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Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction (1860–1900): A Critical Review of Phyllis Weliver’s Interdisciplinary Analysis

Viktorya Dönemi Romanında Kadın Müzisyenler (1860–1900):
Phyllis Weliver’in Disiplinlerarası Analizine Eleştirel Bir Bakış

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical review of Phyllis Weliver’s *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900*. The book examines the cultural role of female musicians in Victorian literature and shows how music functions as a narrative instrument to reflect and shape social perceptions of gender, class, and femininity. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework combining musicology, feminist criticism, and literary studies, Weliver analyzes fictional representations of women’s musical performance and their broader societal implications. The review emphasizes the author’s perceptive treatment of themes such as mesmerism, emotional susceptibility, and the dichotomous portrayal of women as angelic or demonic figures. It also notes the study’s limitations, particularly its focus on middle- and upper-class women and the relative inattention to working-class musical practices. The review affirms the book’s value as a significant contribution to Victorian studies and feminist musicology while identifying avenues for further research on gender, artistic expression, and cultural politics.

Keywords: Victorian literature, gender studies, feminist musicology, female musicians, narrative analysis, cultural representation

ÖZ

Bu makale, Phyllis Weliver’in *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900* adlı eserinin eleştirel bir incelemesini sunmaktadır. Kitap, Viktorya dönemi edebiyatında kadın müzisyenlerin kültürel rolünü araştırmakta ve müziğin toplumsal cinsiyet, sınıf ve kadınlık algılarını yansıtmaya ve şekillendirmeye aracı olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü analiz etmektedir. Müzikoloji, feminist eleştiri ve edebiyat araştırmalarını birleştiren disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşımla Weliver, kadınların müzikal ifadelerinin edebi temsillerini ve bunların toplumsal etkilerini incelemektedir. Bu değerlendirme, eser boyunca öne çıkan mesmerizm, duygusal hassasiyet ve kadınların melek/demonik ikiliğiyle betimlenmesi gibi temaları vurgularken çalışmanın sınırlılıklarına da değinmektedir. Özellikle orta ve üst sınıfa odaklanılması ve işçi sınıfına dair müzikal deneyimlerin görece ihmal edilmesi eleştirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak, bu değerlendirme, eserin Viktorya dönemi çalışmaları ve feminist müzikoloji açısından önemli bir katkı olduğunu teyit etmekte ve toplumsal cinsiyet, sanat ve kültürel politika üzerine gelecekteki araştırmalar için yeni yönler önermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Viktorya dönemi edebiyatı, toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmaları, feminist müzikoloji, kadın müzisyenler, anlatı analizi, kültürel temsil



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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical review of Phyllis Weliver's *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900*, a work located at the intersection of Victorian literature, musicology, and gender studies. The book investigates the portrayal of female musicians in Victorian fiction and the role of music as a narrative mechanism that reflects, reinforces, and occasionally contests societal conceptions of gender roles. Through close examination of literary depictions of women's musical practices, Weliver illuminates cultural anxieties and ideological tensions surrounding femininity, emotionality, and artistic agency. The interdisciplinary approach yields significant insights into literature's participation in forming and negotiating cultural norms.

Set within Victorian society between 1860 and 1900, the analysis is grounded in a historical framework that recognizes women's expanding roles in education, public life, and the arts. The increasing visibility of female performers during this period, concurrent with early feminist movements, challenged conventional domestic constraints on women. Weliver locates her study within this broader transformation, engaging feminist scholarship that critiques patriarchal restrictions on women's artistic and professional aspirations. She also incorporates contemporary scientific discourses, including mesmerism and theories of psychological influence, demonstrating how these shaped the image of the female musician as simultaneously fascinating and dangerous, gifted yet vulnerable.

The review identifies several core arguments in Weliver's work. The book centres on the cultural role of female musicians in Victorian fiction. Each chapter develops this theme through detailed textual analysis and sustained engagement with authors such as George Eliot and Wilkie Collins. One of Weliver's central arguments is that music served as a tool of social mobility and moral respectability for women, particularly those from the middle and upper classes. Moreover, the book underlines the dual nature of musical talent: although music signified refinement and feminine virtue, it also aroused suspicion when linked to ambition or excessive emotionality. The connection between music and mesmerism is particularly significant here, as Weliver demonstrates how narratives of trance, influence, and nervous disorders intersected with Victorian ideologies of femininity.

