

A Music of Her Own: The Power of Music in Dollie Radford's Songs and Other Verses

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Abstract.

This article explores Dollie Radford's depiction of music in her second volume of poetry, *Songs and Other Verses* (1895), engaging with increasing arguments about the subversive meaning of musical references in Victorian literature and culture. It shows how Radford, like her contemporary women poets, places musical settings and instruments in her work to challenge prevailing perceptions of women's naivety, simultaneously suggesting physical intimacy. Building on the discussion raised by Emily Harrington, who identified Radford's use of songs and music in *A Light Load* (1891) in association with waiting for the new (Harrington, 2014: 144), the argument presented herein offers a further, yet more subversive, reading of Radford's engagement with the theme, which is in line with the revolutionary changes of late-Victorian England. The analysis of the selected poems shows how Radford uses what were once perceived as feminine traits to revolt against patriarchal norms and confront misogynist conventions. Thus, the article contributes to the existing body of literature on Victorian women poets, filling the gap on an intriguing subject from which Radford's name and poetry are still overlooked.

Keywords: music, poetry, Radford, songs, Victorian, women

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1. Introduction

This article explores Dollie Radford's depiction of music in her second volume of poetry, *Songs and Other Verses* (1895), engaging with increasing arguments about the subversive meaning of musical references in Victorian literature and culture. It shows how Radford, like her contemporary women poets, places musical settings and instruments in her work to challenge the prevailing perceptions of women's naivety, simultaneously suggesting physical intimacy. Building on the discussion raised by Emily Harrington, who identified Radford's use of songs and music in *A Light Load* (1891) in association with waiting for the new (Harrington, 2014: 144), the argument presented herein offers a further, yet more subversive, reading of Radford's engagement with the theme, which falls in line with revolutionary changes of late-Victorian England. The analysis of the selected poems shows how Radford uses what were once perceived to be feminine traits to revolt against patriarchal norms and confront misogynist conventions. Thus, the article contributes to the existing body of literature on Victorian women poets, filling the gap on an intriguing subject from which Radford's name and poetry are still overlooked.

The article begins by previewing contemporary scholarship on the value of music for the Victorian audience and how practising music was perceived as a "feminine" domain. In addition, the first section provides insight into how such perceptions changed towards the end of the century, when playing music began to be considered a threat to Victorian morals. Having set the context of the argument, the article then moves to discuss Radford's reflections on music and musical instruments in her diary and poetry. The analysis of the selected poems is linked to the depiction of music by Radford's contemporaries, who sought to cross the boundaries of conventional norms.

2. Music in Victorian Literature and Culture

Victorian Britain is a historical period that witnessed tremendous social and legal changes. The industrial and technological revolutions are examples of such changes whose influence extended to the music industry. Commenting on music and its reception among the Victorians, Karen Yuen points out:

Britain, especially in the nineteenth century, experienced an explosion of musical activity that no individual could have avoided in his or her day-to-day life. With a growing middle class willing to patronise music, there came a refinement of concert life established in the previous century, the appearance of numerous music societies and the growth of instrument making and music publication as industries. (Yuen, 2008: 79–80)

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For Yuen, music, like other domains in the nineteenth century, could not eschew the gendered segregation of the private and the public spheres:

Composing, conducting, critiquing and theorising were ‘masculine’ because they required sustained mental effort, which, according to popular belief, could handicap the reproductive capabilities of women. Performing was ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ depending on where it was being done (public/private space) and who was performing. (Yuen, 2008: 83)

Associating masculinity with public life and “mental effort” was not part of Victorian culture only, but an ideal that is evident in many poems of the time. In his poem *The Princess, A Medley* (1847), Lord Alfred Tennyson manifests this association in the following lines:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.

(Tennyson, 1860: V.437–441)

As Queen Victoria’s poet Laureate, Tennyson was widely read among the public. Like many of his contemporaries, he established a conventional doctrine that renders women incapable of any activities beyond the borders of domestic life.

Like needlework, piano playing was one of the activities women practised in the private sphere. As Yuen points out:

for centuries in Britain, men believed that playing music led to feminisation, and so must be avoided at all costs. Also, largely responsible was the development of a masculine ideal in Victorian Britain whereby a man was expected to be disciplined, industrious and responsible; such an ideal man could hardly have time to pursue leisurely and frivolous pursuits like music. (Yuen, 2008: 83)

Yuen adds that as the century progressed, this association between women and music became sexually connoted:

the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘music’ collapsed into one due to their perceived similarities; it was believed that while women and music could inspire men – that is, be muses to their creativity and morality – they were also dangerous creatures, morally and sexually, because they were unpredictable. (Yuen, 2008: 83–84)

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Scholars such as Deborah Rohr read the rise of practising music among women in line with the revolutionary changes in terms of women's rights: "in the early nineteenth century, new opportunities made it possible for a surprising number of women musicians to achieve levels of financial success and professional status which they could not attain in any other occupation" (Rohr, 1999: 308). Like Rohr, Amanda Harris explores the relationship between music and feminism:

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was an important era for the proliferation of talented and successful female composers. These composers were not the first of their kind; women had been known to compose music as far back as the twelfth century. However, in this period, far greater numbers were successful in having their works publicly performed and were becoming known chiefly and professionally as composers. (Harris, 2014: 19)

Harris continues: "Increasingly, especially since the 1980s and 90s, scholars in musicology and music history have also turned to the history of women and have to some extent linked the efforts of women composers with those of feminists in the same period" (Harris, 2014: 21). Such arguments form a solid background for the forthcoming proposal of Radford's depiction of music as an empowering tool against existing conventions.

3. Music and Piano in Dollie Radford's Diary

As a woman poet in *fin de siècle* England, Dollie Radford should have been aware of the rising debate about music and how it increasingly became associated with women's independence. Given Radford's support of the New Woman, which has been discussed at length in recent studies, this section explores music as a regular routine practised by Radford to provide further evidence of her engagement with women's emancipation.

Radford's diary repeatedly records her practice of piano: "George Bradford called. Practised on Louis Brown's piano" (Radford, n.d., 29 May 1883). On another occasion, she reports: "Ernest came down about five o'clock, & went out in a ferry. Practised 'Haller' on the ferry piano" (Radford Diary, 7 August 1883). Radford's fascination with piano becomes evident throughout the diary pages: "Up to London. To Broadwood's, to chose [sic] the piano William Thompson has given us. – It is a beautiful one!" (Radford, n.d., 4 October 1883). However, it becomes obvious to readers that such fascination is mixed with political ends: "Played tennis – music and Dancing! A very nice evening" (Radford n.d., 7 July 1883). In this diary entry, Radford puts together three practices that were associated with women's emancipation towards the end of the nineteenth century, thereby questioning gendered attitudes towards piano and femininity.

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This reading is further emphasised in other diary entries, including the following: “The Club came in great force. About thirty beings present in these rooms I think. [...] Music – not so musical an evening however as social” (Radford, n.d., 20 November 1883). The following day, she declares with delight: “We are reading Symonds’s Renaissance: ‘The Fine Arts’. Am practising too. It is delightful having the piano. How I mean to play & play” (Radford, n.d., 21 November 1883). It is worth noting that Radford’s reference to playing piano after reading John Symonds’s “Renaissance” may be intended to highlight her knowledge of different forms of arts, thus providing a counterclaim for the prevailing underestimation. Three years later, Radford, a more mature poet, manifests the influence of music on her political motives: “Music is good for one. I feel refined & improved by it. I have planned – under its spell – a socialistic spring-song” (Radford, n.d., 13 February 1886). This diary entry may be read in relation to Mary Burgan’s argument on how music in the nineteenth century became increasingly associated with women’s independence:

In the beginning of the century, women at the piano tended to be objects of satire. But as the century progressed, the image became more complicated; women’s aspirations for genuine education and high culture had to be taken more seriously. And the issue of women’s independence from the conventional round of family life became a feature of the “woman question” towards the end of the century, the possibility that women’s music could be a disruptive rather than a harmonizing force in the home became more insistent. (Burgan, 1986: 52)

For Radford, music is clearly an inspiration that affected her revolutionary poems, an argument that will be explored in the upcoming analysis of selected poems from her second volume *Songs and Other Verses*.

4. The Power of Music in Radford’s *Songs and Other Verses*

Radford’s revolutionary poems have been the focus of a handful of scholars who discuss subversive meanings in poetry. “The little songs which come and go” (1895) depicts a woman’s experience with songs and music:

The little songs which come and go,
In tender measures, to and fro,
Whene’er the day brings you to me,
Keep my heart full of melody.

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But on my lute I strive in vain
To play the music o'er again,
And you, dear love, will never know
The little songs which come and go.
(Radford, 1895: 3)

The speaker's struggle to "play the music" may be read in relation to her lack of training and experience. Using the possessive pronoun "my", she identifies the songs as a language of her own that her beloved is unable to understand. In doing so, Radford engages with debates raised by contemporary scholars, including Phyllis Weliver, who identifies "music" and "musical performances" as a method by which Victorian women "find [...] a value in the world that is their own instead of living by prescribed upper-class ideals" (Weliver, 2000: 206). In addition, this language embodies sorrow and grief: "on my lute I strive in vain", reflecting the suffering of many Victorian women at that time. Shannon Draucker points out: "In several of the short stories, we see characters viscerally affected by sound: both performers and listeners cry, throb, convulse, quiver, and sweat while playing or hearing music. These instances, I suggest, reflect a contemporary Victorian interest in—and growing understanding of—the physics and physiology of music" (Draucker, 2018: 2). This interest continues in Radford's poems in the same volume, such as in the lines, "If you will sing the song I play,/ Then you shall be my dear" in which the speaker is in control of the musical instrument (Radford, 1895: 3, lines 1–2). In this poem, love becomes a conditional trait associated with the preferred music of the lover. The poem manifests music and piano as women's possessions, thereby identifying them as parallels to love.

