

# Modernism's Handmaid: Dexterity and the Female Pianist

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Representations of female pianists in early twentieth-century literature often link the instrument with a burgeoning self-expression. Miriam Henderson in Dorothy Richardson's *Pointed Roofs* (1915) finds both substance and solace in her morning practice, while Lucy Honeychurch in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) eventually learns to live as fearlessly as she plays her Beethoven sonatas. In Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), the reticent pianist Rachel Vinrace briefly acquires autonomy as she free-wheels through dance tunes on a ship's piano, and the gathered audience find themselves 'tripping and turning' to her music.<sup>1</sup> Yet Rachel's position is telling: she finds verbal communication more difficult, and music provides a hermetic seal rather than a means of communication. Fellow passenger Miss Allan warns her, somewhat gnomically, that music and the English novel 'don't go together' (*VO* 295), and Rachel is dead by the novel's conclusion, unable to link the social gift of her piano-playing with the possibility it offers her for personal expression.<sup>2</sup> Other works from the period are more explicit about the dangers of the female pianist in modernist culture: in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), the ambitious Mrs Kearney jostles her piano-playing daughter into an uncomfortable spotlight. Here we find an anxiety about the female musician as a public spectacle, and a fear of the porous boundary between the amateur and professional. Willa Cather's short story 'A Wagner Matinee' (1904) presents a particularly unsettling meditation on a similar theme. The story's narrator takes her elderly aunt to a chamber

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concert, hoping to rekindle memories of her youth as an accomplished pianist. She greets her aunt Georgiana 'with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Joseph-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo'.<sup>3</sup> The aunt's fingers and eyes are both metaphor and metonym here; she has given up a career as a musician to elope. She warns her niece not to become attached to music as it will be taken from her, inviting comparison with Woolf's doomed romance plot for Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*. Georgiana's fingers work only on domestic tasks, but the necessary specialisation of the ear and the hand for the demands of life as a virtuoso has left her body unable to adapt to the monotony of everyday use. Her pianist's fingers have become lifeless 'tentacles' (*AWM* 494). Yet as Georgiana listens to the concert recital, her hands work 'mechanically upon her black dress, as if, of themselves, they were recalling the piano score they had once played' (*AWM* 494). Here is a kind of compulsive telepathy, like a missing limb still felt by an amputee. Her fingers, thinned by 'waste and wear' (*AWM* 493), cannot quite let go of the past. The wounded explorer wakes from retirement, and the ear and the hand remember something the brain is trying to forget.

These musico-literary encounters suggest wider cultural narratives about the period. Modernism lingers with a mixture of malevolence and fascination on women's hands. Ezra Pound's scathing 'Pastoral' in the first issue of *BLAST* (1914) slavers over the 'performance' of a bare woman's hands, anxious in case the woman might laugh and shatter the silent spectacle of her 'delicate' beauty.<sup>4</sup> Celeste M. Scheck has uncovered a striking series of metaphors from reviews of the period which use the female body to represent poetic form, and find it subject to a series of violent dismemberings.<sup>5</sup> The female arm is the poetic line that should be lopped off, with the male critic playing the role of a despotic Bluebeard slicing off the fingers. The hand suggests a threatening sort of agency, and becomes the site where modernist anxieties about the female musician and the gendered body meet. Yet the concomitant violence visited on women's hands, from Georgiana's shrivelled fingers to Bluebeard's imprisoned wife, offers only one reading of this narrative. Rebecca West's novel *Harriet Hume* (1929), a fantasy based on the British pianist Harriet Cohen (1895–1967), asks us to rethink the role of the female pianist in modernist culture, resituating the hands as agents, rather than subjects, of interpretation. This essay will offer a re-reading of West's novel that draws extensively on the text of Cohen's own life, suggesting how the hands of the female pianist

might make us reconsider notions of agency, autonomy, and gender, and the implications of this for musico-literary relations in the period.

### **Handling Cohen**

What's in a hand? It's a body part often valued more for what it does than what it is. Yet Harriet Cohen was born at a time when hands, and women's hands in particular, were a lively topic of conversation. In 1896, Bertha Röntgen became the first person ever to see an X-ray photograph of her own body when her husband produced an image of her left hand complete with wedding ring. The image speaks to us now, perhaps, of scientific innovation, and the decades of technological progress that would follow. However, its impact at the time was felt more erratically, in seemingly the unlikeliest of places. As Lisa Cartwright has noted, New York women were soon clamouring for X-rays of their bejewelled hands to keep as fashion accessories, a spectral sign that their beauty wasn't just skin deep.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Harriet Cohen had a very particular reason to want an X-ray of her hands. She was born with webbed fingers and her hands remained extremely small throughout her life. While Rachmaninoff's huge stretch was legendary, Harriet Cohen's diminutive reach was another sort of accolade. Cohen was a virtuoso pianist despite, rather than because of, her body—each hand could barely reach an octave. Although she was the youngest pianist to win the prestigious Ada Lewis Scholarship to the Royal Academy, by the age of fourteen her teachers realised that the majority of the Romantic repertoire would be out of her range. Documenting her career in the autobiography *A Bundle of Time* (1960), Cohen is haunted throughout by 'the smallness of her stretch' and her 'faulty hands'.<sup>7</sup> The composers that made Harriet Cohen famous—Bach, Bartok, Arnold Bax—were as much a physical necessity as an aesthetic choice. In her own words, she was the world's first 'anti-virtuoso'.<sup>8</sup> There is a telling note of self-promotion in this phrase, and Cohen is keen to offer up her 'serious natural handicap' for discussion in interview; most profiles of her during her career are careful to include the anecdote of Busoni meeting her as a young girl, where he marvelled at 'the worst and smallest pianoforte hands he had ever seen' and advised her to 'give up music' (*HC* 593). Paintings and photographs of Cohen by Hugh Cecil and Ronald Ossory make much of the disparity between her international acclaim and her tiny stretch; pianos dwarf her, or her hands are covered by heavy sleeves or



