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"Are The Odds Against Women
Composers?"

The wide-ranging effects of the women's movement have all but bypassed women composers. There has been a flurry of scholarship, but courses on music by women are dropped for want of interest. There have been festivals and conferences on women's music, but the early enthusiasm has faded and few are slated for the coming year. There have been organizations created to encourage and even lobby for the woman composer, but support—even from other women and even from leading feminists—is so tentative that a national conference on women in the arts in 1986 had not one composer as a speaker, panel member, or discussion leader, and not more than two or three even invited to attend.

So why should the Boston woman composer fare better? In fact, she doesn't. Not where it counts: academic jobs to pay the rent and permit at least summers for concentrated work; performances by a variety of the many new music groups in town; grants and commissions from state councils and foundations to support copying and printing costs; broadcasts and recordings to bring her work wider notice.

In 1975 the College Music Society first published statistics regarding women in music along with articles on women in composition and foundation support for them. The figures were grim: out of nearly 1,200 college teaching positions in composition, only 5.8% were held by women although women were already receiving 20% of the doctorates in theory, composition, and performance in 1972. A second report for 1976-77 showed an upsurge for women teaching composition in colleges to 10% of the 1,231 jobs with a drop to 9.6% (of 1,262 jobs) in 1977. (See Table 1.)

Incredibly, in 1986 the percentage of women teaching composition had declined to 6% of the 1,493 jobs listed at a time when 35% of the doctorates in theory and composition were being awarded to women. The figures show that the small affirmative action gains made in the 1970s are being lost in the 1980s despite the ever larger pool of qualified women entering the market.

Even if progress in academia is glacial, one might expect the new music groups to be more attuned to change and quicker to discover and promote women's music. ALEA III, for example, seems to make a fairly consistent effort to present women's music, performing works by six women this year, a full 15% of the season's offerings and by far the best record of any of the organizations surveyed. (See Table 2.) While most of the rest of Boston's new music ensembles could be accused of tokenism at best, the sprinkling of women composers' names on concert programs in the last few years is at least a clear change from the nearly total neglect of the 1960s and early 1970s. It would be refreshing to hear the music of some of the great historical women composers as well, such as Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre or Barbara Strozzi on programs of Baroque music with period instruments, but early music groups seem even less aware of the repertory of women's music than the contemporary ensembles.

Considering the very low percentages of women on concert programs and in composition jobs compared to the pool available suggested by the percentage of women receiving advanced degrees in composition over the years, it is encouraging to find that substantially higher percentages of Massachusetts composition grants are going to women composers. As Table 2 shows, both the Meet the Composer and Massachusetts Artist Fellowship programs have awarded about 15% of their grants to women composers. (If finalists are included in the fellowship awards, the

number rises to 18.5%.) The lower level of support to women through the New Works program may reflect the attitudes of the groups applying for the grants rather than that of panelists for the program since applications originate with the performing groups. At least women are beginning to share in the foundation pie in percentages approaching those of the available pool of qualified women.

Another encouraging sign for women composers in New England is the pioneering series of recordings from Northeastern Records, including both contemporary and historical works with complete records of music by Fanny Mendelssohn, Ellen Zwilich, Amy Beach, and Rebecca Clarke, and collections of old and new music by many others. The only other label to release so much music by women is Leonarda which was founded primarily to record women's music. Aside from Northeastern and Leonarda, women have had little access to the recording industry, as a glance at any recent Schwann catalogue will reveal. In her article, "Women in Composition," in the previously mentioned College Music Society Report, Adrienne Fried Block found no new listings for women and only a total of thirty-three women composers listed in the October/75 Schwann catalogue. In the April/86 issue of the tape and record catalogue there were six new listings for women (all but one from Northeastern Records) and ninety for men; in the April/87 catalogue there were no new listings for women but 205 for men on tapes, records, and compact discs.

It is a pity that composers of the stature of Miriam Gideon and Louise Talma are seldom heard in Boston. Andrew Porter reviewed the eightieth birthday concerts for these two composers last year and commended the taut, beautiful music of Gideon's "Voice from Elysium" (1979) and the passion and intensity of Talma's "Lament" (1980), which he suggested belongs in every cellist's repertory. If our premiere

music critic says, "Everything Talma writes is marked by her distinction and elegance," surely some of her music is worthy of performance by our local groups. The Boston Musica Viva performed Vivian Fine's 1977 opera, *Women in the Garden*, six years ago, but we have heard little else since. Music by Ellen Zwilich, the first (and only) woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize, recurs on Boston Musica Viva programs but seldom elsewhere. Joan Tower's orchestral music has rave reviews but no Boston performances. Programs featuring new music by English composers exclude Thea Musgrave, Gillian Whitehead, Jennifer Fowler, Priaulx Rainier. The American Music Center, the American Composers Alliance, and American Women Composers (which has an extensive library in Washington, D.C. as well as a Massachusetts chapter) are obvious resources for lists of names and works and, more important, are lending libraries. In Boston, as elsewhere, women composers are lacking the proportion of performances and commissions that their numbers and quality warrant, and audiences are missing out on a substantial portion of the music being written today, a situation that could easily change with a little effort on the part of concert managers, conductors, and performers in the region.

Table 1. Comparison of Degrees(1) and Academic Posts(2)

Degrees Awarded		1962-63		1972-73		1983-84	
		total	% women	total	% women	total	% women
ALL MUSIC (not Mus. Ed.)	B.A.	3034	58%	6749	55%	7870	53%
	M.A.	1248	37%	2652	46%	1360	52%
	Ph.D.	154	14%	366	22%	216	31%
THEORY / COMPOSITION	B.A.	n.a.		n.a.		352	34%
	M.A.					222	31%
	Ph.D.					84	35%
Academic Posts Held		1972		1976		1986	
		total	% women	total	% women	total	% women
ALL MUSIC (incl. Mus. Ed.)		n.a.		n.a.	24%	26108	33%
THEORY / COMPOSITION		n.a.		5173	18%	5132	17%
COMPOSITION		1160	6%	1231	10%	1493	6%

Table 2. Profile of Performing Groups & Granting Agencies (3)

Performances		1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88	Totals
ALEA III	Composers	39	31	41	34	40	185
	Women	0	4	7	2	6	19
	% Women	0%	13%	17%	6%	15%	10%
BOSTON MUSICA VIVA	Composers	14	21	15	18	15	83
	Women	2	1	1	1	1	6
	% Women	14%	5%	7%	6%	7%	7%
COLLAGE	Composers	13	12	12	14	16	67
	Women	1	0	1	0	1	3
	% Women	8%	0%	8%	0%	6%	4%
ISCM	Composers	7	11	7	8	15	48
	Women	0	1	0	0	0	1
	% Women	0%	9%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Grants		1984	1985	1986	1987	Totals	
MEET THE COMPOSER (NEW ENG.)	Composers		93	153	177	166	589
	Women		18	17	22	28	85
	% Women		19%	11%	12%	17%	14%
NEW WORKS (MASS COUNCIL)	Composers		n.a.	32	34	n.a.	66
	Women			5	0		5
	% Women			16%	0%		8%
MASS. ARTISTS FELLOWSHIPS	Fellows			4	4	4	12
	Women			1	0	1	2
	Finalists			5	5	5	15
	Women			2	0	1	3

- (1) information from the Bureau of Educational Statistics
(2) information from the College Music Society
(3) information provided by the named organizations