Gendered Musical Responses to First World War Experiences

Abstract

This article investigates how women composers have responded to and commemorated the First World War. It juxtaposes works written between 1915 and 1916 by Susan Spain-Dunk, Morfydd Owen and Adela Maddison, with contemporary responses as part of the centenary commemorations (2014-18) by Cecilia MacDowall, Catherine Kontz and Susan Philipz. Pierre Nora’s concept of ‘sites of memory’, Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ and Judith Butler’s theory of mourning provide a framework in order to analyse the different functions of this music in terms of our collective memory of the War. The article ultimately argues that this music contributes to a re-evaluation of how female composers experience the cultural impact of the War. By anachronistically discussing these stylistically disparate works alongside one another, there is the possibility of disrupting the progressively linear canonical musical tradition.

In August 1914, London’s musical society was taken by surprise at the outbreak of war. As it was outside the main concert season, only the Proms concerts, then held at the Queen’s Hall, had to immediately consider their programming choices. On 15 August the decision was taken to cancel a performance of Strauss, and two days later an all Wagner-programme was replaced with works by Debussy, Tchaikovsky and a rendition of the Marseillaise.¹ This instigated a debate in the musical press, which continued throughout the War, questioning nationalistic tendencies in music, the role of musicians in wartime, and how the War would influence musical composition. Meanwhile, women’s music, which had increasingly gained currency from the early twentieth century, continued with some vibrancy throughout the War, albeit often in non-mainstream venues and private contexts. Here seemed to be a chance for women composers to further the cause of women’s music in general, and their individual status as composers. One hundred years later, new musical works have featured prominently as part of the current centenary commemorations (2014-18).² New

² Works range from Jonathan Dove’s choral work For the Unknown Soldier based on nine First World War poems, to BBC Radio 3’s extensive commemoration programming to multi-media works commissioned for the 14-18 Now project including Dr Blighty at the 2016 Brighton Festival, see https://www.1418now.org.uk/
works by women have re-evaluated and re-worked dominant narratives of the War and contributed to the plurality of voices heard in an extended act of collective mourning. Therefore, three instrumental works by composers Susan Spain-Dunk (1880-1962), Morfydd Owen (1891-1918) and Adela Maddison (1866-1929) written in 1915 and 1916 provide snapshots of very different experiences of the War. These are then juxtaposed to recent works by contemporary composers Cecilia McDowall, Catherine Kontz and Susan Philipsz, in order to open a connective dialogue across time between historical and contemporary women’s musical practices. This raises the question of how both sets of works function within collective memory in relation to their individual temporalities and performance histories.

The works are all analysed within the context of collective memory (or indeed collective remembrance), specifically considering whether they function as what Pierre Nora has labelled *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). Sites of memory are understood as being created through interaction between history and memory, where in the absence of spontaneous memory ‘moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it – no longer quite alive but not entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded’. A site of memory needs to contain the will to remember, as distinct from other historical artifacts. Particularly pertinent to the musical analysis of women’s music is the distinction between ‘dominant’ sites of memory which are imposed from above by governments or official organisations and include official memorial services, compared to ‘dominated’ sites which Nora considers ‘places...
of refuge, sanctuaries of instinctive devotion and hushed pilgrimages.’

There is also consideration of how the musical works contribute to the construction of the nation at time of war, which Benedict Anderson defines as ‘imagined communities’. Here the nation is ‘conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history’.

Women’s music, however, lacks this continued, canonical linearity that is present in the mainstream heritage of the male musical canon: ‘Women were caught in a constant state of rediscovery in which the story of women composers’ history had to be re-invented each time...’ Thus, women’s music also has the potential to both contribute to and disrupt nations’ narratives.

Finally, issues surrounding the process of mourning in relation to collective remembrance are examined in terms of how women composers construct personal voice as well as representations of historical voices in their work. Here Judith Butler ‘codes mourning as a potential eruption of “unspeakable” losses into public life that would revise the frames by which grief is organized’.

Music and the First World War

Debates on the nature of British and, more specifically, ‘English’ music preceded the War. Constructs of nationalism were also being discussed in the arts more generally, especially in a European context. In British art, these debates were seen most prominently in volk culture such as in the writings of Walter Flex and Edward Thomas ‘who felt that Europe’s new cities were destroying regional and national cultural identities’.