*Fig. 1.* Photograph of Harriet Cohen by Hugh Cecil, © from the National Portrait Gallery.

furs (fig. 1). The most famous part of her body is hidden from view, like the circus contortionist who is conscious that she cannot give away the secret of her dexterity.

Yet if we can rarely see Cohen's hands, their role in shaping her career is foregrounded both by her particular technique and by her idiosyncratic approach to her career. She was frequently the dedicatee of works she played and premiered, but, if this was not the case, sometimes demanded that composers revise the dedication to include her. Bax's miniature *In a Vodka Shop* (1915) was initially

dedicated to her rival, the pianist Myra Hess; Cohen persuaded Bax to revise *Winter Legends* from 1930 after he dedicated it to Sibelius.<sup>9</sup> Cohen fought to retain exclusive performance rights over the works written for her, ensuring that no-one else could perform them during her lifetime. These acts of creative control were only heightened by her physical limitations. Pieces written for her were often not possible for her to play because of her stretch. Composers were obliged to revise works heavily as a result, and consequently whole movements went unperformed during Cohen's lifetime. Bax's *Symphonic Variations* (1920) was not heard as its composer intended until the 1970s, more than fifty years after its premiere. These gestures towards authorship make Cohen's tiny hands the most powerful part of her professional identity, performing their own kind of 'dismembering' of the works they perform. The smaller her stretch, the smaller her repertoire; the greater her control over that same repertoire, the more distinctive her role as performer became. Although composers, photographers, and audiences appropriated Cohen's hands in various ways, she remained resolutely in control of them.

The interest in Cohen's hands and their level of agency plays into wider debates in the period about the pianist's role in interpretation and performance. The vogue for the player-piano in the early decades of the century offered a virtual reproduction of a pianist's performance. While the novelty was being celebrated as a teaching aid and a means of bringing world-class performers into the middle-class home, it was also a source of anxiety.<sup>10</sup> Ezra Pound, writing criticism under the pseudonym William Atheling, was not the only one to wonder if the pianist was more a mechanical operator than an artist: 'All keyboard instruments tend to make into performers people not born to be musicians; and the very fact that one can play a keyboard instrument quite correctly without in the least knowing whether a given note is in tune or is correct in itself, tends to obscure the value of true pitch.'<sup>11</sup> Given that the most socially acceptable instrument for a professional female musician to play in the period is a piano, Pound's argument is implicitly gendered. His review goes on to pour scorn on the domestic piano where 'the very young mother sits with her numerous well-washed offspring clambering about her, receiving the cultural rudiments' (*EPM* 334). If the pianist depresses keys rather than makes notes, the argument goes, they are nearer to a person who winds the gramophone than a soloist who merits our attention. Pound's determinist argument situates people 'born' to be musicians against people who might be 'trained'. The new technologies which can

recreate the greatest performances of professional pianists might also render their art redundant. Success and distinction leads to a curious obsolescence.

The fear of being replaced haunts fictional representations of pianists by Joyce and Cather, and one reading of Cohen's life and work might see her competitive and obsessive personality as a symbol of a larger anxiety about the longevity of the live musician in the era of the gramophone, the wireless, and the pianola. Yet recent modernist scholarship by Julian Murphet has called for a move away from technological determinism, asking instead for more complex and nuanced 'models of transference' between modernist innovations and their consumers.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Lisa Gitelman has reminded us that the introduction of new media 'is never entirely revolutionary'.<sup>13</sup> It is with their work in mind that we read Cohen's own comments in a 1929 interview about the uncertain future of the concert performer in the changing technological landscape: 'so many of these developments are new that it is unwise to be dogmatic about them' (*HC* 593), Cohen suggests. She is careful to differentiate between technology which supplies 'a real need' versus that which serves 'the department of commerce' (*HC* 593), all the while acknowledging the difficulty of distinguishing between the two. Yet she is particularly optimistic about the possibilities of the wireless, pointing to its importance in bringing classical music to places far from concert halls, and, significantly, in creating a new type of listener who will lend ears to the music rather than eyes to the performer: 'Wireless is, I think, training up something like a new public [...] that will be less and less concerned with the appearance and personality of the performer, and more and more with the music' (*HC* 594). In Cohen's pragmatic and hopeful response to the advent of various sound technologies, she sees the invisible music promised by the wireless and the gramophone as an escape from the cult of personality. While she could be shrewd about her own public image, here she envisages a release from the body and the icon of the female musician through radio transmission. Her use of the term 'training' is significant: she answers Pound's problematic division of the 'trained' and the 'born' musician by imagining the expansive possibilities of 'training' new kinds of listeners and listening. Friedrich Kittler has argued that the invention of the phonograph is the most significant single development for our understanding of agency and authorship. With invisible sound, 'it is no longer necessary to assign an author to every trace, not even God'.<sup>14</sup> Yet Cohen suggests an attraction to the authorless trace of the radio. While her hands retain a

