

Women in Composition

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Senior Honors Thesis

Abstract:

Women's success in music composition has been limited by societal perceptions that have labeled women as inferior to men physically, emotionally, and intellectually. These impressions have created barriers for women who wished to pursue education and gain music training. In the 20th century, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Nadia Boulanger, and Lili Boulanger were three women composers who, despite these limitations, received education and gained recognition for their musical talent. Now, in the 21st century, composers Libby Larson and Anne Guzzo note aspects of modern society that continue to limit young women composers. In order to reduce prejudice toward women, aspects of music education must change. We must reexamine how we portray women composers and musicians, reconsider requirements for the study of music composition, and offer regular examples of women in academic music roles as models for young children.

Keywords: Women composers, music, education, accessibility, equality

Music is predominately considered a feminine art due to its emotional and expressive characteristics, but despite this perception, composers throughout history have been primarily male (Halstead, 1997, p.57). Impressions about women's genetic make-up, intellect, ability, and place in society, as inferior have created inequalities in education which in turn has limited the ability for women to pursue professional music careers. Despite these biases, women such as Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Nadia Boulanger, Lili Boulanger, Libby Larson, and local composer Anne Guzzo have become accomplished composers. Aspects of music education must be reevaluated to accurately reflect composers throughout history and the basis experienced by women then and now if women are to be given an equal opportunity to succeed.

Due to the biological and psychological differences between men and women, women have been seen as physically and intellectually less equipped. Biologically, women have smaller and lighter brains which for years proved that women were less intelligent than men. This difference also provided justification to deny women access to equal education, job opportunities, and other fundamental human rights. In addition to brain size comparisons, men's superiority in musical composition has been attributed to the nature of men and women. "Many people believe that men and women differ fundamentally in their basic personalities and that these differences then form the basis of further sex differences in interest, attitude and occupations." (Halstead, 1997, p.35). Although personality traits often draw individuals into specific professions, those traits associated with composing are a mixture of both masculine and feminine qualities (Halstead, 1997, p.44). However, these qualities can be traced back to what is perceived as socially acceptable traits which are imposed on children from a young age.

In a 1980 study conducted by Judith Langlois and A. Chris Downs, pre-school aged girls who chose to play with toys historically perceived as masculine, tended to be criticized by other children and punished by their parents through lack of attention. In contrast, boys were encouraged and rewarded for playing with the same toys (Langlois & Downs, 1980). Therefore, when men are considered by nature more logical, independent, technical, and ambitious, while women are seen as intuitive, emotional, and caring, it is due to information they receive from general observations, media, and family members (Halstead, 1997, p.36 and 44).

Intelligence Quotient or IQ tests results between males and females can also be attributed to culturally imposed sex differences in learning opportunities, training, and social expectations, that are enforced from childhood. Although men and women scored similarly on IQ tests, the areas in which each sex scored highest on differed. For example, females, on average, scored higher on verbal ability, whereas men, on average, scored better on mathematical reasoning and visual spatial skills. This can be attributed to the types of toys boys are encouraged to play with include trucks and trains, which encourage objectification, whereas girls are encouraged to develop communication skills through toys such as dolls. These results have prompted the belief that women “lack spatial and visual skills” which is attributed to the shortage of female composers (Halstead, 1997, p.6-7). But, as pointed out by Jill Halstead in her book, *The Woman Composer*:

“It is striking that the findings of research into sex differences are used only to the disadvantage of females. A glaringly obvious example of this is the fact that female spatial ‘deficiency’ had been suggested as the reason for a shortage of women in certain occupational areas. Yet no one ever suggests that the male ‘deficiency’ in verbal,

language, and communication skills will disadvantage, or indeed has ever disadvantaged, male writers, politicians, poets or philosophers” (p. 15).

These perceptions and culturally enforced expectations have led to the lack of participation and representation of women in education (Halstead, 1997, p.57).

Historically, women were denied access to education. Even after women’s admission into formal education, the type of training they received was very different from men. In special cases, women of higher class were granted education, but the course of study was extremely different. Because of the cultural perception of women’s inferiority of physique, intellect, and personality, women were educated in ways that would equip them for their individual roles in society. For women, this primarily included caring for a husband and raising children (Halstead, 1997, p.98). They were not educated or given the tools to become professional musicians or composers (Halstead, 1997, p.101).

For women, music education was considered “instrumental tuition” and included lessons in how to sing or play the keyboard, lute, violin, or guitar. This type of education was deemed appropriate because it was ‘home based,’ valued only for domestic enjoyment and entertainment of guests. This was the case of composer and private performer Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847), whose formal musical education, high social status, and support of male family members both helped and hindered her in becoming a published composer.

