

## THE LADY VANISHES?

by Elizabeth Vercoe

"If women composers must be segregated in ghetto concerts, let's get on with it and get it over." Keynote speaker Edith Borroff thus expressed her sense of urgency and mission to the audience of more than 200 women registered for the 1982 Conference on Women in Music sponsored by the University of Michigan. Cautioning women that the "myth of the female mind" (that a thinking woman is masculine) is still widespread, that men continue to dominate music publishing and education and that respected musicians such as Copland and Menuhin continue to deny the possibility of really good women composers, Borroff urged action. She urged adoption of new histories of music as alternatives to Grout (where "the lady vanishes," she reminded us). She stressed the importance of education in giving women composers a chance to develop skill in handling large forms. And in recounting her own experiences of discrimination at even the most liberal of colleges (Oberlin), she reflected that "women's music has been composed under conditions men can contemplate only in the abstract."

The somber theme of oppressive conditions was echoed in many of the ten papers given at the three-day conference. Jane Snyder described women musicians in classical Greece as being forbidden to play the kithara, to participate in competitions, or to play music except for themselves or other women (conditions not entirely foreign to present day women orchestral musicians, conductors and composers). Adrienne Fried Block spoke of the demeaning images of women in the sixteenth-century *chanson rustique* as reflecting a decline in the status of women of all classes. Adding that the crude chansons also appeared in handsome polyphonic versions by Clement, Jannequin, Josquin and others, she explained that the polyphonic versions were popular at court and preserved in publications by Petrucci, Moderne and Susato. In raising questions of why such misogynous views arose and gained acceptance in sixteenth-century songs, Block supported the notion that we need to understand such phenomena not only to learn about past cultures but to avoid repeating history. A later paper by Beverly Morse brought the general topic of women in music up to date with a talk somewhat wryly entitled, "The Social Acceptance of Women in American Music."

While the opening papers gave a rather gloomy overview of the history of women in music, later talks and lecture-recitals celebrated the achievements of individual women (despite the odds) as composers, performers and educators: namely, Elizabeth Wood on the operas of Ethel Smyth, Victoria Sirota on Fanny Mendelssohn, Jean Cazort and Constance Hobson on the brilliant black pianist Hazel Lucille Harrison, Donna Pucciani on educator Olga Samaroff, Rosemary Platt on her recording of contemporary women's piano music, Mary Schiller on songs by Lili Boulanger, Dorothy Howard-Brooks on music by Canadian women, and Carol Longworth on women's choral music. The celebration of women musicians extended to writers in a fascinating paper by Jane Marcus based on the correspondence between Ethel Smyth and Virginia Woolf.

Central to the conference, however, was the music itself. And there was an abundance: over 100 pieces by 70 composers from a dozen countries spanning four centuries. As sponsor of the conference, the University of Michigan contributed several programs including the opening concert of works by University of Michigan women (at which there was standing room only) and a performance by the Sterling Chamber Players of Ann Arbor. While the level of performances was unusually high throughout the conference, a few were outstanding either for the sheer virtuosity of the performer alone or for the evident close association between composer and performer occasioned by the performer's artistry. An incomplete list would include Sharon Mabry's program of twentieth century vocal music, Laura Hunter's recital of music for saxophone (including the world premiere of a piece by Laura Karpman and a sample of avant-garde saxophone techniques), Donna Coleman's tough-minded choices of piano music (by Seeger, Gideon and Clayton), Anne Mischakoff's program of unaccompanied viola music, Vivian Taylor's piano recital of music from five countries (including two pieces from China and the premiere of music by Dutch composer Tera de Marez Oyens), and Joanne Vollendorf's extraordinary performance of women's organ music.

Since there have been several conferences on women's music lately, it is perhaps useful to look at these papers and concerts in the light of those of another convention, the First National Congress on Women in Music held last year in New York City. The First Congress was actually an international meeting (unlike Michigan where American composers and performers predominated). Staggering in scale (with about 80 papers, 25 concerts, 25 panels and half a dozen workshops in three days), the Congress events were well-attended and were presented amidst an atmosphere of near euphoria. However, the sheer number of events meant that facilities were sometimes strained (listeners crowded into tiny rooms for papers, poor pianos for some of the recitals), and the quality of the presentations quite uneven. Some of the performances were rather embarrassing, others stunning (to be fair, a range rather typical of most music conventions).

In contrast, the Michigan conference was on a much smaller scale and a more even keel. There was only one paper or concert at a time (for a total of 32 events over three days), no ambitious choral or orchestral performances (the weakest link in the New York Congress events anyway), and no contingent of European, Australian or South African musicians as there were in New York. But the rewards of the smaller gathering in a quiet university town were many. It was easier to get to know people, since it was possible to have social events for all attending. It was also quite possible to attend everything, should one want to.

Should one want to? Questions about the value of women's conferences keep coming up. It would be easy enough simply to skirt the issue by pointing to the many conferences on much more specialized topics or to retort with the Aristotelian view that "to be constantly asking 'what is the use of' is unbecoming to those of superior mentality." But answers come to mind just as easily as ways of avoiding the questions.