



The Player Piano and the Edwardian Novel

Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg

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In her study of music-making in the Edwardian novel, Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg argues that the invention and development of the player piano had a significant effect on the perception, performance and appreciation of music during the period. In contrast to existing devices for producing music mechanically such as the phonograph and gramophone, the player piano granted its operator freedom of individual expression by permitting the performer to modify the tempo. Because the traditional piano was the undisputed altar of domestic and highly gendered music-making, Björkén-Nyberg suggests, the potential for intervention by the mechanical piano's operator had a subversive effect on traditional notions about the status of the musical work itself and about the people who were variously defined by their relationship to it. She examines works by Dorothy Richardson, E.M. Forster, Henry Handel Richardson, Max Beerbohm and Compton Mackenzie, among others, contending that Edwardian fiction with music as a subject undermined the prevalent antithesis, expressed in contemporary music literature, between a nineteenth-century conception of music as a means of transcendence and the increasing mechanisation of music as represented by the player piano. Her timely survey of the player piano in the context of Edwardian commercial and technical discourse draws on a rich array of archival materials to shed new light on the historically conditioned activity of music-making in early twentieth-century fiction.

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