

Review: Phyllis Weliver, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 305pp. ISBN 978-1-107-18480-0, £78.00.

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MARY GLADSTONE (1847–1927) was a talented musician, arts critic, writer and hostess, as well as private secretary to her father, Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. Positioning Mary within her social context, Phyllis Weliver's new monograph, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon*, explores the importance of the musico-literary intersections of the late nineteenth-century salon to Victorian liberalism. The liberal movement, partly inspired by Thomas Hill Green, favoured individual self-improvement and action over state intervention. For Oxford Idealists in the Gladstones' network, a moving political speech or work of art inspiring charitable action among the populace was more valuable than government funding for short-term isolated projects. Artistic romanticism was therefore particularly valuable in liberal salons: an emotional appreciation of artworks mingled with political discussion, and sublime elements of performances aimed to enliven participants to enact social improvements outside. Liturgical developments at High Anglican places of worship like St Paul's Cathedral similarly immersed listeners more deeply than before in organ music and synaesthetic ritual to inspire Christian charity, even among less fortunate participants.

As ecclesiastical secretary between 1881 and 1885, during the second of William Ewart Gladstone's four leadership terms, Mary had formal and informal modes of influence, including upon her father's appointment of Church of England clerics. While Mary's salon was part-familial and part-political, so the Gladstone family's reception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work) crossed public-private boundaries, both secular and ecclesiastical. Mary and her salon guests appreciated the music of Wagner, Chopin, Liszt and Schumann, championing *Zukunftsmusik* (the music of the future) whilst also enjoying Beethoven, Bach and Handel from the past.

Improving scholarly understanding of women's role in this musico-political milieu, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon* documents Mary's public impact on funding and staffing London's Royal College of Music (RCM), established in 1882–3. As well as occasional authority over concert programming in the capital, which was

granted her by her musical connections, Mary was central to a network of Anglican clergy, Oxbridge academics and romantic artists including Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot and Edward Burne-Jones. Drawing convincingly on established theories of the *salonnière* (Seyla Benhabib) and aesthetic critic (Linda Dowling), Weliver's interdisciplinary study explores the liberal belief that social appreciation of the romantic arts was divinely inspirational of public philanthropy by salon members.

In *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon*, Weliver intends to re-define 'liberal', performing a 'politics of appraisal' to explore liberalism that is 'rational and inspirational, verbal and extra-linguistic'.¹ Although one reviewer positions 'liberal' as an overworked analytical term in the monograph, the project's juxtaposition of detailed literary and musical analysis specifically alters our perceptions of gender and audience in Victorian Britain, making important contributions to studies of the long nineteenth century.² By highlighting Mary as a liberal female *salonnière*, this text circumvents previous male-dominated studies of Liberals and other late nineteenth-century British statespersons. Weliver recovers previously neglected aspects of European salon history too, given that little scholarship exists which examines salon life in Britain during the 1870s–1880s, or situates salon activities as a discourse of the public/private 'social sphere'.³ Readers find precise details of the Gladstone's Thursday Breakfasts set against the Keble College group's ideals and the philosophical backdrop of Romanticism. Weliver's study of these gatherings reveals that high Victorians met and socialised in a more *ad hoc* manner than previously thought, that men were more avid salon members than nineteenth-century fiction would have it, and that domestic music-making had its light-hearted moments. Mary and her friend Arthur Balfour shared scholarly expertise and a comic appreciation of Handel's music, contradicting established ideas of the composer's reverent public reception. Weliver's original contextualisation of progressive musical performances, her fresh reading of Dante/Rossini reception in *Daniel Deronda*, and her digitisation of song scores and recordings, which illuminate the Tennyson chapter, are

¹ Phyllis Weliver, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 51.

² Emily Jones, review of 'Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism,' *Reviews in History*, <<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2258>> [Accessed 30/05/2019].

³ Weliver, p. 88.

all significant contributions to understanding the salon as an artistic context for Liberal politics.⁴

A key strength of *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon* is the way in which it uniquely extends nineteenth-century scholarship by revealing new details and connections. Just as Mary's thirteen-volume diary – Weliver's key source – reflected her delicate social role through carefully-selected inclusions or omissions, this monograph recreates the world of its liberal heroine with equal discernment in content and similar quotidian immediacy. After a well-paced and clearly-structured 'intellectual history' which introduces liberalism, the Gladstones, and the musical functions of the salon, three case studies rigorously scrutinise important musical and literary forms at play in the Victorian home. Mary's life-writing is examined in the context of national musical progress, before two analyses assess the impact of literature on Gladstonian political actions: Mary finished reading Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* just before starting her first secretarial post on 5 October 1876, and William heard Tennyson's poetic recitations on 1 November 1876 as Prime Minister whilst dealing with the Eastern Question. Weliver argues that literature offered both Gladstones inspiration – even guidance – in their public roles. From Weliver's painstaking new study of archival material, readers will discover comprehensive details of literary and musical repertoire, musicians and musical instruments involved at the Gladstone breakfast gatherings and country house visits, and links between these gatherings and improvements in the public musical world. The RCM's establishment was a national development mentioned recently by television presenter Lucy Worsley, and Mary's diary reveals fascinating new details about this Victorian institution's founding.⁵