Weliver's interdisciplinary methodology is one of the book's principal strengths. Her integration of literary criticism, historical contextualization, and gender theory provides a robust framework for analyzing representations of female musicians across a range of fictional texts. The review commends Weliver's attention to the symbolic role of music in Victorian narratives, not merely as background, but as a powerful narrative device charged with ideological meaning. The author's clear organization, precise terminology, and incorporation of philosophical and aesthetic theory (including references to Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, and evolutionary thought) further deepen the analysis. Of particular note is her skill in drawing internal comparisons within novels, showing how music constructs character identity in relation to mental instability, repression, or empowerment.

However, the review also identifies certain limitations in Weliver's approach. One concern is the frequent reliance on binary archetypes, angelic versus demonic, to categorize female musicians, which can overshadow more ambiguous or evolving representations. Although Weliver acknowledges this framing, the inclusion of characters who transcend these oppositions would have enriched the discussion. Additionally, the study concentrates almost exclusively on middle- and upper-class women, with minimal attention to working-class musical practices. While music is presented as a pathway to social mobility, the omission of radical or informal musical contexts, such as choirs, community performances, or labour-related song traditions, narrows the class perspective. Lastly, although the exploration of mesmerism and emotional intensity provides valuable psychological depth, it occasionally overshadows broader socio-political considerations that would more firmly situate music within issues of labour, access, and institutional power.

In conclusion, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction* stands as a valuable and insightful contribution to Victorian literature and feminist musicology. Weliver's rigorous interdisciplinary analysis reveals how fiction both shaped and was shaped by dominant and contested ideologies of femininity, performance, and respectability. The book's ability to connect literary texts with scientific, social, and philosophical discourses secures it a distinctive place within the historiography. Although the study might have benefited from a broader range of sources and greater class inclusivity, its contributions remain substantial. For scholars of gender, music, and nineteenth-century cultural history, Weliver's work provides a compelling foundation for further research and encourages examination of lesser-known texts and wider connections between literature and other artistic and social practices. At a time when the visibility and agency of women in the arts remain pressing concerns, this book illuminates their historical roots and literary representations with clarity and depth.

Introduction

Weliver (2016), a scholar specializing in Victorian literature and musicology, provides a nuanced analysis of female musicians in *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900*. In this work, she examines how Victorian fiction employs music as a narrative tool to reflect and shape contemporary perceptions of gender, underscoring the tension between artistic expression and social constraint. Although her expertise is rooted in Victorian studies, Weliver's research extends across the interdisciplinary fields of literature, gender studies, and musicology. She holds a doctorate in English literature and regularly lectures and publishes on Victorian culture and its artistic representations.

Weliver is the author of *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and *The Musical Crowd in English Fiction, 1840–1910: Class, Culture and Nation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). She has also co-edited volumes such as *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth Century* (ed. and intro. Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis, Boydell & Brewer, 2013).

Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900 was first published by Ashgate in 2000 and reissued by Routledge in 2016 as part of the *Routledge Library Editions: The Nineteenth-Century Novel series*. The book presents a detailed examination of the representations of female musicians in Victorian fiction between 1860 and 1900. Weliver explores how these portrayals reflect societal attitudes towards women's roles in domestic, professional, and public spheres. Her central aim is to investigate how music functions as a narrative mechanism for interrogating gender roles and the social construction of femininity. Often a symbol of refinement and idealized femininity, music also appears in her analysis as a site of rebellion, emotional excess, and moral ambiguity. Weliver demonstrates how this dual role of music influenced Victorian literary discourse and contributed to evolving perceptions of women's place in society.

Historical and Historiographical Context

Between 1860 and 1900, Victorian England experienced significant transformations in the social roles of women, reflecting broader changes in education, employment, and cultural participation. During this period, debates intensified over women's involvement in the arts and their visibility in the public sphere. Female musicians began to challenge conventional domestic boundaries by performing publicly and pursuing professional careers, prompting a reassessment of gender norms. The increasing prominence of women as public performers coincided with the emerging feminist movement, which sought to expand women's rights and contest restrictive social conventions.

