



The *Violet* Trilogy and the Joys of Musical Biofiction

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Imagining Violet by Mary E. Hughes. Victoria, BC: First Choice Books, 2018. 254 pp. ISBN: 9780228501640 (paperback).

Imagining Violet Married by Mary E. Hughes. Victoria, BC: First Choice Books, 2019. 262 pp. ISBN: 9780228502869 (paperback).

Imagining Violet Blooming by Mary E. Hughes. Victoria, BC: First Choice Books, 2020. 256 pp. ISBN: 9780228504184 (paperback).

Biofiction (or biographical fiction) seems to be enjoying something of a popular resurgence across multiple genres over the last decade. In an early performance of the song “Alexander Hamilton” at the White House in 2009, Lin-Manuel Miranda framed what was then conceived of as *The Hamilton Mixtape* in terms of “a concept album about the life of someone I think embodies hip-hop, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. You laugh, but it’s true!”¹ After the audience’s laughter subsides, Miranda goes on to frame Hamilton’s humble origins, political successes, and feuds with other “founding fathers” in terms of a kind of musical biopic, arguing that “he embodies the word’s ability to make a difference.” The television show *Upstart Crow* (2016–2020), by contrast, is overtly about the ways in which artistic words may not always make a difference, casting William Shakespeare in the mould of the beleaguered sitcom father. Writer Ben Elton works in historical jokes about Tudor politics and the inspirations for the sonnets alongside allusions to Brexit, British Rail, and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the usual family and workplace tensions of the genre.

While these works differ greatly in terms of tone and focus, they both reflect the sometimes-paradoxical appeal of fictions about real historical figures: a desire to understand both the



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¹ The Obama White House, “Lin-Manuel Miranda Performs at the White House Poetry Jam: (8 of 8),” YouTube video, 4:26, November 2, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNFf7nMIGnE>.

perceived exceptionalism and the everyday humanity of those who came before us. The theatregoer does not need to be conversant with the historical nuances of the Washington presidency to understand Miranda's decision to depict cabinet meetings as rap battles any more than the television audience for *Upstart Crow* needs to have read Robert Greene's *Groats-Worth of Wit* (1592), the historical source for the show's title. In many ways, the more accessible mediums of popular music, musical theatre, and the sitcom can serve as entry points into a conversation about the historical sources and details. On a recent interview with the *Reduced Shakespeare Company* podcast, literary scholar Edel Semple argues for a recent trend in adaptations and reinterpretations of Shakespeare aimed at new audiences that include the playwright as a quasi-fictional character within his own works, noting that "there's been this emergence [of Shakespearean biofiction] ... in the last decade, definitely, increasingly, and we were trying to put our finger on why and how those things work, and how they talk to one another."²

Semple's questions about how a blurring of historical sources and fictional stories "work and how they talk to one another" seems particularly relevant to discussions of musical biofiction, a genre intimately linked to the history of the musical biography and the changing ways audiences engage with both musical works and histories. As Simon Keefe discusses in his research on early Haydn and Mozart biographies, the nineteenth century saw an explosion of musical biofiction, "popular, anecdotal, and fictional biographical materials, abundant in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, [which] also enriched and enlivened the images and reputations of the composers, if not by promoting new information ... then by shaping and reinforcing narratives about them."³ The collection, curation and repetition of musical anecdotes served as the basis for both ostensibly nonfiction biographies and a variety of novels, poems, and plays on biographical subjects. In his refutation of conspiracy theories surrounding Mozart's death, Eric Blom put forth one explanation for the persistence of supposed biographical "facts" unsupported by historical evidence:

Spaun says to Schober: "What do you think? Schubert went to bed last night and forgot to take his glasses off!" Schober then says to Schwind: "I say, Spaun tells me Schubert goes to bed with his spectacles on." Schwind says to the world: "Schubert always goes to bed without taking his glasses off." The world's comment on which becomes: "Schubert always keeps his spectacles on in bed, so as to be ready to write down his music as soon as he wakes up." Thus, in four moves, a pretty situation has established itself which no biographer can resist or takes the trouble to think about more than once.⁴

² Austin Tichenor, "Analyzing Shakespearean Biofiction," *Reduced Shakespeare Company* podcast, April 5, 2021 (accessed April 25, 2021), <https://www.reducedshakespeare.com/2021/04/analyzing-shakespearean-biofiction/>.