Fanny Mendelssohn is considered one of the best-known female composers (McVicker, 2011, p. 72). In contrast to many women of the time, Fanny and her younger brother, Felix Mendelssohn, received the same musical education, beginning with their mother and continuing with both children eventually joining the Berlin Choral Society in 1820. While her brother

continued on as a professional musician, Fanny was required to compose in private, despite her extraordinary musical talent. Fanny had responsibilities as a woman which she was frequently reminded of by her father. On her twenty-third birthday, Fanny's father told her, "You must prepare yourself more seriously and diligently for your real calling the only calling for a young woman—to be a housewife" (Reich, 2004, p.19-20).

Although Fanny's status in the aristocratic class allowed her access to education, it was also the reason she did not become a professional musician and composer. "[A] career as a musician placed a woman of Fanny's class in an untenable position: money would be exchanged, her name would be in print, and she would appear on stage," (Reich, 2004, p.25) all of which would go against the family expectation and tradition of modest and obedient women. In the private sector of music, Fanny was most known for her *Sonntagsmusik*, or Sunday musicals, which were often attended by the high-class citizens of Berlin. During these performances, Fanny would direct, plan the musical programs, perform as soloist, accompany her own compositions, and conduct the choir and orchestra. These performances were considered acceptable because they were amateur performances, unpaid and performed in her own home (Reich, 2004, p. 24). Fanny's brother and father, however, did allow her pieces to be published under her brother's name (McVicker, 2011, p.74) and eventually under her own name with encouragement and support from her husband (Reich, 2004, p.25).

The combination of advantages Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel had, including her education, social status, and support from male family members allowed her to become an exception to much of history. Beyond Fanny, it was clear that if women were to compete on the same level as men, they had to gain access and be successful in "subjects revered and valued by male

academics” (Halstead, 1997, p.102). For composers, that access began with entrance into the famous French composition competition, the Prix de Rome.

The Prix de Rome was instituted in 1803 by the Académie des Beaux-Arts (McVicker, 2011, p.60). It wasn't until one hundred years later, in 1903, that women were allowed to enter the competition and another ten years until a woman would win the top prize, the Premier Grand Prix (Fauser, 2004, p.86). Two of the most influential women at the beginning of women's involvement in the Prix de Rome were the two sisters, Nadia and Lili Boulanger (Fauser, 2004, p.84).

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) was first accepted into the final round of the Prix de Rome in 1908 after entering every year since 1906. Many aspects of Nadia's participation raised controversy, beginning with her position as the only woman to compete that year. In turn, Nadia's defiance of the rules when she chose to write a four-part fugue for string quartet instead of a four-part fugue for voices, added more controversy than the Académie anticipated (Fauser, 2004, p.115). Despite her avoidance of the rules, Nadia secured one of the six spots in the final round of the competition but was not nominated to win the Premier Grand Prix. The judges felt that Nadia was the only competitor worthy of the Premier Second Grand Prix. Regardless, they decided that because of the “faux pas of her fugue,” Nadia, nor any other competitor, would receive the second-place award. After six rounds of voting, Nadia Boulanger was awarded the Deuxieme Second Grand Prix, the third highest award that only acknowledged the achievement of the winner in comparison to the Premier Second Grand Prix, which included future endorsement of the winner (Fauser, 2004, p.119).

This award was considered a victory, and Nadia became the idol of the *femme nouvelle*, the New Women movement and the first wave of feminism. This did not resonate well with the

conservative Académie. In 1909, Nadia entered the competition again and was favored to win the grand prize. This was due to the rule of the Prix de Rome which stated that a candidate can only receive higher prizes within the competition, not equal or lesser prizes. Therefore, Nadia could only be awarded the Premier Grand Prix or the Premier Second Grand Prix, the highest prizes ever awarded to a female competitor. However, Nadia was not awarded either prize. According to author Annegret Fauser, “when the jury of specialists cast their ballots on the first prize, Boulanger’s cantata received not a single vote. This can only be a political decision since no other candidate was judged to be sufficiently competent to receive the Premier Grand Prix in 1909” (2004, p.121-122). Once again, since the prize could not be awarded to the most deserving participant based on gender, the Premier Grand Prix was not awarded. Nadia walked away with nothing after also failing to receive the Premier Second Grand Prix. Another woman would not compete in the Prix de Rome again until 1912 with Lili Boulanger, Nadia’s younger sister, finally winning the Premier Grand Prix in 1913.

Unlike her sister, Lili Boulanger (1893 – 1918) portrayed herself in public as “the divinely chosen genius in the fragile body of a beautiful child,” and an icon of the *femme fragile*, the opposite of the *femme nouvelle*. Fauser believes that on top of her musical ability, one of the primary reasons Lili became the first woman to win the Prix de Rome was because, “she took on the unthreatening aspect of the eternal female who needed the support and help of the strong masculine sex” (2004, p.124). Lili would not have won the elite competition if it was not for her musical ability, however, because she was a woman she had to have more than skill, she had to also comply to the political and conventional ideals of the Académie.

The story of the Boulangers and their struggles towards achievement are not unique. The success of women composers depended on their ability, education, and how they fit into the

society instead on their musical ability alone. A century after the Boulangers there are still many aspects of the musical world that limit women in their pursuit to become composers.