Music, long considered a suitable domestic accomplishment for women, gradually emerged both as a means of empowerment and as a potential marker of deviance when practised beyond the private sphere. Weliver positions her work within feminist historiography by examining the gendered dimensions of Victorian fiction and the cultural anxieties surrounding women's artistic autonomy. Her study engages with leading feminist scholars who critique the patriarchal structures that have historically limited women's artistic and professional aspirations.

Furthermore, Weliver locates her analysis within contemporary scientific discourses, including mesmerism and theories of psychological influence, which shaped public perceptions of female musicians. By drawing connections between music, gender, and literature, Weliver's study illuminates how Victorian fiction mirrored the era's social tensions and contributes to broader discussions on the intersections of art, science, and gender during a pivotal period in British cultural history.

Critical Analysis of the Text

Main Arguments

The book is structured around a central thematic thread and several interconnected arguments. The overarching theme, present in every chapter, is the cultural role of female musicians in Victorian fiction. This theme emerges through Weliver's arguments, comparisons, and examination of works by authors such as George Eliot and Wilkie Collins¹. She demonstrates how music functions as a narrative device to explore tensions between social expectations, gender roles, and women's artistic expression.

Other topics addressed follow naturally from this main theme, creating a cohesive flow across the chapters. For example, the analysis of music as a tool of social mobility and power, developed particularly in the first chapter, illustrates how music enabled women to advance within the Victorian social hierarchy². Weliver presents music as a means of facilitating social mobility, allowing women to transcend certain class boundaries by upholding domestic values or entering professions such as teaching. This discussion illuminates how music opened paths to respectability and autonomy for women.

Another central issue is the dual nature of musical talent. Weliver emphasizes that music was largely entrusted to women as a cultural activity, since amateur musical involvement by men was often regarded as effeminate. This strong association between music and femininity reflected a deeply rooted cultural norm: "*Because music was also one of the only fields that*

¹ Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900* (London: Routledge, 2016), s. 15

² Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900* (London: Routledge, 2016), s. 48.

*middle- and upper-class women regularly received education in and men did not, it was frequently connected with perceptions of ideal femininity.”*³

A further central theme is the intersection of music with emotional and psychological narratives. From Chapter 2 onward, Weliver examines how music and mesmerism (a popular form of hypnosis at the time) intertwine with Victorian ideals of femininity. Music is portrayed as a symbol of female passivity and susceptibility to control, reinforcing the angelic or demonic dichotomy that dominated representations of women in Victorian literature⁴. Furthermore, the relationship between music, passion, and vulnerability to external influences aligns with Victorian anxieties about femininity and emotional excess.

Within this context, the effects of musical education on women are also considered. Weliver shows how young girls were mentally and artistically overburdened in the name of proper upbringing. She argues that excessive emphasis on the arts, particularly music, could overstimulate women’s imagination, lead to nervous disorders, and heighten emotional sensitivity. This idea is developed extensively in Chapter 2 and revisited in the “Source Reading” section: *“The anxiety to render a young lady accomplished, at all hazards, has originated a system of forced mental training, which greatly increases the irritability of the brain.”*⁵ These themes interweave to form a comprehensive examination of how Victorian fiction reflected cultural tensions surrounding women, their place in society, and the complex role of music as both a tool of control and a means of emancipation.

Key Strengths

The work employs an interdisciplinary feminist approach that integrates literature, music, and gender studies. This method enriches the analysis by supplying both historical depth and critical readings of major Victorian literary figures. The book’s structure is also a major strength. From the introduction onward, each chapter is clearly outlined, providing preliminary guidance that facilitates understanding of the material that follows. The seamless progression of chapters, never resembling standalone essays, enhances overall accessibility. Weliver further reassures the reader by explicitly identifying her sources early on: *“While I am most interested in how novels represent female musicians, Chapter 1 constructs the background to the perceptions of music that the large middle- and upper-class readership in*

*Victorian Britain brought to their reading of these novels. To this end I use periodicals as my main source to establish the views generally held about music at this time.”*⁶

The book’s interdisciplinarity is reinforced through precise terminology that maintains clarity despite the range of topics addressed. This approach prevents fragmentation and sustains a coherent perspective: *“After documenting how music was used in nineteenth-century theories of consciousness, I apply these theories to readings of specific novels. The year 1860 is when sensation fiction is commonly thought to begin, with the publication of Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White. In sensation novels, appearances are deceptive. Angelic spouses harbor dark secrets, and the role of musical accomplishments, as a signifier of social ideals, is questioned.”*⁷