³ Simon Keefe, "'No Kind of Reading so Generally Interesting as Biography': Establishing Narratives for Haydn and Mozart in the Second and Third Decades of the Nineteenth Century," *19th-Century Music* 44, no. 2 (2020): 68.

⁴ Eric Blom, "Mozart's Death," *Music & Letters* 38, no. 4 (1957): 325.

In the decades following Blom, most of the scholarly commentary on musical biofiction and related genres has been similarly corrective, observing familiar tropes, debunked tales, and other inaccuracies.⁵ Yet I think that it is worth asking—what positives do we as people who study, perform, and enjoy music gain from historical fiction on musical subjects? Not all biofiction, after all, responds to two centuries of narrative fashioning and refashioning. What can be learned from fiction, particularly when it comes to figures whose personal lives are less well documented than those of canonical composers? How can fiction allow us to “talk to” historical people and sources we might not otherwise encounter?

Musical biofiction spans a wide range of genres and topics. The most longstanding kinds of musical fiction are undoubtedly the *biographie romancée* (fictionalized biography) and biographical fantasies observed by Tibor Pintér in his work on Hungarian Mozart biofiction.⁶ These tend to rely and expand upon the kind of anecdotes analyzed by Blom and Keefe, blending elements of nonfiction biographies with invented conversations and authorial speculation. One recurring theme across genres is the idea of fiction as filling in the gaps left in the historical archive, an idea that lends itself to exploration of musical lives in multiple directions beyond straightforward biography. There is, for instance, also crime fiction with historical musicians as detectives, culprits, and suspects, which turns these gaps in the historical record into mysteries worthy of investigation. Laura Lebow’s Lorenzo Da Ponte series finds the librettist embroiled in solving murders in between negotiating the theatrical politics at play behind the scenes of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, putting forth an explanation for his various adventures in Vienna noticeably not included in his famous memoirs.⁷ One also finds examples of musical biofiction in the romance, science fiction and fantasy, and alternate history genres, as well as the occasional novel about contemporary musicologists, critics, and biographers who uncover broader historical or musical mysteries as a part of their research.⁸

⁵ See, for example, William Stafford, *The Mozart Myths* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Christopher Wiley, “Re-Writing Composer’s Lives: Critical Historiography Biography” (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2008); Scott Messing, *Schubert in the European Imagination*, 2 vols. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006–2007). John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) explores twentieth-century trends in popular depictions of musical lives through the medium of film. Linda Shaver Gleason’s blog *Not Another Music History Cliché* (<http://notanothermusichistorycliche.blogspot.com>) focused primarily on the repetition of musical misinformation in nonfiction journalism and pop history, but frequently alluded to fiction’s role in perpetuating the most persistent myths surrounding canonical composers’ lives and works.

⁶ Tibor Pintér, “Beyond the Mask and Under the Surface: On *Divertimento*, Miklós Szentkuthy’s Mozart Novel,” *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics* 8, no. 2 (2013): 182–193.

⁷ Laura Lebow, *The Murder of Figaro* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015); Laura Lebow, *Sent to the Devil* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

⁸ Donna Leon’s standalone novel *The Jewels of Paradise* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2012) explores an underemployed musicologist’s studies on the life and works of a little-known eighteenth-century composer and the questions and frustrations brought about by archival research.

