

## Are Musical Ghettos a Good Idea?

by Elizabeth Vercoe

(Public lecture in March, 2003 during a semester in residence holding the Acuff Chair of Excellence at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee and preceding a concert of music at the university by women composers)

Perhaps this discussion should be called: “Are Musical Ghettos Still a Good Idea?”

There is no doubt that they were totally necessary as recently as twenty or thirty years ago; there was nowhere else to hear women’s music then. Women’s concerts were it. Before that, nobody heard music by women at all. In the late 1980’s in a talk for the Music Library Association I remember quoting composer Beth Anderson as saying that on the West Coast, women’s concerts were covered by journalists because they were by women, whereas in New York City they were ignored because they were by women. That was a quip that covered a lot of pain. In the 1960s and 70s, being a woman composer was no joke. There were few women having major success and those few were not always welcome nor thought capable of doing significant work. Everyone else was out in the cold. And the context was already one in which all composers, male and female, struggled for performances. Some things never change.

Is our situation now analogous to the “lady orchestras” that arose when women wanted to play in orchestras but were not admitted? So that once admitted, most of the all-women orchestras disappeared?

There are three women who have won the Pulitzer Prize in music, others like Tania Leon at the New York Philharmonic who have had residencies with major orchestras, and others like Joan Tower who have won the Graemeyer Award and its 6-figure prize. I often hear women’s works on programs of contemporary music and here I am at Austin Peay enjoying a residency as a woman composer.

Do we still need to do these concerts? Are women composers, conductors and performers still facing a lot of discrimination because of their gender?

When I started re-thinking the advisability of all-women’s concerts in the last few days, I was very open to the possibility that we have all come such a long way in the last generation that maybe women’s concerts are no longer strictly necessary. Perhaps it is time for them to become just an opportunity to celebrate music by women.

Certainly, it is true that women had a hard time gaining attention as composers, but why? And is it still true? It seems as if women painters and women writers have had a lot more notice and much earlier too. If you think about the working conditions for women painters and writers, they can produce a finished product alone. A composer can’t because she is dependent on performers and concert organizers to present her work to the public. True, painters need galleries and writers need publishers, but at least the work itself can be complete without a presenter. For some, like Emily Dickinson, collecting the work into books oneself is enough to keep going, to keep being productive. But for a composer, it is that living performance that gives the feedback and stimulation necessary for her growth as a creative artist. Few can emulate Joan Tower and create a performing ensemble like the Da Capo Chamber Players to play one’s own work.

So, historically, women composers have had a very hard time finding performance opportunities. They have also had a hard time finding any public acknowledgement of the work they have done. But it is odd how spotty this recognition has been.

In 1568 Maddalena Casulana had two books of her madrigals printed by Scotto in Venice, the first music by a woman that was published. This is early in the history of printed music. Why was her music not acknowledged in 20th century textbooks on Renaissance music? Scotto was a well-known engraver and the works he published were no great secret.

Bear with me a moment while I give you some disquieting facts and figures about music textbooks.

As recently as 1987, a survey by Diane Jezic and Daniel Binder of college music textbooks found that only one of 47 music history textbooks included a musical example of a woman’s work. At that time, another quarter never mentioned a woman composer at all, and about half mentioned only one or none. Furthermore, many of the women who composed were mentioned as performers only—think Clara Schumann— or teachers—think Nadia Boulanger— or patrons —think Isabella d’Este. Even books by women, such as Edith Borroff’s *Music of the Baroque* and Eileen Southern’s book on African-American music mention only one or two women composers. Another peculiar development was that whereas older textbooks from the 1940s by Gustave Reese and Manfred Bukofzer mentioned several women, newer ones by Hoppin and Palisca mentioned no women composers and not even women performers despite the abundance of new research! Why ever was there this regression? Was it part of the syndrome identified by feminist Betty Friedan as *The Problem That Had No Name*? I don’t think so. I think the name in this case is obvious; it is discrimination.

How much have times changed since the 1987 Jezic and Binder study? The short answer is “only a little.”

In the last few days I have done an informal study of some of the standard textbooks that are available and used at Austin Peay. Here are some of my findings of what passes for balanced scholarship. Hoppin’s *Medieval Music* published back in 1978 does no better than Gustave Reese in 1940, listing only a few women, and those women are patrons—not composers; there is no Hildegard von Bingen, no Countess of Dia, no troubaditz. David Wilson’s 1990 text called *Music of the Middle Ages* is even worse, citing no women whatever, this at a time when there has been much scholarship on Hildegard von Bingen and her recordings have actually been hot sellers.

