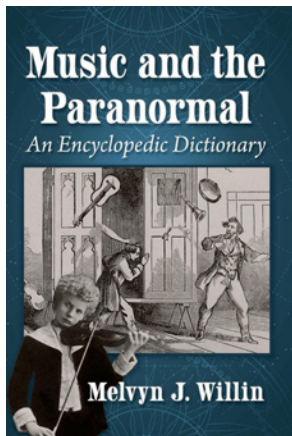


**BOOK AND  
MULTIMEDIA  
REVIEW**

# Melvyn J. Willin, *Music and the Paranormal: An Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022

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Melvyn J. Willin, *Music and the Paranormal: An Encyclopedic Dictionary*

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Melvyn J. Willin has two doctorates in paramusicology, a field he seems to have created, in which music and the paranormal mix. So he'd seem to be the perfect author for this book, which (as its subtitle says) is a dictionary and encyclopedia, an alphabetical listing and discussion of people, places, and phenomena in which music and the paranormal might seem to mix.

And, to judge from a bio on his website, Willin is a lively soul — a guitarist, a witch, an archivist of unpublished poltergeist events, and also a Morris dancer and a practitioner of martial arts.

The book did bring me one delight, which I'll save for the end of the review. Note, though, that what delighted me is something Willin mentions, without (or so it seems) understanding how important it is. And because of this and other lapses, the book is disappointing.

Almost right from the start, there are problems. The second entry is for Arthur M. Abell, an American writer active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and best known for a book of interviews with great classical composers, whom he quotes as saying that their music was inspired by God or by other forces larger than themselves.

But these interviews, published 50 years after Abell says they were done, aren't thought to be genuine. Even Willin's quotes from them are suspect. Brahms is quoted gushing about his inspiration from above, while everywhere else he's been described (both in his time and ours) as reticent about himself and skeptical about religion. The leading English-language Brahms biography doesn't mention Abell or include his quotes.

Willin also gives us nonsense about Debussy — that the great French composer may have been a "Grand Master" of a "mysterious esoteric society," the Priory of Sion. But the Priory never existed; the book that first described it, and mentioned Debussy, is known to be a hoax.

Here are some further errors about musical things. They might seem esoteric in an age when not so many people know classical music. But to assess Willin's work, I need to note them, since classical music (to judge from the book) is his musical home turf.

- The American composer Gian-Carlo Menotti gets an entry, because — this is all the entry says — he wrote an opera about a fraudulent medium. But he's far more famous for another opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, with a far more paranormal theme — it's about a boy whose disabled leg is miraculously cured. Plus, Menotti himself, as a child, reportedly had his own miraculous cure of his own disabled leg. (Or so says the one published Menotti biography, which gives no source for the story.)

- Willin misspells the name of a 19th-century French singer, Célestine Galli-Marié (in the book for a plausibly paranormal event I'll mention later), leaving out the second accent. A small thing, maybe, but, in identifying her, he leaves out what she's most famous for — creating the title role in *Carmen*, one of the most popular operas — and instead has her singing a world premiere she couldn't have been in, of an opera written 100 years before she was born.
- He somehow thinks that Schoenberg's String Trio is about a near-death experience, the possibly paranormal kind, with a welcoming white light. This may be unfamiliar territory even for classical music fans, since Schoenberg, an intense 20th-century modernist, isn't a composer many people listen to. But the history of the String Trio is well known; as Schoenberg told his friends, it depicts — in music full of painful jabs and whispers — his pain from a nearly fatal heart attack, which you could call a near-death experience, but not the paranormal kind.

To be fair, Willin seems to know a lot about 19th and early 20th century spiritualism, which is in the book because of seances where music with no source reportedly was heard, or where, reportedly, musical instruments seemed to play themselves. But he doesn't parse these accounts with clarity enough for us to judge if these events might, incredibly, have happened. Or, setting a lower bar, even to guide us in thinking about them. I'd guess it's impossible to draw conclusions after so many years, but the book doesn't help me with thog. Though Willin does draw conclusions in his longest entry, for the once-famous British medium Rosemary Brown, who said that great composers spoke to her, and, from beyond the grave, dictated new piano works. In 1970, she released an album with these pieces, called *A Musical Seance* (which I bought back then, and which you can still find on streaming services). Of course, the question would be whether Liszt, Schubert, and the other greats Brown named really wrote that music. Willin, to his credit, applies the simplest test. How does the music sound? It doesn't seem like great composers' work, he says, joining many others, including me. It doesn't nearly have their spark or depth.

But he gets lost in his entries — more than 150 of them — on places where music has reportedly been heard, with no apparent source. This, clearly, is a phenomenon, or rather, the reports are. But listing them by their

geographical locations — mostly old British homes and churches — is unhelpful, to put it mildly. He needs to put the reports (or at least the most important ones) together and then assess them. This is exactly what he does in a doctoral dissertation (online at <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/14778/>), where he concludes (to quote his abstract) that “seemingly genuine anomalies are generally found to consist of mistaken identities or the embroidery of anecdotal facts. It would appear [he adds] that human susceptibility and enthusiasm for the paranormal are responsible for most of the data discovered.” It's beyond me why he doesn't say this in his book, or even leave himself a place to say it.