Music, therefore, was perhaps unusual as its canonical repertory was almost exclusively based on German/Austrian composers and their associated forms. British composers had been encouraged by wealthy musical philanthropist Walter Willson Cobbett (1847-1937) to explore ‘English’ forms such as the Phantasy, which was based on sixteenth-
century English fancies. The Phantasy was a free-form style representing a continually evolving musical fragment with no exact repetition. However, in reality many Phantasies remained reliant on German sonata form which, by contrast, was highly structured with an interplay between a main and secondary musical theme culminating in a recurrence of material and a tonal resolution.\footnote{For information on twentieth-century Phantasies see Laura Seddon (2013) *British Women Composers and Instrumental Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate).}

Proportionally, there were few contemporary works performed during the War, instead programmes of well-known canonical works contributed to the construction of what Benedict Anderson has defined as ‘imagined communities’ where ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.’\footnote{Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.} Thus, the ability to imagine simultaneity of events beyond direct experience and across time, instills a sense of belonging within a particular group and is an essential part of the concept of the nation.

Large-scale occasional works, such as Edward Elgar’s *Carillon* (1914) for orchestra and narrator, attracted mass audiences in the main urban centres and acted as unofficial propaganda for Britain declaring war and significantly contributed to the sense of solidarity between Britain and Belgium.\footnote{Elgar wrote *Carillon* as a contribution to *King Albert’s Book* which was published at Christmas 1914 to raise funds for Belgian Refugees in Britain. It contained contributions by leading politicians, writers, poets, artists and composers including Claude Debussy, Ethel Smyth, Liza Lehmann and Camille Saint-Saëns.} Within the listening experience of a musical work, therefore, the emphasis in terms of ‘imagined communities’ lies in the ritual of performance rather than pitch or form. As Vanessa Williams has argued, this manifests in the participation of this act of collective memory through listening, singing along, anticipating final chords, reading reviews or remembering past performances.\footnote{Williams, ‘Welded in a Single Mass’.} Less canonical chamber works, as will be analysed here, also contributed to the ‘imagined community’ of the nation. They provided, particularly in the case of the phantasies, an unbroken link to the past and, therefore, the possibility of a post-
war future. Jay Winter and Geoffrey Cubitt refer to this as the construction of collective memory – in this case triggering collective emotional memory through sound. Indeed, although Winter argues for a collective remembrance rather than memory, in this case the transient but immediate nature of a group listening to live music performance lends itself to the term ‘collective memory’.\(^\text{16}\)

Despite fewer opportunities for performance, living composers responded to the War in numerous ways. Firstly, dedications to individuals such as Frank Bridge’s *Lament* in 1915 dedicated to a young girl Catherine who drowned on the Lusitania. Secondly, collective, monumental requiems such as Frederick Delius are *Requiem* (1913-16), and finally, and most unusually, by invoking sonic resonances of the battlefield such as Gian Francesco Malipiero’s *Pause del Silenzio* in 1917.\(^\text{17}\) While, as Kate Kennedy describes, there were multiple reasons for immediate compositional responses to the war, including as a means of making sense of the escalating situation, Jeffrey Wood argues that the musical works produced tended to display heroic, denunciative, elegiac or reconciliatory qualities.\(^\text{18}\) Yet the creative responses of women composers were not so publically identifiable, classifiable or indeed considered ‘valid’. Winter reflects on Joan Scott’s interpretation of the authority of direct experience of the moral witness as not something the witness *has* but something out of which the sense of self emerges.\(^\text{19}\) This was an authority which the majority of women were denied within their war roles, as they tended to be distanced from the battlefields, despite the fact that many established male composers were equally distanced from active military roles. Women composers were also in an artistic double-bind of the mutually exclusive roles of ‘woman’ and ‘creator’, resulting in an identity with diminished authority on two fronts.

\(^{16}\) Winter, *Remembering the War*, p.5 and Cubitt *History and Memory*, p. 18.


\(^{19}\) Winter, *Remembering the War*, p. 239.
Women composers had, however, been making strides in gaining professional status. By the early twentieth-century, they were increasingly entering composition classes at London’s musical conservatoires including the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) and the Royal College of Music (RCM). This increase had been slow due to the harmony and counterpoint aspects of the entry tests, as these were not common place in women's musical education at this time, which tended to emphasise performance. Women who were the ‘exception’ such as Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), Liza Lehmann (1862-1918) and Maude Valerie White (1855-1937), had previously achieved prestigious orchestral and opera performances in London and in Germany. Lehmann and White also became household names with the publication of their popular songs. This group represented a generation of women who had studied privately in Europe and were held as role-models for the younger generation who were more likely to have studied within a musical institution. Yet, as Smyth lamented as late as 1933 ‘there is not at this present moment one single middle-aged woman alive who has had the musical education that has fallen to men as a matter of course, without any effort on their part, ever since music was.’ On graduation from the conservatoires, women’s musical disadvantage was compounded by the fact that, while individuals were supportive of their compositional endeavours, musical society in general was not inclusive. For example, it was difficult to gain regular performances of work at the established concert series in London or to gain financial musical patronage.

