Introduction: Music and the Female Sphere

Despite prevailing prejudices against their intellectual and creative powers, women contributed in important ways to the rich musical life of England during the late-Victorian period and the early-twentieth century. Women composed in a wide variety of genres and were prominent on the concert stage, where two of the most admired performers were Clara Schumann, who made 19 concert trips to London between the mid-1850s and the late ‘80s, and Wilma Norman-Neruda (later, Lady Hallé). The latter was, for many years, a star of the Popular Concerts at St. James’s Hall, which introduced large numbers of concert-goers to the chamber music repertoire. The most famous musical women were the great divas who appeared each year on the London opera and concert stage. The personal lives and finances of Adelina Patti, Christine Nilsson, and their colleagues and rivals received close scrutiny in the press; newspapers and journals featured gossip about and interviews with these fascinating women, whose magnificent musicianship evoked the most extravagant adulation, even when their power to command enormous fees was deplored. By the turn of the century, a number of women had taken their places among the foremost instrumentalists of the day, especially as pianists and violinists. Several women founded and managed traveling opera companies that regularly toured the provinces and performed in a number of American cities. Many women were involved in philanthropic activities that brought free or inexpensive concerts to neighborhoods geographically and socially distant from the cultural world of London’s West End.

The 1870s, the first decade of the period under study, was an especially important time for English women. At the start of the decade, women...
Image not available for the electronic version of this book.