"A Concert" (1895) is another poem in *Songs and Other Verses* that establishes music as a powerful tool by which Victorian women could escape patriarchal constraints:

Ah, was it all a fantasy,
You and your distant stall,
The silver stream of melody
Which floated through the hall,
And I, in my obscurer place,
Gazing upon your flower-faces?

Around you how the music clung
And trembled, till a sea
Of passion was unbound and swung
Between your face and me;
And you were hidden from my sight,
Plunged into waves of blackest night.

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And when the strife and tumult ceased,
The music wandered far,
From all its human load released,
To moon and evening star,
Where a few notes most clear and true,
Pierced the deep Heaven's deepest blue.

Ah, was it all a fantasy!
The outer world we reach,
As cold and distant as may be,
A stranger, each to each;
But in my heart a sound so sweet,
All Paradise is in the street.
(Radford, 1895: 18)

Recalling the time spent in the concert, the speaker uses the metaphor of “stream” to embody the power of music over the audience. She also correlates music with physical intimacy through the act of “gazing”. If the speaker is female, then she adopts the position of the male observer rather than being the object of the muse. In discussing the relationship between music and sexuality in late-Victorian England, Emma Sutton argues, “During the *fin de siècle* there was considerable, disparate attention to the relations between music and sexuality. Whether explicit or allusive, discourses about music and about sexuality were, I would suggest, mutually constitutive” (Sutton, 2005: 214). This relation may be due to the prevailing belief that feminised music. Therefore, in Radford’s poem, the speaker gazes from an “obscurer place”, suggesting uncertainty and reminding us of how women were expected to remain in the shade.

Radford visualises the concert experience through multiple references to natural forces, including “sea” and “waves”. In her discussion of the relationship between sea and music, Lorraine Wood argues: “Although music had historically been regarded as a temporal art, Rossetti’s frequent employment of the sea as a symbol suggests his conception of music not only as sound that occurs in time, but as sound that fills space” (Wood, 2013: 545). In her use of the “sea” and “waves” images, Radford shares a tradition embraced by her contemporary poets to emphasise the power of music, thereby eschewing gendered perceptions of music and femininity.

Given Radford’s long friendship and acquaintance with her fellow poet Amy Levy, it is plausible that in her portrayal of the theme, Radford was influenced by Levy, whose poems defy conventional norms. Published a decade prior to *Songs and Other Verses*, Levy’s “A June- Tide Echo. After a Richter Concert” (1884) offers mixed images of nature and music:

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Sweet sounds to- night rose up, wave upon wave;
Sweet dreams were afloat in the balmy air.
This is the boon of the gods that I crave—
To be glad, as the music and night were fair.
For once, for one fleeting hour, to hold
The fair shape the music that rose and fell
Revealed and concealed like a veiling fold;
To catch for an instant the sweet June spell.
For once, for one hour, to catch and keep
The sweet June secret that mocks my heart;
Now lurking calm, like a thing asleep,
Now hither and thither with start and dart.
Then the sick, slow grief of the weary years,
The slow, sick grief and the sudden pain;
The long days of labour, the nights of tears—
No more these things would I hold in vain.
(Levy, 1884: 79)

As with Radford's "A Concert", Levy's poem represents images of waves to highlight the strong influence of music over the speaker, assumingly a female. For the speaker, the sound of music is associated with passion and desire suggested in the word "crave". As Weliver points out, "Besides expressing the experience of imagination and music in physical terms – a formulation that Levy was not alone in using – the poems contribute to our understanding of Victorian concert-going and constructions of the sexual self" (Weliver, 2005: 2). This idea is further emphasised towards the end of the poem when the reference to the speaker's experience of "tears" and "pain" becomes more evident. The "grief" she encounters may be read on two levels. On the one hand, the pessimistic tone reflects women's suffering in Victorian times, a fact which is implied in the "long days of labour" that went unnoticed and unacknowledged. On the other hand, describing the "grief" as "sick" could have sexual connotations, as languages of pain and illness were commonly associated with women's sexuality.

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5. Conclusion

Studying *Songs and Other Verses*, then, reveals Radford's interest in exploring music and the various implications of viewing music listening and performance. Although the volume has been overlooked by contemporary scholars, references to songs and music to evoke sensual and affective responses and permeate its poems. Moreover, this discussion has shown that the choice of musical images and settings embodies both pain and pleasure and confronts the patriarchal silencing of the female voice. Just as advancements in sound science threatened the dominant paradigm of musical idealism, the selected poems foreground a variety of shifting social and political concerns.

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