In the years immediately preceding the War, women’s music benefited from the instigation of the Society of Women Musicians (SWM) in 1911. It was founded by three women, Marion Scott (1877-1953), Katherine Eggar (1874-1961) and Gertrude Eaton (1861-?) who, throughout the war years, were influential in the day-to-day organisation of SWM events as well as disseminating their position on the development of women’s music. SWM services were clearly needed; between 1911 and 1920 there were approximately 423 female members and 49 associates. The SWM existed as part of a milieu of musical societies before the

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War, including those organized by women for women such as the Oxford Ladies’ Musical Society, however, the political nature of the SWM was through their focus on composition. Activities included Eggar’s composers’ group, conferences and concerts of members’ works and career advice. Although still active until the early 1970s, the SWM had become less influential as an advocate for women in the music industry and more of a social musical group. Thus, the years of the First World War, expanding into the inter-war years, represent the peak of the SWM’s political campaigns, which included lobbying the BBC to include women in their orchestra and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music to employ women examiners. Despite arguing, at the inaugural meeting in 1911 that the SWM was not a suffragist society, Eggar did acknowledge that ‘In both political and musical life there is a great deal of wire pulling and party policy; one does not need to know much about musical dealings in general to know this’.  

Despite Eggar’s above comparison, it was rare for SWM members to contribute musical skills to the suffrage movement. Well-known members, such as cellist May Mukle were politically active in the suffragette movement and as has been widely documented composer Ethel Smyth contributed *March of the Women* as a suffrage anthem as well as participating in direct action. However, the feminist movement prior to and during the War did not seek to assist the position of women as composers. As Amanda Harris’s study has shown, the radical feminist press tended to disregard music, whereas when woman composers were mentioned in moderate feminist publications such as *The English Woman, The Vote* and *The Suffragette* they were referred to as exceptions rather than being exemplary of their sex. The refusal to recognize compositional careers in music as a ‘site of radical activism’ has been argued to be due to both the association between the feminine and music, and the domestic nature of much of women’s music making in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, there was a lack of engagement between women musicians and the feminist

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22 Katherine Eggar (1911) *Address at the Inaugural Meeting*, 15 July 1911, SWM Archive, RCM, London.
23 Amanda Harris, *The Spectacle of Woman as Creator*, p 20.
24 Ibid., p. 36.
movement at this time and the musicians were criticized for advancing their own cause rather than acknowledging the wider movement.\textsuperscript{25}

Some women composers either chose not to engage, or had a sporadic relationship with the SWM. The most notable of these was Ethel Smyth who, while having work played at SWM concerts and speaking at SWM conferences, did not actively support other women in their music making through SWM activities or outside of the Society. Other than SWM concerts, women made gains in performances of their works during the War. In Spring/Summer 1915, one of the Thomas Dunhill Chamber Music concerts was dedicated to works by SWM members, and Adela Maddison performed a concert of her vocal works on her London return. The London String Quartet also performed Smyth’s String Quartet in E minor at the Aeolian Hall, and her opera \textit{The Boatswain's Mate}, whose Frankfurt performance had been cancelled, was produced at the Proms concerts. Both Dora Bright and Maude Valerie White additionally had works performed at the same season of the Proms.\textsuperscript{26} However, throughout the war years, women’s music did not often overtly reflect war-time themes.

