognition of these nearly invisible yet greatly talented musicians, Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel have brought together an international corps of experts to produce *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*. This definitive source provides detailed biographies of more than 1,000 creators of Western classical music. In signed articles, the Dictionary chronicles the lives and works of women composers from all corners of the world. Here you can read about the Medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen, the Renaissance madrigalist Maddalena Casulana, the flamboyant seventeenth-century vocal composer Barbara Strozzi, the prolific New Englander Amy Beach, and the Pulitzer Prize winner Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. I believe there is now a newer edition than this one.



In the **New Historical Anthology of Music by Women**, James R. Briscoe "offers an indispensable resource.... He has commissioned new biographical and critical essays by leading musicologists such as Thomas J. Mathiesen, Elizabeth Aubrey, Suzanne Cusick, Ellen Rosand, and Mark Everist, thus making the most recent interpretations of these women and their music easily available for the classroom." — from the Foreword by Susan McClary



New Historical Anthology of Music by Women updates the extremely popular collection with 55 compositions by 46 women composers from the ancient Greeks to the present. Each work is introduced by an informative essay by a specialist in the field, with recommendations for further reading, listening, and performing. Historical scores have been transcribed into modern notation for ease of use, and the works represent a wide variety of genres, including solo songs, chamber music, piano music, and orchestral scores. Composers include Sappho, Hildegard of Bingen, Barbara Strozzi, Clara Schumann, and Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel. The anthology includes a foreword by Susan McClary, the leading scholar on women's music.

Amazing Feats! (pun intended) As a once-upon-a-time horn player I was especially intrigued, and hugely impressed by this guy's accomplishments. And the horn is hard enough to play even with all your fingers. Watch and be amazed!

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-59312659>

Talk about turning a disability into an ability!

Recently, when asked to pick a movie to watch on my birthday, I chose **The Music Man** - the 1962 movie version of the musical starring Shirley Jones and Robert Preston.

It is without doubt my favorite of the classic musicals. Even though I've seen it many times before (and not even that long ago) I enjoyed it thoroughly. Wonderful dancing, lovely romantic story line and great songs! (I still don't get "Shipooopi" though.)

Oddly the 2003 version is available for free on YouTube, but you have to pay to watch the 1962 version. Perhaps that reveals something in itself.

Here is one very classic scene from the 1962 "original".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHAbJGItAa4>



The DVD is available from a number of Maine libraries through the Minerva system, or if you're really committed you can buy the DVD for around \$10.

And to bring us full circle, here is the other version of Rosie the Riveter (besides the famous poster) This is a link to the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2E613J9m0I>



and this is pretty interesting too...:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzCMLSxA1xE>

Be sure to send me your opinions and reactions to this newsletter and its contents. Also please share your own discoveries. You can reach me at

enigmavars1899@gmail.com

Note that any reply you might receive from my gmail account will say it's from Edward Elgar, but that's really me.

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