Weliver extends her framework beyond the intersection of literature and music by incorporating philosophical theories, thereby constructing a broader cultural landscape. This sustained dialogue between literature, philosophy, and aesthetic theory adds considerable depth: *“Chapter 5 investigates theories that are important for understanding the role of music in George Eliot’s fiction: Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, Feuerbach and evolutionary theories, especially in terms of the shared origin of language and music. In terms of the evolution of language, I begin with Rousseau’s theories of melody as part of social formation. Next, I examine the physiological associationist theories of Spencer and Lewes.”*⁸

Another key strength is the author’s skill in drawing internal comparisons within the works examined. Rather than limiting herself to external critique, Weliver highlights parallels and contrasts inside the narratives themselves, yielding a more nuanced interpretation: *“I am interested in the factors that go into that characterization. In particular, how does Dickens use music and abnormalities in mental health to underpin Jasper’s character and the novel’s structure?”*⁹

All of these elements combine to produce a study of exceptional analytical richness and intellectual depth that transcends conventional literary reading and offers a thorough exploration of the cultural and intellectual interconnections shaping the representation of female musicians in Victorian fiction.

3 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, s. 1.

4 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, s. 2.

5 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, s. 285.

6 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, s. 14.

7 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, s. 15.

8 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*.

9 Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*.

Critical Limitations

One principal limitation of Weliver's work is the tendency to reduce female musician figures to binary archetypes, generally categorised as angelic or demonic. Although this framework usefully illuminates how Victorian fiction reflects social anxieties surrounding women in the arts, it risks oversimplifying more complex and evolving representations. Weliver herself acknowledges this pattern: "*Social approval can be monitored by the heavenly or demonic names attached to certain musical practices.*"¹⁰ This observation underlines the restrictive lens through which Victorian society often viewed female musicians. A deeper examination of characters who escape these categories, such as Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*, who combines ambition and vulnerability, would, however, have enriched the analysis and revealed how Victorian fiction sometimes blurs the boundaries between these extremes.

Furthermore, Weliver's study concentrates primarily on middle- and upper-class women, devoting less attention to musicians from working-class backgrounds. Although the book briefly notes the rise of music teachers and performers from modest origins and recognizes music's role as a vehicle for social mobility, a more thorough investigation of working-class engagement with music, through public performances, choirs, or informal settings, would have broadened the treatment of class dynamics. This relative neglect aligns with a wider tendency in Victorian studies to privilege middle-class domestic narratives, thereby marginalizing the diverse and occasionally radical musical practices of working-class women.

Weliver's emphasis on psychological and emotional dimensions, especially in her discussion of mesmerism and music, lends valuable depth. Yet this focus occasionally eclipses broader socio-political readings of music's place in women's lives. The connection between mesmerism and female musicians is undoubtedly compelling, but the priority given to individual psychological transformation can overshadow structural analyses of how social and economic conditions shaped women's musical experiences. A more balanced approach would have yielded deeper insight into how Victorian fiction not only reflected but also helped shape contemporary discourses on gender, art, and professionalization.

In sum, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction* remains a valuable contribution, yet a wider selection of literary sources, greater attention to character complexity, and fuller consideration of class diversity would have further strengthened Weliver's already persuasive arguments.

Comparison and Historiographical Context

Phyllis Weliver's *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900* occupies a distinctive position within musicology and Victorian literary studies. Although scholars such as Nicholas Temperley and Ruth Solie have examined the intersection of gender, music, and literature, Weliver's work is distinguished by its integration of musicology with feminist literary criticism, thereby providing an original perspective on the representation of female musicians in fiction (Temperley, 1986).

Comparison with Other Publications

In contrast to scholars such as Nicholas Temperley¹¹ or Joseph Morrissey¹², who primarily focus on the historical, institutional, or sociological dimensions of Victorian music, Weliver adopts a distinctive approach by examining fictional representations of female musicians (Morrissey, 2018). Her study does not merely trace performance history or educational structures but interrogates how music functions as a narrative tool through which issues of gender, emotion, and identity are articulated.

Other scholars address related themes from different perspectives. For instance, Alan Davison's research on musical iconography¹³ focuses on the visual representation of male virtuosi such as Liszt or Chopin (Davison, 2003). Although his work illuminates cultural codes in nineteenth-century portraiture, it does not explore female musical subjectivity or narrative fiction. Suzanne Fagence Cooper¹⁴, in her examination of Victorian painting, treats music as a visual motif linked to domesticity, sensuality, or nostalgia, yet remains within the visual domain without considering its development across narrative time or its interaction with character development (Cooper, 2005).