\textbf{Women's Compositional Responses during the War}

Susan Spain-Dunk is representative of a SWM member during the War, she was educated at the RAM studying harmony with Stewart MacPherson and winning the Charles Lucas medal for composition.\textsuperscript{27} She was a friend of Cobbett, playing viola in his private string quartet, and was married to composer Henry Gibson. She was, therefore, at the centre of a young group of women composers who used their connections within musical society, and opportunities afforded them by SWM membership, to further their compositional careers. Although she increasingly composed orchestral music in the 1920s, in the nineteen teens she was a prolific Phantasy composer. Therefore, Spain-Dunk, alongside composers such as Frank Bridge and Thomas Dunhill, can be considered at the forefront of

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 29.
\textsuperscript{26}The \textit{Musical Times}, April 1915-August 1915, pp. 866-869.
\textsuperscript{27}Student Record for Susan Spain-Dunk, Student Entry Records 1902, RAM Archive, London, p. 426.
musical explorations of this revived ‘English’ form in the context of wider debates on nationalism in music. Indeed, Glenn Watkins highlights the increasing intensity in discussions of identity in British and, specifically, English music.\textsuperscript{28} Music was exceptional as an art form at this time, as it was not only so dependent on German forms, but also the ingrained structures and processes that valued tradition in musical performance seemed to set itself at odds with the political/social debates in the War.\textsuperscript{29} Contemporary musical commentators were aware of this unique position: ‘of all the arts, music is the most cosmopolitan; the regular daily interchange not only of composition but of performers has meant that Europe is virtually a single country so far as the process of music is concerned’.\textsuperscript{30}

Therefore, Spain-Dunk’s Phantasy Quartet in D Minor, published by Goodwin and Tabb in 1915, is a musical response produced in the context of debates on English music. It was also part of the SWM’s conviction that women’s music would be advanced by moving away from its association with small-scale vocal and piano works, towards instrumental chamber music. The piece can, therefore, be considered to be building on previous phantasies written by women, such as Ethel Barns’s (1873-1948) \textit{Fantasie} 1905 and Alice Verne-Bredt’s (1868-1958) \textit{Phantasie} 1908. In the twentieth century the Phantasy, as advocated by Cobbett, had become a short piece of instrumental music that progressed through a variety of tempi and styles, with equality among its instrument parts.\textsuperscript{31} Despite this most phantasies at this time were, in practice, heavily reliant on Germanic sonata form featuring the distinctive duality of main theme versus subsidiary theme and, crucially, exact repetition of musical material in the recapitulation at the end of the work. Spain-Dunk’s Phantasy is more subtle in its approach, however, combining some sonata principles such as the return of the main theme in the original key but does not include any passages of exact repetition. The musical material is equally distributed between the instruments with

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\textsuperscript{29} Williams, ‘Welded in a Single Mass’.
\textsuperscript{31} See Seddon, \textit{British Women Composers and Instrumental Chamber Music}, pp. 117-8.
movement between the instrumental lines and textual variety. The slower middle section acts as a condensed sonata before returning to a florid, evolving phantasy style. Marion Scott commented on the work ‘Each of the four parts has an individuality, and there is significance in the phrases, which marks a great advance in musical thought’. Although not explicitly linked to her war-time experience, Spain-Dunk’s Phantasy can be considered a working-through of her musical concerns relating to nationalism and gender.

Audiences would have heard Spain-Dunk’s chamber works in private rooms (At Homes), by playing them at chamber music socials and through attending formal concert series. Her Phantasy can be situated within the increasing interest in chamber music, which resulted in the widening of the audience demographic. For example the People’s Concert Society founded in 1878 provided low cost tickets in London and other counties, and immediately postwar in 1921 free quartet concerts in Portsmouth attracted an initial audience of 1,100. Therefore, the Phantasy can be analysed for its role in the creation of an ‘imagined community’ by allowing the listener to return to both a pre-war experience and a time before German influence in musical form. The musical cues within the work would have been understood by a musically knowledgeable audience in a communal act of listening that bolstered the possibility of a post-war musical future that was not necessarily based on apocalyptic modernist deconstruction. The preference for the traditional and the canonical, as was prevalent during the War in other art forms, manifested differently in a British music scene that was slow to engage with the European Avant-garde, whereby ‘the need for hope, nostalgia, comfort and ritual overpowered questions of music’s national origin’, or we could argue, the composer’s sex. Thus for an audience well versed in sonata form, the composer’s deviations from this in the Phantasy can be argued to have been an audible disruption to the linearity of historical narrative.