fierce control over the works she plays, she revels in the possibilities of obscuring her own body from the performance of those same works.

### Playing Cohen, Cohen at Play

Cohen's emphasis on the sonic rather than the bodily trace of her performances offers an oblique comment on her posthumous legacy, which seems similarly caught between the aural and textual remnants of her life. In 2007, the British Library acquired thousands of letters from Cohen's archive, after her self-imposed embargo on them had come to an end. Her missives to George Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, Albert Einstein, Arnold Bennett, and Ramsay Macdonald make the collection significant for any literary scholar working in the modernist period. Yet the collection of over 2,000 love letters written between her and Arnold Bax offers Cohen up to particular kinds of readings. A biography was published in 2008 titled, tellingly, *Music & Men: The Life and Loves of Harriet Cohen*, and a biopic is now in the early stages of production, scripted by Cohen's biographer Helen Fry. The book quotes their erotic missives at length, but is silent on the subject of Cohen's music: in its place we are promised 'one of the greatest love stories of all time', as Bax and Cohen play out their affair against the background of the First World War and the threat of TB, which Cohen suffered from intermittently after contracting it in 1915.<sup>15</sup> The omission of Cohen's music from this account tells us something about the desires of contemporary publishers for scurrilous biography, but also something about the figure of the female pianist in modernist culture. Posthumously, as in her own lifetime, Cohen seems in danger of being effaced, or remade in a mythical image – indistinguishable from, and often complicit with, the mythical and mystical appropriations of endless composers and admirers. Cohen's prodigious list of intimate correspondents trope her variously as St Cecilia, the piano-witch (Albert Einstein), or the woman of Andros (Thornton Wilder) (see *ABT* 218 and 234). The blank canvas of the female musician apparently offers a disorientating series of disguises and garbs. Her memoirs and personal correspondence make further play with these competing archetypes. Meeting D. H. Lawrence in 1915, Cohen attempts to lighten his mood by having him wade into a pond to fetch her a lily (see *ABT* 23). During wartime rationing in 1943, she writes to the Labour MP John Mack to have some burgundy nail-varnish smuggled into the country for her personal use.<sup>16</sup> The first Fleet Street tycoon Max Beaverbrook dubs her 'the biggest woman in the country', her miniature hands once again the perverse root

of her colossal fame.<sup>17</sup> Here she hovers halfway between a faddish infatuation and immortal body incarnate. In the extensive thirty-year correspondence between Cohen and her lover Arnold Bax, too, we find a familiar series of romantic effusions and abstractions. For Bax she was an embodiment both of the Celtic faery and of the tortured spirit of Russia. His letters address her as Tania; a tone poem dedicated to her brands her *The Maiden with a Daffodil* (1915), mythologising her own meeting with Lawrence. Bax's settings and musical tributes—like the solo piano piece *Nereid* from 1916—offer the spectre of the female musician as nymph: disembodied, ethereal, and spectral. Yet there are important ways in which Cohen counters this writing of her as wispy muse.

If the metaphors of modernism were subjecting female limbs to a series of attacks, the agency and artistry of the pianist was similarly being questioned in the period. In his piano manual *The Act of Touch in All its Diversity* (1903), Cohen's teacher and mentor Tobias Matthay helped define a school of twentieth-century pianism based on schematic arm movements which might offer a particular means of tone production. The sound a pianist made was neither idiomatic nor intuitive, but the result of a particular procedure. Matthay's approach put a new emphasis on the individual capabilities of each muscle in the finger, signalling the move away from personal interpretation to technical proficiency. In his organisation of all the physical gestures a pianist might make into different 'species' of 'touch-formation', Matthay created a systematised code which emphasised the artful and technical over the artistic.<sup>18</sup> Cohen's own piano manual, *Music's Handmaid* (1936), draws significantly on Matthay's methods, collapsing and making redundant Pound's distinction between the 'born' and the 'trained' musician. She offers advice to her readers on a variety of contemporary piano works, including Bax's own *Nereid*, the piece written to (and about) her, making her less ethereal muse than interpreter, critic, and technical assistant. Directly playing off Bax's sense of her as an other-worldly presence, she offers a variety of practical solutions for playing the more difficult passages, details various ways of distributing the melodies between the two hands, and offers a commentary which rewrites her own representation: 'Contrary to the marking of the copy, I think it is best to play the last half of bar 20 suddenly (*subito*) very softly, as if the nymph had disappeared into the water, the tone suddenly coming out again clearly as before.'<sup>19</sup> Here, under the guise of interpreter, she makes the nymph disappear from view. This is a tone poem whose mythical subject has the liberty to revise her own representation. The body-as-work dispels the ethereal