Mary E. Hughes's *Violet Trilogy* takes a different approach to the question of gaps in the historical record. Instead of constructing a linear biographical or fictional narrative around her subject, her novels are an attempt to understand the coming of age, inner life, and broader world of a historical figure for whom scant documentation and facts survive. The primary focus and narrator of the series is Hughes's grandmother, Violet Courtenaye, whose studies at the Leipzig Conservatory, marriage to pianist and conductor Frank Welsman, and eventual life in Toronto are documented in *Imagining Violet* (2018), *Imagining Violet Married* (2019), and *Imagining Violet Blooming* (2020). In the introduction to *Imagining Violet*, Hughes describes her project as "a work of historical fiction. It could also be described as very creative non-fiction."⁹

The concept of "very creative non-fiction" allows Violet's story to serve as an entry into a variety of different topics relevant to the study of music history. The epistolary format (with occasional images of surviving photos and postcards) gives the reader something close to the experience of reading a personal archive. Throughout the series, Violet writes to several different correspondents—her parents and sister, her aunt, Frank (during her art studies in London), and various friends. The reader, however, only has access to her side of the conversation, leaving them, much like a biographer or musicologist, to piece together what they can of the complete narrative over time. Hughes also interweaves documented historical content into Violet's letters, including the curricula of conservatories and art schools; the lives of British, Irish, and American students in Germany; and changing social customs around gender in Germany, England, and Canada. Many of her sources for this information are documented in the bibliographies included at the end of each book.

Violet's fictionalized story is reminiscent in many ways of the real-life late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century memoirs of her fellow female conservatory students, including Amy Fay's *Music-Study in Germany* (1880), Mabel Wheeler Daniels's *An American Girl in Munich* (1905), and Ethel Smyth's *Impressions that Remained* (1919). While these nonfiction works remain of interest to students of women's musical history and the history of musical education, they were all carefully curated by their respective authors to reflect those topics deemed suitable for public readership at the time.¹⁰ By choosing to reimagine Violet as a letter writer rather than a memoirist, Hughes takes the reader through any number of subjects of interest to Violet and her friends and family at various times. The reader thus empathizes with a series of deeply personal concerns, including her family's eventual awareness of her parents' aging, concern for her sister Birdie's health, and worries about losing touch with school friends through her various moves. We also see Violet's own excitement and anxieties surrounding her time in Germany in *Imagining Violet*, her move to

⁹ Hughes, *Imagining Violet*, 4.

¹⁰ See, for example, Christopher Wiley's work on Smyth's self-presentation in her memoirs: "'When a Woman Speaks the Truth about her Body': Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/Biography," *Music & Letters* 85, no. 3 (2004): 388–414.

Toronto and growing family in *Imagining Violet Married*, and domestic and musical uncertainties in *Imagining Violet Blooming*.

In many ways, Hughes emphasizes that music could be only one of Violet's many concerns. Her later letters detail issues around hiring staff to help care for her home and children, her involvement in Toronto's social scene, and the difficulties of living so far from her immediate family. In some familiar biographical narratives on female subjects, there is the temptation to make a woman's life fit into a clean, if often ahistorical, narrative of struggle and triumph.¹¹ By drawing out the everyday nature of Violet's correspondence (both surviving and imagined), however, Hughes reflects and celebrates the complex nature of a life that was filled with privilege and opportunity, spoken and unspoken limitations, and above all a deep and abiding love for the arts, family and friends, and travel. Violet's discussions of concerts, touring performers, and the professional careers of Frank and her friend Flo Heins (a studio teacher in Ottawa) in *Imagining Violet Married* show her continued engagement with music as a part of her new life in Canada as a married woman. Violet's accounts of performances conducted and organized by Frank are interspersed with references to and quotations from surviving newspaper accounts and reviews, and clearly reflect a deep investment on Hughes's part in understanding the art music scene in Ontario in the decades prior to the First World War. As recent work on the history of women's amateur musical clubs in Canada has demonstrated, music served an important social, artistic, and educational purpose in delineating certain kinds of Canadian urban identity during the early twentieth century.¹²