32 Katherine Eggar and Marion M. Scott (July, 1914) Women’s Doings in Chamber Music: women as composers of chamber music third paper, Chamber Music: a supplement to the music student, 9, p. 98.
Morfydd Owen’s Piano Trio, was written in November 1915 and, unlike Spain-Dunk’s Phantasy, was written in direct response to the War. Entitled *The Cathedral at Liège* and *The Cathedral at Rheims*, the two movements of the Trio were a musical representation of these sites which had been virtually destroyed in zeppelin attacks a month apart at the beginning of the War. The outcry in the allied press in response to the Rheims offensive forced the German authorities to issue a statement: ‘we regret the necessity but the French fire came in that direction. Orders have been issued to save the cathedral’. In the British press reports of atrocities ‘rapidly became exaggerated and embellished not least by wounded soldiers’. Therefore, it is highly likely that Owen had read the newspaper coverage of these events while studying in London. While, as Susan Grayzell describes, the fronts were certainly gendered with the home front regarded as ‘female’, these boundaries were porous. The fronts could be crossed particularly through letters, newspaper accounts and conversations with soldiers on leave. This can be argued to be part of the process of a woman composer gaining increased validity to write on a military theme.

Undoubtedly, Owen was deeply troubled by the outbreak of war, writing to her friend Kitty Lewis on 8 September 1914 (after the cathedrals' destruction): ‘Everything is awful and ghastily [sic] horrible’. Originally from Wales, she had entered the RAM in 1912 principally to study composition under Frederick Corder, obtaining the position of sub-professor before her tragic early death. The Trio, written while Owen was still a student, is likely to have been a competition piece and remains in manuscript form; therefore, it may have only received one performance. Arguably Owen benefited from the increased opportunities for women at the RAM during the War, when Principal Alexander Mackenzie noted

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the zeal and discipline of the female students who made up by far the majority of the student body.\textsuperscript{39}

Owen's Trio was composed in the context of an initially fervent and patriotic atmosphere. Owen does use military-style motifs to invoke sounds of war, however, the work is written for an intimate and reflective instrumental ensemble of violin, cello and piano. This can be compared to other women's works such as Marian Arkwright's (1863-1922) jingoistic \textit{Requiem Mass} for full orchestra, which premiered seven months earlier in Newbury, and was also based on a wartime experience filtered by censored letters and newspaper accounts.\textsuperscript{40} By contrast, the smaller Piano Trio includes a military theme, a lyrical theme, a folk tune and a chorale. Within the work it is significant that Owen experiments with silence, which acts to isolate and emphasise particular moments. The use of complete silence – which would have rarely occurred on the front – also contributes to her use of musical narrative. As Byron Almén argues, narratives in music do not necessarily need text or titles, rather narrative can be found in multiple elements within a piece of absolute music: ‘For the individual, then, narrative patterns are psychological templates illustrating possible responses to conflict.’\textsuperscript{41} The strongly evocative musical features of the themes in the Trio allow a narrative reading. For example, although the military and lyrical themes are not tonally distinctive, they do not flow into one another. Alternatively the lyric theme takes over from the military theme with a sudden shift to a soft dynamic, and the military theme is only re-introduced after a full bar of silence. The two movements, and thus the two cathedrals, of the work are bound together by the military theme; it is this theme that is ultimately musically triumphant with its final return in a jubilant major key. This can certainly initiate multiple readings, rather than being either clearly patriotic or pacifist. These readings include a statement of the inevitability of futile destruction as a product of conflict, a position of solidarity with the

\textsuperscript{39} Alexander Campbell Mackenzie (1927) \textit{A Musician's Narrative} (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd), p. 247.
\textsuperscript{40} Kennedy, A Music of Grief.
increasing numbers of Belgian refugees within the musical community in London, or as the hope for a military triumph. It is a subtle, intellectual response from a young woman which sets itself apart from the kinds of patriotism displayed by the women's movement or the SWM.

The significance of the cathedrals' destruction resonates within collective memory. Therefore, the possibility of multiple interpretations of the musical semiotics within the work, create the possibility for a collective experience of a musical and, indeed, architectural space. It is however, likely that there were no further listening experiences of the work beyond its first performance. Thus it acts as a potential site of memory in that it contains a will to remember, yet as argued by Nora, the archive (in this case the score) only becomes a site of memory if the imagination invests it with symbolic aura.\(^{42}\) The fate of Owen's Trio can be compared to Elgar's previously mentioned orchestral work *Carillon*. His work formed part of a widely disseminated collective response to the invasion of Belgium, is scored for large instrumental forces and received multiple performances across Britain. Owen's Trio was a response by a woman composer who had considerably less influence in musical society. Although both works aurally represent symbols of Belgium (bells and the cathedrals), it is notable that *Carillon* has received recent performances as part of the centenary commemorations of the War.\(^{43}\) Therefore, at the point of interaction between history and memory essential for sites of memory, Owen's work requires future performances to fulfill its potential in this regard.