approximation of the female body. As Cohen rewrites the dynamics of Bax's music, the symbolic sexual dynamic of their collaboration is also repositioned. Bax chooses the archetypes, but Cohen stages their exits and entrances, her interpretive authority giving her hands control not only over her own performance but in subsequent interpretations of the work itself.

Cohen's posthumous sonic trace confirms this sense of artistic autonomy. In 2005, the Dutton label re-released a collection of Cohen's recordings, ensuring new listeners would have access to the sound, if not the body, of her work. As with *Music & Men*, the titular emphasis of the disc—*Cohen Plays Bax*—apparently reduces a complex figure to the sum of her conquests, or to the compelling narrative of one doomed love affair. Yet here the ear can do the careful listening denied by the biography; the careful control evident in her recordings of *A Mountain Mood* (1917) or Bax's viola sonata treat the romantic and Celtic mythology which informs so much of Bax's writing with dispassionate restraint. Bax's score markings for *A Mountain Mood*—'dreamy' (bar 28), 'very tenderly' (bar 53), 'very delicate' (bar 60)—make gestures to Debussy's impressionistic tone poems, and these prompts are followed in later recordings by Iris Loveridge and Eric Parkin.<sup>20</sup> Yet Cohen proves herself to be both dedicatee and revisionist; through the crackle of a remastered 1930s 78, the contemporary listener can still hear Cohen's judicious pedalling and measured tempi. A rereading of Cohen's own interpretative strategies in her playing offers us ways of resisting the archetypal muse figure which emerges from the recent biography, and may give us strategies for rethinking the representations of female pianists in the period.

Cohen's control over Bax's dynamics and phrasing is echoed by her stringent instructions to the reader on tempi. In *Music's Handmaid* she draws attention to her unusual reading of Bach, which drowns his keyboard inventions in rubato, and 'writes out' suggest tempo changes for performers of Bax's music. Here, she offers a very practical way in which the pianist, by attending to duration and speed, might be not only in control of her own body, but able to manipulate time itself. She discusses Salvador Dalí's painting *Piano* (1936), where two women look on as a third figure holds a melting piano keyboard. One way of reading this painting would be to see it as an encounter between different St Cecílias: three versions of a female musical archetype quite literally compare notes. Yet Cohen offers an alternative surrealist image that overlooks the gender connotations of the painting: 'if I were Salvador Dalí I would paint a pianist with his ear at the end of a long wire like a fishing rod, for this *listening* should be projected

forwards, in advance as it were, and not only at the time of execution' (*ABT* 236). Cohen, who devoured J. W. Dunne's *The Consciousness of Time* (1927), a work pointing to the practical possibility of time travel, constructs a pianist who is always listening to what is coming next. The body in time is reclaimed. When Cohen temporarily lost the use of her right hand after an accident with a tray of glasses, George Bernard Shaw recommended she leave behind the 'ironmongery' of the piano for life as a conductor. The career she never quite began as a conductor nevertheless offers a model for reassessing the pianist's agency in modernist culture. Cohen's Rilke epigram from *Music's Handmaid* tellingly fuses the conductor and performer's role with the abstract spirit of music itself, as two young lovers ask: 'Auf welches Instrument sind wir gespannt?/ Und welcher Spieler hat uns in der Hand [On what instrument are we strung? And what performer holds us in their hand?]' (*MH* 45).

D. H. Lawrence's poem 'Piano' (1918), written after their brief meeting, displays a similar ambivalence about who is playing whom, and makes significant mileage from acts of remembering and dismembering. The poem centres on a professional soprano whose show-stopping and showy range jolts the narrator back to a memory of lying under his childhood piano as his mother plays to him. As with Cather's short story, the human voice is a means of sonic transport back to the past, a time-machine returning the subject to the physical memory of the piano. Here, the remembering adult male is taken back to infancy, and locates happiness in an image of a 'child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings / And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.'<sup>21</sup> The sentimental image hovers between a child's passivity and a curious sense that they are 'operating' memory; the child who presses the mother's feet against the piano pedals does not sound the notes, but controls their resonance. The female musician is both machine and display. It is the child's pedalling that creates the 'boom' of the strings, and makes the sound linger longest in the ear. While the performing woman is both the prompt for this memory and the figure at its centre, the listener-narrator seems half-ventriloquist, half-fetishist. This may be in part a poem about how the archetype of the female musician fails to submit to Lawrence's imaginings and appropriations – it is no coincidence that the 'democracy of touch' he argues for in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) would not look out of place in Cohen's piano manual, or that his image of modern futility in 'Why the Novel Matters' (1922) begins with an orgiastic celebration of his own writing hand, and ends with an image of a modern woman who is 'merely dead [...] like a pianoforte with