Libby Larson is a prolific and successful American composer. In a recent interview, she offered her opinion to the question, 'why are there are so few women composers?' (Strempel, 2008, p.170). Larson's reply criticized the university entrance exams that determine if a person has the ability to study composition. She explains that these exams favor students who are trained on orchestral instruments and technology, while women composers are often trained in the vocal or performing art world. The entrance exams for composition do not account for differentiating theories or educations, therefore, the pool of entry for young composers is limited. If a talented individual does make it past an entrance exam, they then have to "grapple with the complex notions of what is important, valued and worthy of study" (Strempel, 2008, p.170). This is a modern example of limiting women's education which then, limits the quality and number of women composers.

Larson also indicates the need for women role models for young musicians in the work they are seeing and performing. This is difficult in a modern society where women composers are limited and also feel the need to hide their gender in order to avoid discrimination. According to the authors of *Hiding gender: How female composers manage gender identity*, "theories of social categorization and social identity assert that individuals classify themselves and others into social categories... that are likely to lead to the most positive outcomes in a given situation and they adapt their behaviors accordingly" (Bennett et. all, 2008, p.2). Strategies such as concealment and fabrication are used to buffer discrimination such as judging women's work as only confirming or attempting to deny 'femininity.' Halstead states,

“if a women composer writes delicate, refined, melodic music in a small form, this immediately ‘confirms’ beliefs about her feminine temperament of which such musical expression and content is an extension. However, if a woman composes music that is dramatic, large scale and intellectual in character, this only ‘proves’ that she was adopting a masculine style in order to step beyond the limitations of her sex” (p.142 and 143).

The role of parents, celebrities, family members, and teachers, all influence young people and their understandings. In music, what children see and hear in primary school directly impacts how they understand musical culture. If they only hear or see men in compositional roles, they may only believe that men are allowed to be composers. Currently, we “live in a society which is informed by and constructed on the basis of a long history of male domination” (Halstead, 1997, p.161). This topic is explored by Dr. Anne Guzzo, a full-time professor at the University of Wyoming. Dr. Guzzo has taught at the University of Wyoming for seventeen years, is an active composer, and professor of composition and Contemporary Period, a class that focuses on music from the early 20th century to present day.

As a composer, Dr. Guzzo feels that there are several reasons why there is a lack of women composers. These include, historical access, opportunities for education, and structural sexism. The lack of women composers can also be attributed to the tradition of composition as a male profession and accompanying barriers such as sexual harassment (Guzzo, personal communication).

Unlike many classes in higher education, in her course, Contemporary Period, Dr. Guzzo focuses intentionally on women composers. She points out that it’s unfair to students to not mention half the population when teaching, because “women were present in every single period

of music history - and explaining why they weren't played or more popular is valuable" (Guzzo, personal communication). One example she utilizes in her course is Florence Price (1887 - 1953), a female African-American composer who had few opportunities, yet became the first noted African-American female composer to gain national status (florenceprice.org). "We know Gershwin's music, NOT Florence Price. (I love Gershwin, indeed, but Florence Price is amazing too and deserved to be known in her lifetime.) It feels tragic, actually" (Guzzo, personal communication).

Dr. Guzzo expressed her feelings about hiding one's identity as a female composer. Any nuance of a composer's work could disqualify them from a competition, therefore composers are tempted to remove all barriers, such as the bias of gender. Guzzo has never used a pen name, partly because of the difficulty to remain hidden in the internet age, but also in the interest of working for equality. However, Guzzo does admit to experiencing prejudice as a woman composer. In regard to specific challenges she has faced, Guzzo replied that,

"I met other great, aspiring young composers whose work I would assess as being similar to mine...I met the same dozen or so composers over and over again at these summer festival, at concerts, etc. However, over the years, the white gents from the group have become much more famous. The women and composers of color, are all doing well - but none of us are famous or winning the standard large grants and awards like the Guggenheim or the Rome Prize" (Guzzo, personal communication).

She attributes this to what she calls “structural racism and sexism,” which consists of individuals complying with what is easy, traditional , or what they know. Dr. Guzzo believes that people have begun to tackle this issue within the past year, a movement which begins within education.

Women have been considered inferior to men throughout all of history. This has led to unequal opportunities, education, and participation in society. Although women have proven their capability to compete with men in music, there is still a skewed ratio of well-known male to female composers. Women such as Fanny Mendelssohn, Nadia Boulanger, and Lili Boulanger had advantages such as male support, access to competition, and education that allowed them to become well-known composers. However, as discussed by Libby Larson and Anne Guzzo, society can still improve in many areas. To acknowledge women for their accomplishments in the same way as men, we must begin to offer as many examples of women composers as men beginning in elementary classes. If women composers are considered equally alongside men, young people will have role models to which they can look. By accepting women’s perspectives and interpretations of music as equal to men, and by allowing multiple avenues of music to produce composers, women’s participation and success as composers will increase.

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