While Owen's experience of war remained physically distant, the War had a dramatic effect on the personal and professional circumstances of established composer Adela Maddison. She had a career in both Paris and Berlin as an opera composer, initially leaving her husband and children in London to study with Gabriel Fauré in the late 1890s. By the outbreak of war, she was living in Berlin under the artistic patronage of the Princesse de Polignac and was the lover of the

\(^{43}\) *Carillon* was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra in 2014 and by the Flanders Symphony Orchestra in 2015.
Princesse's German secretary Martha Mundt. After managing to escape Germany in 1914 and return to London, the couple were in straightened circumstances as demonstrated in the tone of Maddison’s letter to her friend, the singer Mabel Batten:

I feel a brute writing all this. I don’t want money and hate anyone thinking I am begging at this terrible moment but if a roof can be provided somehow – I can for a time manage our food etc.

However, Mundt was ultimately forced to return to Berlin, while Maddison remained in London, and the couple were only reunited in Switzerland in 1921.

Maddison’s Piano Quintet (1916) did not receive its first performance until after the War in 1920. The work maintains intellectual connotations of the piano quintet as a genre, while in the fourth movement there is waywardness in the use of continually evolving repetition and corruption of the legacy of sonata form, which was easy for critics to interpret as a shortcoming especially in a work by a woman. ‘But surely there is something to be said also for ‘the little creature’... this Quintet leaves us very doubtful.’ Such criticisms, however, miss the point of a work that places itself in opposition to what Judith Butler and David McIvor consider the ‘monumental’ and public acts of mourning, which become part of the discourse of the state. Thus, disrupting the narrative formation of imagined communities. Rather, this work represents a personal working-through of mourning a loss which ‘becomes unspeakable when certain kinds of mourning are not allowed.’ Here, instead of the process of interminable, inconsolable, irreconcilable mourning as described by Derrida, no name is evoked overtly, either in terms of sexuality or nationality. When finally

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45 Letter from Adela Maddison to Mabel Batten (1914), Cara Lancaster Archive, Lancaster Family Collection, London.
performed after Maddison’s post-war reunion with Mundt, the disintegration of the musical form in the final movement of the work was unreadable by an audience who were unable to access a particular collective memory.49

The corruption of sonata form in the final movement results in the main theme fracturing into increasingly small fragments accompanied by very subtle changes in rhythm, morphing into a more improvisatory feel. The piece shows Phantasy-like tendencies as Maddison appears to be experimenting with this free-style form which was entirely under the control of the individual. Thus, the work can be considered both a personal negotiation of uncontrollable circumstances and a mode of political resistance. A temporal distance is perhaps required to enable the listener to move towards a response where, as McIvor suggests, the meanings and significance of traumatic events are contested and revised. Indeed if it can now be identified as a site of memory, through revived performance for the first time in 87 years at the Wigmore Hall in 2007, radio broadcasts and a CD recording by the Fibonacci Sequence ensemble, it is a composite one where commemoration is only one of many symbolic resonances.

**Contemporary Musical Responses to the Centenary of the First World War**

The shift from the individual to the universal, what Butler defines as making ‘a tenuous we of us all’, in terms of the ability to narrate ourselves not only from the first person alone, is displayed in women’s musical responses for the centenary commemoration.50 The approaches to the composition of these works by Cecilia McDowell, Catherine Kontz and Susan Philipsz, highlight the reworking of established war narratives in music. These are presented as examples of ‘sites of memory’ in the context of what Nora identifies as ‘alienated memory’, where collectively we have now become disconnected from any sense of continuity with the past. Thus ‘[t]he old ideal was to recreate the past, the new ideal is to create a representation of it.’51

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Cecilia McDowall’s work for solo soprano and choir, *Standing as I do Before God* (2014), is an intricate interplay between multiple singing voices. It was commissioned by the Sospiri choir who requested settings of unusual war stories/voices rather than settings of war poetry. It sets Sean Street’s poetical response to Edith Cavell’s last words before her execution in Brussels on 12 October 1915:

I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me
Standing as I do in view of God and eternity,
I realize patriotism is not enough.
I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.

With meditative qualities and plainsong soundscapes, in general the soprano soloist vocalises Cavell’s words, whereas Street’s lines are set for the choir. The soloist and the group alternate to provide a ghostly counterpoint as atmospheric response. However, in the opening bars, it is in fact the choir who sing Cavell’s first line, emphasising the ‘universal collective’ before the soloist reiterates this line and the choir fragments. Musical devices such as the shift chromatically downwards resolving a men-like in bars 14-15, contribute a sense of religious spirituality. Towards the end of the piece, the roles are, again, reversed between the choir and soprano as the soloist almost imperceptibly joins the collective voices on the word ‘infinity’:

a flame alight in hours
before infinity,
in the presence of death
leaving all enmity
we are air after breath.