half the notes mute'.<sup>22</sup> Here, the power of his writing hand cannot summon the female pianist from the past without a conscious effort of will, making the pressing of the pedal his own. The spectre remains mute, and resists being replayed for the man's enjoyment. However, the most direct literary representation of Cohen comes with *Harriet Hume* (1929), Rebecca West's novel written in tribute to her. When read in tandem with the text of Cohen's own life, it offers a significant opportunity for rethinking our grasp of musico-literary modernism.

### **Re-reading *Harriet Hume***

West called *Harriet Hume* her 'ghastly incubus', its strange authority compelling her to turn it from a short story to a novel, yet its prolixity only lengthens the puzzle.<sup>23</sup> The novel traces in episodic structure a series of amorous meetings between Harriet Hume, an ethereal concert pianist with small, webbed hands, and Arnold Condorex, a pragmatic and ambitious politician with delusions of greatness. The work has often troubled critics, with its fantastical whimsy and mercurial protagonist. Bonnie Kime Scott notes the novel's 'violent potential for dualism', while Jane Marcus reads it as an extended analogy for the failure of the suffragette movement.<sup>24</sup> An obvious biographical reference-point for the novel is Cohen's affair with Arnold Bax, and Francesca Frigerio finds in *Harriet Hume* a heroine who 'powerfully resists some of the cultural and social stereotypes associated with women artists'.<sup>25</sup> Yet West's novel is perhaps more radical than this, as the remainder of this essay will show: in Cohen, West finds an ideal subject for unravelling the cultural understanding of the female pianist.

The novel's opening scene warns the reader of the text that it will treat narrative with caution, even derision; it begins with the two lovers scurrying downstairs after an amorous afternoon encounter in Harriet's room. Yet their first conversation does not begin the narrative, but defers it. Condorex admires a Kensington family from the landing window, and then attempts to decode the image for Harriet: 'it is telling us [. . .] that some day we will live in houses like that and be people like those'.<sup>26</sup> Harriet orders him to stop mid-reverie, and covers his lips with her 'narrow hand', which '[startles] him as if it had been a blow' (*HH* 9). The violence enacted on women's hands becomes the strange force enacted by them. Harriet goes on to tell Condorex that she is telepathic, and already knows what he is about to say, a nod to Cohen's own interest in time travel, and West's sense that 'time was being spun about round her'.<sup>27</sup> The effect of translating this

to a fictional character plays strategic havoc with representation; by pre-empting Condorex's attempt to 'read' an image, Harriet forestalls any attempt he makes to appropriate her.

The novel is also quick to alert its readers to the limitations of textual representation. In an early scene, Condorex prowls Harriet's bookshelves, hoping to find something in her library that will explain her, only to find it contains no books (*HH* 16). Images of blank or obscured pages litter the novel, from the shadows that line her face like 'watermarks on paper' (*HH* 125), to the empty summer streets which are compared to a familiar book with 'the stubs of twenty torn-out pages' (*HH* 118). The spaces where text should be are left empty. *Harriet Hume* effects other kinds of erasures via the telepathic second-guessing that runs throughout the novel. Condorex dismisses Harriet as an occultist with no grasp of the real world, only for her to point to her tax-return (*HH* 32). West is careful to balance the whimsical with the pragmatic, so that the apparent binary between Harriet as fantasist and Condorex as patriarchal materialist is blurred, unsettling a series of other binaries in the process. Harriet lives in a house without doors, casting her as an oddity from *Alice in Wonderland*, yet here the narrator steps in as cultural historian to offer some astute justifications, explaining the house had been converted too hastily after the Great War 'house-hunger' to solve 'some problems of architecture' (*HH* 13). West's tendency to let Harriet embody contradiction rather than anxiety offers us a protagonist who is as shrewd as she is supple: as Harriet explains, 'there is the North, and there is the South, and there is no great war between them' (*HH* 203).

Central to West's project in writing the novel is resituating the cultural expectations of the female musician. In Condorex and Harriet's first meeting, Harriet offers him a chance to play her Bechstein, before remembering he 'does not play' (*HH* 12). West is careful to ensure that Harriet's 'play' throughout the novel means both a rigorous regime of practice and a tendency towards the fantastical, offering the title of the recent Cohen CD, *Cohen Plays Bax*, a new kind of interpretative authority. As if in answer to Pound's snide decree about the pianist as a 'trained' musician, Harriet's musicianship is both innate and the result of difficult physical labour. West also unravels the debate about the pianist as mechanical musician. The names of the first player-pianos, from 'Aeolian' to 'St Cecilia', attempted to pass off their mechanical innovation as mythical, drawing on the traditional iconography of the female musician. A memorable advert for the Welte Mignon 'Vorsetzer' from 1912 describes a 'jest' a society woman played on some friends by inviting them one afternoon to her

**How Mme. Bloomfield-Zeisler played a jest on some friends**

Mme. Bloomfield Zeisler, the eminent pianiste, while playing to some friends suddenly rose and left the piano. Her playing, however, continued to the bewilderment of the company.