Similarly, Lise K. Meling¹⁵ investigates the piano as a symbol of idealized femininity in literature and painting (Meling, 2018). Her emphasis on posture, decorum, and surface representation complements Weliver's concern with musical expression, but whereas Meling privileges visual aesthetics, Weliver explores the tensions between interiority and performance. Her fictional

¹⁰ Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, s. 56.

¹¹ Nicholas Temperley, "The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music," *Music & Letters* 71, no. 3 (1986): 415–418.

¹² Joseph Morrissey, *Women's Domestic Activity in the Romantic-Period Novel, 1770–1820: Dangerous Occupations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹³ Alan Davison, "The Musician in Iconography from the 1830s and 1840s: The Formation of New Visual Types," *Music in Art: International Journal for Music Iconography* 28, no. 1/2 (2003): 147–162.

¹⁴ Suzanne Fagence Cooper, *Picturing Music in Victorian England* (Doctoral dissertation, Buckinghamshire New University, 2005).

¹⁵ Lise K. Meling, "Women and Pianos in 19th-Century Art and Literature," *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2018): 25–34.

protagonists frequently embody ambivalence, restraint, or rebellion, qualities less evident in iconographic studies. Cyril Ehrlich's social history of the piano¹⁶ provides essential context for the instrument's diffusion across the Victorian domestic sphere, yet centres on material culture and economic trends, leaving the symbolic, affective, and narrative dimensions that Weliver examines largely unaddressed (Ehrlich, 1990). Weliver thus bridges a critical gap between historical inquiry and narrative imagination, revealing how the piano serves not only as a domestic object but as a conduit for constructing female identity in fiction.

Position within the Historiography

Weliver's study occupies a distinctive place in Victorian scholarship through its integration of literature, musicology, and gender studies. Although considerable research exists on the period, her approach transcends conventional boundaries by incorporating feminist criticism and cultural analysis, placing her work both in continuity with and in contrast to preceding studies. The book argues that novels do not simply reflect social attitudes towards female musicians but actively participate in shaping those attitudes. Victorian fiction, in Weliver's reading, functions not merely as a mirror of norms but as a site where such norms are negotiated and contested. This perspective underscores literature's role as a cultural instrument in forming public perceptions of women's places in music and society.

A further strength lies in Weliver's attention to the psychological and emotional dimensions of music, especially through mesmerism and mental influence. This emphasis shifts focus from institutional accounts of women's musical participation towards intimate explorations of how music affects identity, desire, and agency within fictional worlds. By uniting close textual analysis with historical contextualization, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction* renews understanding of nineteenth-century discourses on gender and art while contributing to feminist historiography. Hence, Weliver fills a significant gap by examining the convergence of music and literature in producing complex narratives of femininity, artistic expression, and social power.

Conclusion

Phyllis Weliver's *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900*, makes a significant contribution to Victorian studies, particularly in the domains of gender, literature, and musicology. Weliver illuminates how Victorian novels depict female musicians, demonstrating how these texts both reflect and reinforce societal concerns surrounding women's roles in the arts. Her interdisciplinary approach, integrating literary analysis with psychological and sociological perspectives,

deepens understanding of the intersections between music, social class, femininity, and subjectivity.

The rigor of Weliver's textual analysis and the pertinence of her arguments render this work an essential resource for scholars of gender representation in Victorian literature. For future research, the study opens possibilities for examining lesser-known Victorian authors and noncanonical works that also address the figure of the female musician. Furthermore, her focus on the links between music and mesmerism encourages further investigation into the relations between performance, mental health, and gender.

The book contributes substantially to contemporary debates on women's visibility and autonomy in the arts while stimulating new inquiry into the historical intersections of music, literature, and gender politics. At a time when questions of gender equality in creative fields remain pressing, Weliver's work serves as a key reference for comprehending the cultural origins of these issues and the literary legacies that continue to inform them.

Ethical Statement

It is hereby declared that all rules specified in the Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive were followed in this study.

Ethics Committee Approval

Since this study did not require ethics committee approval, no ethics approval was obtained.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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