(Also — perhaps because he's British, and focused on British happenings — he misses American reports where ghostly rock songs supposedly are heard, along with noises of a crash at the site where Buddy Holly's plane so famously went down.)

Is anything reported in this book plausibly paranormal?

Is there anything reported in this book that might be truly paranormal? I'll skip past entries like those for “Chant” and “Religion,” in which Willin somewhat vaguely passes on, from other writers, intimations that music might inherently have paranormal force. Of course (and Willin understands this), music needs no paranormal edge to have power in chants and other religious rituals.

Which then leaves me with more prosaic entries, in which, less globally, we learn of paranormal things that may have happened to musicians. Two of these stand out, both with stories amply documented elsewhere (an important confirmation, since, as I've shown, Willin can be credulous).

One is the entry for Célestine Galli-Marié, who not only created the role of Carmen but also became identified with it. In the opera, there's a moment when Carmen foretells her own death, and one night, coming to that place, Galli-Marié felt a great foreboding, and afterward collapsed offstage. She later learned that Georges Bizet, who wrote the opera, had died that day. They had a close artistic and personal connection (unmentioned in Willin's book); she may, in fact, have been having an affair with him. Of course, this is a familiar paranormal trope, in which a person senses the death of someone close to them. If we believe such things can happen (we all can decide whether we do), why not with Galli-Marié?

The other plausible account is about the violinist Jelly d'Aranyi, and Schumann's violin concerto, his last major work, which was hidden by associates after his 1856 death.

Schumann was mentally ill when he died, and musicians close to him felt that the concerto was incompetently written. In 1933, d'Aranyi, using a precursor of an Ouija board, spoke, she said, to Schumann's spirit, which told her that the concerto existed, along with where it might be found. And it was found there, was performed, and became at least an occasional part of the concert repertoire. Some nonparanormal information may have helped in finding it, since its existence wasn't wholly secret, but there's no doubt, in what I've seen of the Schumann literature, that the search was sparked by d'Aranyi. (Who, of course, might just have had a paranormal instinct, which felt, to her, like Schumann).

And now the great delight that Willin — unwittingly — brought me. He has an entry on Chopin, in which he says the pianist Byron Janis revealed paranormal events “centered on” Chopin's memory. It's puzzling, I have to say, that Willin doesn't mention what these were.

But even more puzzling is his footnote to the source of this, which is Janis's memoir (coauthored with his wife), whose title, Willin says, is *Chopin and Beyond*. But that's incorrect. The true title is *Chopin and Beyond: My Extraordinary Life with Music and the Paranormal*. An astounding lapse for Willin, of all people, to have. And in this book, of all books.

I was curious to read the memoir, and loved it, first on musical grounds — Janis (a virtuoso who in the 1950s and 1960s was a leading classical music celebrity) has striking stories to tell, about playing throughout his career with an injured hand, about performing in the Soviet Union when other Americans didn't, about his studies with the most virtuosic of all 20th century pianists, Vladimir Horowitz (who took no other pupils). Janis lived no ordinary life, even for a top musician.

And that's doubly true of the paranormal part of the book, which Janis was brave to write. He was a public figure, famous beyond classical music, at home in American and European high society, friends with Picasso and many other notables. And still he devoted half his memoir to things most people with his fame might never reveal — events that, if they really happened, are beyond doubt paranormal, and

were so frequent that they became routine for him, observed over and over by his family, he says, and by his friends. These, he says, included poltergeist phenomena, things in his apartment moving, day after day, with no apparent cause. A death mask of Chopin shed tears.

And then there's this, reported beyond the memoir book, in news stories in, among other places, the *New York Times*. Janis visited a friend, a French aristocrat, who showed him unopened boxes full of historical materials. Acting on an impulse, Janis opened one of them and found two manuscripts of Chopin pieces, written in Chopin's own hand. The pieces were known, but the manuscripts — with intriguing differences from the published versions — had never surfaced.

Six years later, at the music library at Yale, Janis, again on an impulse, looked in a box no one had opened, and again found Chopin manuscripts — of the same two pieces. Which, to put it mildly, is arresting. Chopin scholars authenticated the manuscripts, and it's plausible that more than one existed for each piece, because composers of Chopin's time might create new manuscripts even of their published compositions, as gifts to friends or patrons.

To fully document all this, someone would have had to contact both the French aristocrat and the person at Yale who took Janis to the room in the library with the unopened box. I don't know that this was done. But (apart from disbelieving anything that could be paranormal) I don't see a clear reason to doubt Janis's account, which is supported, at the very least, by the existence of the manuscripts. Finding them even in a normal way wouldn't have been routine. Do we imagine Janis did that, without anyone knowing he did, and then made up what he tells us in his book (and told the *New York Times*), without anyone contradicting him?

Seems unlikely. What Janis tells remains arresting. As is everything in his book that touches on the paranormal, all of it all the more arresting for the unaffected way that Janis writes about it, as if he felt no need to impress or convince anyone. This is an important contribution to the paranormal literature, and I'm delighted Willin led me to it, even if his own book is disappointing.