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52 Cecilia McDowall (2014) *Standing as I do Before God: a reflection on the execution of Edith Cavell 12 October 1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). The first performance of this work was recorded live on 9 November 2014: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkUXdMT1nvk

53 Cecilia McDowall (2014) *Programme Notes* (including Sean Street’s text), sent to the author.

54 Ibid.
Indeed the piece finishes as the soprano soloist (Cavell) sings the last three of Street’s final lines and provides a counterpoint where ‘leaving all enmity’ and ‘in view of God’ are reiterated, while the choir have transformed into ghostly sound resonance.

Cavell’s tragic story remains in the collective public consciousness, partly due to the repercussions of her death, which particularly resulted in the increase of men signing up for active service, and public fundraising for the Cavell Homes for Nurses.55 The British/American propaganda in the press, at that time, also significantly damaged the German position. Her martyrdom meant that she has come to represent an ‘exceptional’ version of womanhood and has resulted in the perpetual invoking of her name, thus the mourning process has reoccurred in a Derridian loop.56 McDowall’s approach, however, seems to move beyond the simple reclaiming of a voice by displacing it throughout the ensemble and musically evolving into Street’s response. Therefore, the listener is not merely a mourning appendage or a witness to an injustice, but rather a medium through which the process of collective mourning and grief halts.57 This process has moved beyond the official narrative claimed by the imagined community of the state, which as Anderson explains because there is no natural birth or death of a nation its narrative is structured through deaths: ‘exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars and holocausts’.58 Yet at this temporal distance the individual is integral to the collective response. Indeed in such cases the time passed is vital to the disruption of the mourning loop, which risks being undertaken too rapidly, as Butler has argued in the context of the 9/11 attacks, ‘our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it [grief] too quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to former order...’59

56 Derrida, By Force of Mourning.
58 Anderson, Imagined Communities, p.206.
59 Butler, Precarious Life.
As opposed to the exceptional individual, Catherine Kontz uses family voices as her compositional material for *Papillon* (2014), an a-capella piece for choir, treble and children’s choir.\(^6^0\) The work consists of five excerpts from the Papillon family letters, October 1915 to July 1916, published as *Si Je Reviens Comme Je L’Espère* (If I come back as I hope).\(^6^1\) The Papillon children: Marthe, Joseph, Lucien and Marcel, write of their war experiences to their parents, receiving replies from their mother Mme Papillon. Collectively, the letters express worry, complaints, continuous waiting for news, conditions at the front and the weather. Therefore, even though they are contemporaneous with Edith Cavell, by contrast they evoke everyday concerns. Kontz presents the family as a site of commemoration, which as Helle Bjorg and Claudia Lenz argue, represents the intersection between public and private memory where ‘family memory is deeply inscribed into collective discourses of the past.’\(^6^2\) This is reflected in the compositional structures of the work where each child’s voice is represented by a particular combination of voice types from the choir, whereas Mme Papillon is sung by the full range of singers from the choir, thus, representing the ‘whole’. The piece starts with multiple voices singing speech rather than pitched notes, creating the impression of chattering. Out of this collective soundscape emerge individual concerns, however, the counterpoint of voices crossing each other mirror letters moving between family members and highlight the difficulties in communication as well as the strain of no news. The use of whistle noises produced by the singers is also highly evocative of the trains which would have carried both letters and people to their destinations.

Musically the mother’s line – unusually for a female voice, at the lowest line of the stave – comprises of all the notes used by her children, whereas their musical palates are limited in pitch. The individual performance parts within the work

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\(^6^0\) Catherine Kontz (2013) *Papillon* (Commissioned by the European Concert House Organisation), copy sent to author.


are constructed with shifting rhythms and interjections of repeated phrases, which means that each character is on a slightly different musical trajectory, however, the mother acts as the unifying force between the individual and the collective. Kontz is on one level commenting on the gendered nature of correspondence; letters are written to the parents, but it is the mother who replies and the mother who is the musical whole. Yet the work can also be read as a dominated site of memory infused with the rituals of family life, but perhaps more explicitly, it taps into Butler’s ‘we’, in a way that could be argued to be more easily accessible to contemporary audiences than narratives of the ‘heroic’ individual.

