This study investigates the reception of women pianists in London in the decade 1950-60, based on reviews published in three music journals, Music and Musicians, Musical Opinion, The Musical Times, and one national daily newspaper, The Times.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women pianists, both amateur and professional, suffered from the notion that women were innately unable to engage with a superior art form such as music: thus argue scholars including Katharine Ellis, Richard Leppert, Ruth Solie and Judith Tick. Yet, such attitudes did not prevent a strong tradition of women pianists from being formed. In Britain, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Arabella Goddard was at the forefront of the London musical scene; she was succeeded by Fanny Davies and Adelina de Lara and, later, Dame Myra Hess and Harriet Cohen, whose career successes came in the 1920s. While the situation of women pianists in Britain between the mid-nineteenth century and the late 1920s has been assessed by scholars such as Therese Ellsworth and Dorothy de Val, an in-depth study dealing with the reception of women pianists in post-WWII Britain has yet to appear.

This study does not attempt to assess the technical or musical accuracy of the reviews considered; instead, it asks, what were the musical perspectives of the reviewers and, specifically, what were their views on women pianists? First, it presents six important critics, Frank Howes, Clinton Gray-Fisk, Sir Jack Westrup, Andrew Porter, Joan Chissell and Diana McVeagh, all of whom contributed to the four sources cited above. Then it assesses the extent of the prejudice embedded in the reviews examined (written by many more than the six above), which invoke such varied issues as masculinist repertoire and female anatomy. Following this, it examines the careers of six leading women concert pianists of the time: Dame Myra Hess, Harriet Cohen, Eileen Joyce, Gina Bachauer, Margaret Kitchin and Dame Moura Lympany. Their successes reveal the extent to which women musicians of the highest status were considered exempt from the prejudices to which others were subjected.

It is hoped that such a study will illumine aspects of musical life unique to London in the 1950s, partially fill the void in the historiography of women pianists in Britain after Davies, and also alert those women who perform, as well as all who listen and assess women performers, to the complex and often covert issues ‘beyond the notes’.

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Lympany was a Steinway pianist and participated in the Steinway Centenary Concert on 19 October 1953 in which ten Steinway pianists played a Polonaise by Chopin. The rehearsal of this piece was recorded and broadcast on Ed Sullivan's television show, at that time called Toast of the Town. Lympany also gave a recital at Carnegie Hall on November 20, 1957, for which tickets sold for 75c to $1.50. The flyer announcing her appearance contains a quote from the Los Angeles Herald & Express: “Since the days of Clara Schumann and Teresa Carreno, there have been few women pianists who cou...