Mme. Zeisler laughingly confessed that a player attachment on a second grand piano in the studio had been started at a given signal. Mme. Zeisler was acting a part, while the player produced the music. Several guests, however, still objected that the technique and interpretation were Mme. Zeisler's own, whereupon she further explained that the instrument was the Welte-Mignon Autograph Player, which actually rendered her own playing and so exactly that the most delicate musical judgment could detect no difference.



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**Welte Mignons built in following styles: Welte Piano, with keyboard; Welte Piano without keyboard; and Welte Attachment to grand pianos.**

Fig. 2. Advertisement for 'The Welte-Mignon Autograph Piano' (July 1912), from the collection of Arthur W. J. G. Ord-Hume, The Library of Mechanical Music & Horology.

drawing room where two pianos were set up, one of them with a player-piano discretely attached. The hostess sits down to play the undoctored piano, baffling her guests as the piano continues after she gets up (fig. 2).

Here, the entertaining society lady enlivens a tedious social duty with a novel attempt at telekinesis. At first glance, the opening scene of *Harriet Hume*, where Arnold visits Harriet in her Kensington house, offers much the same scenario served up as fantasy rather than advertisement:

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from the unattended keyboard of the piano, whose mistress stood ten feet away, was coming music. Not melody, to be sure, but a progression that corresponded with the line of her voice, echoing clearly enough each note she dwelt on for any space or with any richness. The sound was less brisk than that which a finger evokes by striking a key. Rather was it as if some inhabiting spirit of the instrument had resolved no longer to tolerate the age-old conditions by which human virtuosity steals all the credit of its tunefulness, and was essaying to make its music by itself, and found its new art difficult. (*HH* 34)

In this passage, the female pianist seems once again a ventriloquist, less an interpreter than the agent by which the instrument speaks. Yet this scene of musical telekinesis is prompted by Harriet's own voice, the strings resonating with her call rather than responding to the strike of the hammer. Here the 'anti-virtuoso' is able to uncover the limits of human virtuosity. She speaks to and for the instrument, rather than operating it. Here she becomes the means by which the piano is personified, rather than part of its own mechanics—Condorex notes her Bechstein still 'whinnies when it hears [her] step' (*HH* 138). Later in the novel, despondently playing Handel's *Water Music*, Harriet claims her fingers 'found their way home like dogs whose masters have fallen dead by the wayside' (*HH* 191); rather than splitting the body into a series of assembled parts, *Harriet Hume* offers up the female pianist's body as both coherent and discrete. Whereas Condorex comes to lament his own prosaic digits as his great political career withers into administration, and life finds him 'picking this way with the finger-nail, flattening that with the thumb' (*HH* 267), the fictional Harriet, like Cohen herself, refuses to be dissected. The final scene of the novel restates its concern with female hands as agents rather than subjects. Such is Condorex's bafflement and, increasingly, rage at Harriet's contradictions that he finally vows to kill her: her easy movement between the practical and the fantastical begins to unsettle his own grasp of rational thought. Yet his murder attempt is forestalled by her telepathic powers and, more specifically, the 'two heavy hands' (*HH* 263) of the policeman who catch him as his pistol falls to the ground.

Time and chronology are similarly transformed into subjects, rather than agents, of the female pianist, following Cohen's own control over her repertoire—the watch that adorns her tiny wrist is a 'trifle of time keeping' (*HH* 92). The novel's opening chapters gesture to the temporal—all are set-pieces for the four seasons—yet gaps of five and six years separate them, creating a disparate collection of scenes. Condorex begins each chapter by speculating on how badly

Harriet will have fared in the interim, only to find his narrative dislodged, disappointed not to see 'the ravages wrought by time on her appearance' (*HH* 180). West writes a musical version of Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), published the previous year. Yet Harriet's power over time extends beyond Woolf's fantasy protagonist. She not only defies it, but travels through it, bragging that the Adam Brothers arrive annually to trim back the creeper in her garden and that 'there is much of this in-and-out work between the centuries' (*HH* 133). West is careful to anchor this in Harriet's musicianship rather than afford her extraordinary powers. Her life is always informed by a 'beautiful sense of rhythm and counter-rhythm' (*HH* 95). Harriet ends the novel by expressing her lifelong desire to be a conductor (*HH* 282), prompting a fantastical scene where she conducts the flowers in her garden in a rousing performance of Mozart with a feather-duster for a baton. Here is patriarchy played for whimsy, offering a final re-statement of Harriet as the novel's controlling agent. By mastering time, the female pianist also masters narrative.