*War Damaged Musical Instruments* (2015-16) by sound-artist Susan Philipsz was commissioned as part of the 14-18 Now arts project commemorating the War. Rather than building on the individual voices and experiences to initiate a collective memory, as in the case of McDowell and Kontz, Philipsz takes the well-known sound trigger of the tune of the *Last Post*, as her starting point to explore how personal fate intertwines with constructed societal narratives of the War. This sound piece uses damaged brass and woodwind musical instruments found in museum collections in the UK and Germany, including a bugle of a 14-year-old drummer who was in active service at the Battle of Waterloo. Fourteen sound recordings were made of musicians attempting to play the *Last Post* on these instruments which, depending on the extent of the damage, range from being recognisable as such to being merely the sounds of the players’ breath, however, ‘[a]ll the recordings have a strong human presence’. These recordings were then played through multiple hanging speakers in the Duveen Galleries at alternating intervals, aurally catching visitors to the museum by surprise. The power of the sounds on the body is indicated in the fact that both the sudden and insistent interjection of brass and the subtle whispering of human breath sounds caused visitors to stop and physically rotate towards the speakers.

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63 For details of Philipsz’s work at the Tate Britain, London see: [http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/susan-philipsz-war-damaged-musical-instruments](http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/susan-philipsz-war-damaged-musical-instruments)

The function and meaning of the Last Post has evolved since its eighteenth century roots. Starting as one of multiple calls in barracks, later it signaled to lost or wounded soldiers on the battlefield that it was safe to return to base, its contemporary function is at military funerals and remembrance ceremonies. In itself it is a site of memory, having been appropriated for state funerals, left and right-wing political demonstrations, and British colonies’ independence ceremonies. In 1921 the cabinet committee’s proposed manipulation of the format of the Cenotaph ceremony, which did not include the Last Post, and was meant to be a ‘commemoration of a great occasion in national history’, was met with a public insistence of a day of mourning, with the Last Post as central.65 As Alwyn Turner has observed ‘it was the bugler with his secular spirituality and despite his military status who seemed better able to articulate the nation’s response to war.’66 Therefore, the echoing, cathedral-like space of the Duveen galleries at the Tate, allow the sound to resonate through the recordings of the instruments as ‘indexical traces of the past’ and through the listeners’ bodies.67 The acknowledged function of the Last Post in triggering collective memory is instantly questioned and re-formed here by the multiple distortions of the tune. Just like memory itself the recognized aural fragment is fleeting and corrupted. As opposed to the daily performance of the Last Post at the Menin Gate which can be identified as a dominant and ‘pure’ site of memory in that it’s only function is commemorative, Philipz’s work disrupts this construction and moves towards being a dominated, composite site.

The historical works discussed reflect the composers’ personal experience of the cultural impact of the War. As Spain-Dunk’s Phantasy was the only piece to have been performed and disseminated through publication during the War, these works are perhaps potential sites of memory displaying dominated, private and composite qualities, rather than being part of the collective state narrative.

66 Ibid., p. 120.
Therefore, the temporality of Owen's and Maddison's works is distinct and perhaps more contemporaneous. Despite the double-bind faced by women in terms of authority to represent war and to identify as composer, in the lead up to and during the War, they were, however, in a position to develop women's music and disrupt the progressively linear, canonical music tradition. The changed authority and professional status of contemporary women composers is reflected in the fact that all three works discussed here were officially commissioned. They function as sites of memory as they contain the will to remember, although it can be argued that they represent more public and pure responses than the historical works, in that their primary function is to commemorate. Therefore, they perhaps occupy a space between dominant sites and dominated sites of memory. For example Philipsz's work is part of the 14-18 project and installed at the Tate Britain; both receive state funding. However, she deliberately subverts the current understanding of *The Last Post*'s role in the war narrative. No longer is the validity of the 'moral witness' status required as part of identity for women composers to write the War, at a point in the grieving process where the collective are alienated from memory. The centenary of the War has spotlighted certain obscure musical works generally and has allowed for anachronistic readings. Here, the analysis of both the historical and contemporary works has highlighted that while only MacDowall’s and Kontz’s works overtly deal with gendered themes, the creation of these of sites of memory, or indeed potential sites are connected. They revise the collective sense of the imagined community of the nation and offer an alternative war narrative through sound by acting as markers for questioning how we collectively remember the plurality of war stories, experiences and responses.