Allan Atlas in his *Renaissance Music* (Norton, 1998) seems to have had his consciousness raised at the 11th hour, devoting four pages to what he rather condescendingly calls “the Ladies of Ferrara” at the very end of his book. Otherwise he ignores women musicians except for a few patrons with the one exception of Maddalena Casulana, the first published woman composer mentioned earlier, in a paragraph about music printing. Barbara Strozzi, an astonishing composer and performer, has her name listed with the Ferrara ladies but there is not one word about her or her compositions or performances. Plantinga’s *Romantic Music*, another of the Norton series published in 1984, discusses Clara Schumann, but only as a pianist and as wife of Robert and friend of Brahms. What else is new? Fanny Mendelssohn is discussed as a composer whose works are mostly unavailable, which was unfortunately true both in her day and in 1984. Some women patrons and performers are mentioned.

The Norton book on *Twentieth Century Music* by Robert Morgan published in 1991 lists some women composers such as Laurie Anderson, Ellen Zwilich, Joan Tower, Thea Musgrave and Sofia Gubaidulina. But these women appear only in one sentence as part of a list. And my frustration boils over when I see Charles Seeger listed in the index, someone who did not write music that anybody plays anymore, however much he contributed to American folk music, whereas his infinitely talented composer wife, Ruth Crawford, is nowhere to be found.

At this point it should be fairly clear that those people being groomed in the 1970s and 80s and even 90s as musicians and music teachers for the 21st century were not being told in major texts devoted to particular style periods that women actually compose music! This probably means you too, in 2003 are reading textbooks that fail to mention women’s contributions to music. That women write music seems to be a big secret among those writing textbooks, and I cannot begin to tell you what this means to a young woman thinking of writing music. If, like me, she is lucky enough to have some of her education in an all-women’s college, she may not notice that much because much is expected of women in that context. But once she is in a university, and like me finds that she is the only woman in a composition seminar of a dozen people, she begins to feel a bit out of step. And if, like me, she is told she will take jobs from men, and asked if she really wants to be an old maid and wear her hair in a bun, she will feel downright unwelcome.

Those kinds of overt discrimination that I experienced as a student may be less common now. But Jennifer Freyd, a member of the psychology faculty at the University of Oregon who has done extensive research in the area of gender bias, warns us not to expect those who discriminate to either have a sexist ideology or be actually aware of discriminating. She also warns against the attitude that bias is “out there” and not “here,” suggesting that factual analyses, numbers, statistics, will likely prove otherwise. She talks of what many call “the chilly climate” for women in universities, whether for women students or faculty.

To my amazement, there are dozens of websites with pages devoted to the topic of The Chilly Climate. Some of the articles are listed in connection with Committees on the Status of Women associated with such organizations as the College Music Society or the American Musicological Society. Others are hosted by universities, such as the University of Maryland which has a long-standing committee and something called the Greer Report devoted to recommendations for changing conditions for women on campus.

Yale University has an entire book published online outlining statistics for faculty shifts at Yale in terms of gender, race, salary, and subject matter. Tenured women faculty at Yale, by the way, have increased from a low 5.4% in 1983 to 15.8% in 2000.

That is encouraging. But there has been a huge recent scandal at MIT about the overt, raw discrimination against senior women faculty there, something that was spread all over the local papers in Boston and is being addressed now by the administration at MIT.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in a long-ranging historical survey of faculties in US higher education according to gender, 12% of the faculty at universities were women in 1869. That is right after the Civil War. By 1969, a hundred years later, that percentage had nearly doubled to 23% who were women. And by 1999 the figure had nearly doubled again, rising to 41%. Good news for those concerned about gender equity. But we also know from the College Music Society’s survey back in the 1970s that women tended to be clustered in the lower ranks and tended to be adjunct professors and to be paid less. We also know from that study that almost no women in academia were teaching conducting or music composition.

Another way that bias often shows up is in pay scales. Overall in this country, women still earned only 71% of what men earned in 1993 according to the National Committee on Pay Equity. The Sandler and Hall 1986 report entitled “The Campus Climate Revisited: Chilly for Women Faculty, Administrators, and Graduate Students” states that “at every rank, in every field, at every type of institution, women still earn less than their male counterparts.” The same report continues that “the higher the rank, the fewer the women.”

Bias shows up in student evaluations of faculty as well. In a study first done in 1968 and repeated in 1983, college students were asked to rate identical articles. The authors’ names were clearly male or female but were reversed for each group of raters. Articles supposedly written by women were consistently ranked lower than the same articles when identified as having male authors. A similar study was done of department heads who were asked to make hiring decisions and recommend faculty rank based on resumes. For resumes with male names, chairs recommended higher ranks than for the same resumes with female names. Most of this is probably unconscious bias.

But let’s get back to our investigation of textbooks.

One widely-used general history is the *Grout A History of Western Music* in a new edition edited by Plantinga and published in 2001 and the backbone of the W.W. Norton textbook series. Grout used to be as notorious among women musicians for his shunning of their accomplishments as women were among women art students for his omissions of women artists in his famous text on art history. But the new edition of Grout has come a long long way. There is information about the concerto *delle donne* in Renaissance Mantua, three musical examples by Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre illustrating the French suite, several paragraphs on Francesca Caccini, a paragraph on Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, three surprising paragraphs on Sofia Gubaidulina, and some discussions of many others from the Countess of Dia to Bessie Smith. This is not nirvana because the text is 800 pages long and the women still only a small part of the whole, but it is a big improvement over the nothing that was there 20 years ago.