West's decision to cast Harriet's lover as a politician rather than a composer is also significant. In place of Arnold Bax's Celtophilia, we find a man who dismisses Harriet as having 'as little human history as a nymph' (*HH* 18). The narrative apparently finds room to collude with Condorex's assessment; while Harriet gives the newspapers a dilatory read, she finds world events merely 'an amusing appendix to the vastly more important things that happened when she played the piano' (*HH* 17). Yet the narrative voice offers enough irony to allow the reader to apply the same criticism to Condorex, who is happy enough to advance his career by leading a parliamentarians' rebellion until the political tide turns. Harriet offers him a critique which shows a firmer grasp of political acumen than her distracted newspaper-reading suggests, attacking him for '[applying] to statecraft methods that are more appropriate to banking' (*HH* 277). West rejects the notion of the female artist existing outside of history. She would revisit this in her *Cousin Rosamund* trilogy (1956–1985) which, through the eyes of two piano-playing sisters, offers a saga of the century. In one of her longest speeches, Harriet offers an extended metaphor for the musician as politician, who finds herself an 'unlimited monarch' when alone at the piano, and in charge of a democratic 'government of sound' (*HH* 143) when playing with an orchestra. These metaphors of performance allow Harriet Hume to avoid being subsumed by narrative or sidelined by history.

Throughout the novel, Condorex cannot decide whether the inscrutable Harriet is a symbol or artwork, cipher or spectre. As he

says to her: 'I suspect you of being the embodiment of some principle, of having behind your head or under your feet an invisible scroll bearing the name of some quality such as the young women in the mural decorations of some public buildings are prudent enough to display visibly. Are you love? Are you truth?' (*HH* 93). The invisible scroll remains unreadable throughout, and instead offers a series of difficulties, as this description suggests. Condorex's cry captures our own readerly desire to tether the musical to a fixed meaning. Yet in West's deconstruction of how a female musician, or music itself, might be represented by text, we find a novel that might help us question and rethink modernism's more canonical musical-literary subjects: the disrobed Susanna that haunts Wallace Stevens's 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' (1915), or Woolf's Rachel Vinrace, who replies to a question about whether she votes by confirming she plays the piano. Condorex's suspicions cast Harriet as a series of binaries: absent and present; public and private; prudent and reckless; abstraction and embodiment. Yet West's rewriting of Cohen's surname as Hume seems a jokey nod to her namesake philosopher; here is a character that cannot be tied down to human constraints, or observable properties and characteristics. Here is a representation always aware that 'an image is but an appearance on glass that has been mercuried' (*HH* 228). The surreal and playful world of *Harriet Hume* re-embodies the female musical performer. The disembodied hands of Cather's short story are sutured back on the musician's body. As in the most spectral scene in West's novel, Cohen can play the piano without using her hands; equally, her hands can play the piano without using Cohen.

Both the novel and the textual trace of Cohen's life at first suggest a riddling conundrum—the kind that puzzles Reverend Beebe about Lucy Honeychurch, or has Mrs Dalloway shaking her head over Rachel Vinrace. Cohen's image was appropriated and modified throughout her life, as it will undoubtedly be by the forthcoming biopic. Tributes to her by D. H. Lawrence and Rebecca West add to the complex modulations of icon and cultural construct which inform our own readings, and hearings, of her work; the literary text cannot 'solve' the riddle here, or unpick Cohen's complexity, even as it pushed West towards her most experimental modernist novel. Murphet has asked for a less dogmatic account of modernism's legacy which will take account of 'the cryptic and allegorical' relations between different media, 'some friendly, some less amicable'.<sup>28</sup> Readings of Cohen's life not only complicate our understanding of female musicians and their place in modernist culture, but how their body of work might be mediated through various technologies and media. Cohen is drenched

by her admirers in romantic evasions and myth, yet she hones her technique in the most rigorous and schematic school of modern pianism. Her career was temporarily ended when she lost the use of her right hand, yet she nevertheless ensured her own hands gave her more control over her repertoire than any of her contemporaries. The range of contradictions Cohen both adopts and invites make her an idiosyncratic example of a female twentieth-century pianist but, paradoxically, a paradigmatic one. The inconvenient messiness of her life might, like an X-ray photograph, cause us to look again at representations and archetypes we think we recognise. Here, as in West's fictional fantasy, we find 'a lens through which the unseen can be seen' (HH 76).

The conventional story of modernist literary-musical relations finds writers from Joyce and Woolf to Beckett turning to musical form as way of escaping plot-driven narrative, 'seeking new models in an art that had traditionally seemed remote from the novel's primarily mimetic vocation'.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, West's most musical novel is her least mimetic. Yet if music might help novelists rethink plot, and might yet help us rethink the 'plot' of literary modernism, it can often reinstate our desire to create narratives. As Jean Jacques Nattiez has noted, 'music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative, to comment, to analyze'.<sup>30</sup> The cultural turn of the New Modernist Studies is similarly keen to ventriloquise stories about interdisciplinarity, transforming the relationship between music and literature as one also governed by a series of compelling and compulsory narratives: music as intermedial referent; music as technologically determined; music as site of anxious production. Yet West explores alternative strategies to the experiments of her modernist contemporaries. Rather than offer the piano as that by which the inarticulate heroine is given voice (as in Dorothy Richardson's or Woolf's work), or for a symbol of cultural anxiety about the performing female (as in Joyce's *Dubliners*), West deconstructs our desires to make analogies, narratives, and metaphors from music and its players. Arnold Condorex writes Harriet Hume as spectral muse; West replies not with a counter-narrative, but with a text showing the limitations of any such gesture. Her intervention might give our hands pause for thought as we write our own interdisciplinary narratives.

#### Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (1915), ed. Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 186. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *VO*.

## *Dexterity and the Female Pianist*

2. See Richard Leppert's *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995) for an account of nineteenth-century representations of female pianists.
3. Willa Cather, 'A Wagner Matinee' (1904), in *Stories, Poems and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1992): pp. 489–96, p. 490. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *AWM*.
4. Ezra Pound, 'Pastoral', *BLAST*, 1 (20 June 1914), p. 50.
5. Celeste M. Schenck, 'Exiled by Genre: Modernism, Canonicity, and the Politics of Exhaustion', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *Gender and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2008): pp. 35–56, pp. 35–6.
6. See Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1995), p. 109.
7. Harriet Cohen, *A Bundle of Time: The Memoirs of Harriet Cohen* (1960; London: Faber, 1969), p. 155 and p. 73. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *ABT*.
8. Claudia Shearle, 'Harriet Cohen', *The Musical Times*, 70.1037 (1 July, 1929): pp. 593–4, p. 593. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *HC*.
9. Arnold Bax tempers Cohen's anger at the Hess dedication by noting, in a private letter, that changing it would make 'people talk' (5 May 1915). Later that year she asks him to 'write her name' on his piece *A Mountain Mood* 'as I have worked so hard!' (12 November 1915). All Cohen's quoted correspondence is from the British Library, MS. Mus. 1639–1648. Helen Fry notes the original manuscript of *Winter Legends* bears a dedication to Sibelius, but is revised to Harriet Cohen when published. See Helen Fry, *Music & Men: The Life and Loves of Harriet Cohen* (Stroud: History Press, 2008), p. 186.
10. See, for example, Sir Henry J. Wood, *The 'Pianola': The Future Educational Force in Music* (London: Aeolian Company, 1920).
11. William Atheling, 'Music', *The New Age*, 22.17 (21 February 1918): pp. 334–5, p. 334. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *EPM*. For a discussion of how women were depicted in piano manuals of the period, see Francesca Frigerio, 'Music and the Feminine Art of Detail in Rebecca West's *Harriet Hume*', in Bernard Schweizer (ed.), *Rebecca West Today: Contemporary Critical Approaches* (Newark: University of Delaware, 2006): pp. 125–39, p. 125.
12. Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 3.
13. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 6.
14. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michele Wutz, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 87.
15. Fry, *Music & Men*, dustjacket.
16. John Mack to Harriet Cohen, 6 May 1943, British Library correspondence, Ms. Mus. 1946.
17. Lord Beaverbrook to Harriet Cohen, 4 January 1933, British Library correspondence, Ms. Mus. 1946.
18. Tobias Matthay, *The Art of Touch in All Its Diversity* (London: Longman, 1903), p. 246.
19. Harriet Cohen, *Music's Handmaid* (London: Faber, 1950), p. 164. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *MH*.
20. See Arnold Bax, *A Mountain Mood: Melody and Variations for Pianoforte* (London: Chester, 1917); Iris Loveridge, *Arnold Bax: The Piano Music*, Decca Records, LR 3113-CD, 2008, compact disc; and Eric Parkin, *The Piano*

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- Music of Arnold Bax: Vol. IV*, Chandos Records, CHAN 9561, 1988, compact disc.
21. D. H. Lawrence, 'Piano' (1918), *Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (London: Penguin, 1964): p. 148, ll. 3–4.
  22. D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 67; and D. H. Lawrence, 'Why the Novel Matters' (1922), *Selected Critical Writings* ed. Michael Herbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): pp. 204–9, p. 209.
  23. Rebecca West to Winifred Macleod (January 1929), in *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 110.
  24. Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Refiguring the Binary, Breaking the Cycle: Rebecca West as Feminist Modernist', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 37.2 (1991): pp. 169–91, p. 183; and Jane Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties, Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner', in S. Merrill Squier (ed.), *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1984): pp. 134–60.
  25. Francesca Frigerio, 'Music and the Feminine Art of Detail in Rebecca West's *Harriet Hume*', in Schweizer (ed.), *Rebecca West Today*: pp. 125–39, p. 125.
  26. Rebecca West, *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy* (1929), (London: Virago, 1992), p. 8. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *HH*.
  27. Rebecca West, 'Introduction' (*ABT* 5).
  28. Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism*, p. 3.
  29. Eric Prieto, *Listening In: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 59.
  30. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 128.