One of the most fascinating themes Hughes explores across the series is what she imagines Violet reading and how she might have felt about the outpouring of novels by and about women at the turn of the century. While Violet is not an outspoken feminist and the growing suffrage movement appears only briefly across her imagined letters, her gravitation towards what she calls "New Woman-ish" novels (including the works of Katherine Cecil Thurston, Alice Mona Caird, Sara Jeanette Duncan, and Amy Levy) provides some insight into how changing notions of gender and social order at this time impacted women outside of the now-familiar spheres of activism and political organization. Violet frequently sees parallels between her own educational opportunities and desires and the narratives available to her in fiction, observing in one letter to her friend Flo that "I was heartily sorry, though, that the authoress [Caird] concludes that it is impossible to pursue a life as a musician and be a successful wife at the same time."¹³ Later on, in *Imagining Violet Married*, Violet reflects to her friend Lily on how Thurston's *The Gambler* (1905) raised

¹¹ This is discussed at greater length in Marian Wilson Kimber, "The 'Suppression' of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography," *19th-Century Music* 26, no. 2 (2002): 113–129.

¹² David Gramit, "The Transnational History of Settler Colonialism and the Music of the Urban West: Resituating a Local Music History," *American Music* 32, no. 3 (2014): 272–291; Jennifer Messelink, "Aesthetics of Social Ordering: Exploring Concert Programs of the Women's Musical Club of Edmonton," paper presented at the 2018 meeting of the Canadian University Music Society, MacEwan University, Edmonton, May 23–25, 2018.

¹³ Hughes, *Imagining Violet*, 167.

ongoing questions about how she views her own nationality and sense of history and identity as both a newcomer to Canada and the daughter of upper-middle-class Anglo-Irish parents:

It started me down that well-worn path, the matter of what it means to be Irish. You and I have talked about this over the years. I felt that Mrs. Thurston did not have a high regard for the Irish, yet she is Irish herself and exactly my age ... After all, I end as I began somewhat confused.¹⁴

While the endnotes to *Imagining Violet* mention that Hughes read George Gissing and E. M. Forster to get a better sense of period-appropriate language, the bulk of Violet's own reading material is popular fiction that has largely not remained in the popular imagination. Drawing on fiction that might well be unknown to present-day readers allows Hughes to have Violet engage with authors of her time as a reader of that time, rather than risking anachronistically relying on the interpretations of later readers.

The *Violet* trilogy would be particularly valuable for high school, cégep, and university libraries as a way to introduce students to methodological issues surrounding archival research, the blurring of fact and fiction in biographical writing, and Hughes's process of bringing together family history and secondary contextual sources. It would also be useful for those interested in exploring the specific historical moments in which Violet finds herself—a female conservatory student during the 1890s and a young mother involved in Toronto's musical society during the 1900s and 1910s. Music history and general education instructors could easily use this series to frame questions around the sorts of information one can often find (and not find) in personal archives, connecting Violet's fictional letters to other surviving primary source documents in music history.

While Hughes's novels are meticulously researched, how much the historical Violet Courtenaye Welsman resembled Hughes's imagined Violet necessarily remains something of a mystery, one that can never entirely be solved. She notes in the afterword to *Imagining Violet Blooming* that her father, a young child when Violet passed away, "died before I was old enough to become interested in family history" and that the trilogy is "largely the product of a vast amount of research and my imagination."¹⁵ Hughes's project is an act of making Violet's life and times knowable to a wider readership, to introduce them to people and scenarios they may initially find unfamiliar through the relatable medium of personal communication. All biofiction—indeed, all biography and life-writing, particularly of long-deceased subjects—involves some element of imagining and reimagining our relationships with the past.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Imagining Violet Married*, 253.

¹⁵ Hughes, *Imagining Violet Blooming*, 248.