Of even greater importance, perhaps, is the inclusion of a few women in the Norton Anthology of musical scores which is also available on 12 CDs. The anthology is very widely used, as you all know, and now includes music by five women: the Countess of Dia and Barbara Strozzi in volume 1, and Clara Schumann, Ruth Crawford and Sofia Gubaidulina in volume 2. Again, progress is noteworthy but small. This progress from the zero of past Norton Anthologies still represents just 27 pages out of 1,500, that is just about 2% of the total. So, looked at another way, 98% of the music is still by men. As an aside, I might mention that the Crawford Violin Sonata that is included is a piece that Crawford never published, said she destroyed, and survived only because composer-pianist Vivian Fine found a forgotten copy, and rescued the piece from oblivion by performing it at the Library of Congress.

So what do you think so far? Is it still necessary to try to improve the odds for women composers by offering them concerts of their own music? Is it beginning to look as if it is still too early to celebrate, that we have barely begun to acknowledge the wealth of music written by women? Remember the comment in Plantinga’s recent textbook on Romantic music that Fanny Mendelssohn was mostly unpublished? That was definitely true in her own lifetime, and in fact there were a number of her songs that her famous brother Felix kindly published under his own name to protect her from unwanted notoriety. But today much of her music is indeed published and available. And pieces like her piano trio deserve a hearing in the concert hall and a mention in the music texts. There is no longer any excuse because the music is recorded and published.

A telling example in the 20th century of the chilling effect of attitudes typified by some of the textbook authors just mentioned but certainly not limited to them is that of Rebecca Clarke whose powerful viola sonata is on tonight’s program.

Clarke was an English woman brought up in a musical but highly dysfunctional family from whom she was eventually ostracized. She first attended the Royal Academy at age 16, when she began studying the viola. Later she received training in composition and began an active career as an outstanding violist, both in London orchestras where she was one of the first women members and in chamber groups where she played with such musicians as Casals and Rubinstein. She toured in the United States and met Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge on one such trip. At the suggestion of Coolidge, Clarke wrote her *Viola Sonata for the Coolidge* composition competition of 1919 where she submitted her piece anonymously along with 72 other works. The six judges were tied between her piece and another, and Mrs. Coolidge was asked to break the tie which she did by choosing the piece that turned out to be by Bloch. But the judges were so taken with the Clarke that they insisted on the identity of the composer, which had been rumored to be Ravel. You can imagine their astonishment on finding that this powerful work was by a woman. There was quite an uproar in the press and further speculation that Rebecca Clarke was a pseudonym. A few years later Clarke won second prize in the Coolidge competition for her piano trio, another powerful and tightly organized piece.

Despite this acclaim and the success in her performing career, Clarke found great difficulty in finding a publisher, in getting performances and at times even in making a living. In the 1940s, she found herself unable to return to England during the war and took a job as a governess, ceasing all compositional activity. At this time she met an old friend from the Royal Academy who was teaching at Juilliard, and they married. They lived in New York for many years and performed together. Clarke also gave lectures on music on radio. But she wrote almost nothing further and died in 1979.

The *Viola Sonata* on tonight’s program is a very big work, expansive and highly expressive. It is also a special favorite of mine since my daughter plays it quite wonderfully. The first movement is in sonata form with an arresting opening, and a distinctive style that seems to fuse Impressionism and a late Romanticism. The second movement is full of charm, opening with staccato piano and pizzicato viola. The third and final movement begins very slowly and expressively in the piano before taking off. There are several places in this movement where there is a theme that is distinctively folk-like in its simplicity, in contrast to the rest. The theme from the opening movement returns near the end both in tempo and in augmentation.

Before closing, I would like to read you comments by two women composers.

Fanny Mendelssohn (in a letter of 1836): “Once a year, perhaps, some one will copy a piece of mine or ask me to play something special—certainly not oftener; and now that Rebecca has left off singing, my songs lie unheeded and unknown. If nobody ever offers an opinion, or takes the slightest interest in one’s productions, one loses in time not only all pleasure in them, but all power of judging their value.

“...I cannot help considering it a sign of talent that I do not give it up, though I can get nobody to take an interest in my efforts.”

Joan La Barbara: “I think it was necessary to do concerts of music exclusively by women initially, if only to make a statement, to increase awareness of our existence. The time has come, though, to integrate women’s works into the mainstream of our musical life.”

In conclusion, I hope that instead of feeling it is discouraging to hear about women’s struggles to make a mark as composers, you will be uplifted by hearing some of their music on the concert this evening, some of it written despite their circumstances. And in thinking of why we need to bother about addressing the issues I have discussed, perhaps the words of Pauline Oliveros, an unusual woman and composer, could be convincing. She says: “...the greatest problems of society will never be solved until [there is] an egalitarian atmosphere utilizing the total creative energies that exist among all men and women.”