Weliver's exploration of the salon's musico-literary intersections deviates from overly simplistic surface readings as well as more nuanced theoretical approaches emanating from late twentieth-century criticism, and her monograph is structured to allow interdisciplinary interpretations of salon artefacts. Musicologists, however, might criticise a distinct gear-shift towards literary studies as the Tennyson chapter commences, although it references his recordings of the poems on phonograph and their musical settings by C. Hubert H. Parry and Tennyson's wife, Emily. Furthermore, when Weliver tallies Mary's diaries with her personal letters, differentiating them as to

⁴ 'Sounding Tennyson', <<http://www.soundingtennyson.org/>> [Accessed 01/06/2019].

⁵ Lucy Worsley, *Queen Victoria: My Musical Britain*, television broadcast, BBC, 11 May 2019.

register and purpose, she risks over-reading Mary's actions and intentions. Did Mary forward her cousin Arthur Lyttelton's letter on staffing at the RCM to its first director George Grove and, when evaluating the 1872 performance of Leonora in Beethoven's *Fidelio* by 'new woman [Marianne] Brandt',⁶ did she scribe words over stave lines in her diary in a deliberate evocation of the sublime? Mary's objectives here as diarist and correspondent are open to question by readers and, while clearly presenting Gladstonian intentions for the liberal salon, Weliver admits that its public efficacy – as on John Ruskin's 1878 visit – was not necessarily guaranteed. A future study could more thoroughly investigate how directly Mary's salon guests responded as aesthetic critics by engaging in civic duties afterwards.

It may appear that Weliver elides artistic ideals with historical reality when she includes the fictional references sometimes shared among salon members; however, this achieves her aim to explore literary aspects of the liberal mindset. Her monograph links real events to near parallels in contemporary novels, not least Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) whose heroine shares attributes with Mary Gladstone: 'both contributed to civic change, declined marriage offers until their thirties and organized Thursday social events'.⁷ However, could all the subjects of Weliver's study have equalled her own comprehensive knowledge of Victorian literature? When she relates Mary's experiences of the political campaign platform to Gwendoline's appreciation of chapel architecture in *Daniel Deronda*, the Gladstones almost become imagined characters in a fictional denouement because of the poetic way she describes them. William and his daughter Mary – 'like a Wagner figure sitting on stage' – are observed by the cheering crowds and '[n]ature itself seems to respond enthusiastically'.⁸ From hindsight, Weliver deliberately explores the permeability of fictional and historical boundaries: she communicates her point on liberalism by drawing readers outside the cohesive world of the drawing room into state politics using the romantic artist as image.

Shaped around Mary Gladstone's perspective as music critic and listener, Weliver's monograph interacts fascinatingly with several scholarly streams. Analysing audience response to emotive performances of romantic music and literature as

⁶ Weliver, p. 155–7.

⁷ Ibid., p. 197.

⁸ Ibid., p. 243–4.

motivation for civic action, Weliver is strongly influenced by the Greenian contribution to British Idealist philosophy. As a result, she justifiably claims greater complexity than Marxist, Foucauldian or poststructuralist approaches, and deeper interdisciplinarity than the foregoing tradition of musico-literary scholarship she helped establish. While Mary employed music for political persuasion and amelioration, she also aided its professionalisation and appreciation in and beyond the late Victorian salon. Here, Weliver extends scholarship in two areas: firstly, the shift towards a silent, listening audience by the 1870s (James H. Johnston, Christina Bashford); and, secondly, how romantic paintings depict subjects showing an attentive listening manner (Richard Leppert). Both Ruskin – although sometimes in political disagreement with the Gladstones – and the French critical tradition influenced the ways in which Mary used her criticism to convey sublime elements of performances to her own audience. Weliver's long called-for study leaves readers optimistic about music, literature, feminism, the salon, and liberalism in the Victorian Downing Street she vividly recovers. Likely to inspire future cultural-intellectual histories of British New Women, this meaningful approach extends nineteenth-century diary scholarship so effectively that no longer is this *salonnière's* diary 'a secret-keeper befitting Mary's role as private secretary'.⁹



BIOGRAPHY: Roger Hansford's research interests revolve around nineteenth-century romanticism, particularly keyboard and vocal music in Victorian Britain and their literary contexts. At University of Southampton, Roger was among the early supporters of the Southampton Centre for Nineteenth-Century Research, and a teaching assistant for the undergraduate course 'Materials of Music History, 1500–1900'. He has presented papers at the Biennial Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music, the Biennial Conference on Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain, and at University of Southampton's 'Other Voices Study Day'. Roger holds a Post-Graduate Certificate in music education, and gained distinction for his MMus in Musicology. His doctoral research attracted funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and led to the 2017 monograph *Figures of the Imagination: Fiction and Song in Britain, 1790–1850* (Taylor & Francis).

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⁹ Ibid., p. 174.