

## ACCENT ON WOMEN

### WOMEN COMPOSERS: A STACKED DECK BY Elizabeth Vercoe

The odds are against any composer making a success; the odds against a woman composer making a success with her art are overwhelming. During the last ten years or so, I have been in a position to know. Fresh out of graduate school, doctorate in hand and my first published compositions hot off the press, I thought there was a reasonable chance that the world would soon be clamoring to perform the fistfull of works I had at the ready. This was a good day. On a bad day, realities about jobs and opportunities became so oppressive that it was hard to write another note. What I failed to appreciate even on my darkest days was the extent to which the odds were stacked against me as a woman composer: how few had ever heard of a single woman composer (or cared), how many talented and degree-laden women were entering the field, how few would be performed or commissioned or recorded or published; in short, how little the letter or spirit of affirmative action laws were affecting women in music and how little support of any kind was available to women who write music.

Because of some inborn stubborn streak, my growing sense of the odds against me led to a growing determination to do something about them. I joined national and international organizations formed to promote women composers; organized concerts and festivals of women's music; attended conferences on the subject; read books; wrote articles; reviewed women's records; represented "my" constituency on organizational boards and panels; wrote proposals to fund special projects for women composers, and began a series of compositions with texts that express a woman's point of view. All this activity succeeded in giving ME visibility, in helping ME with performances, commissions and recordings. How little I (and others like me) have been able to improve the odds for women composers in general, however, is a combination of distressing and infuriating. While the lot for women musicians in the 70's was beginning to improve, I see the tide turning against us in the 80's in critical areas such as jobs and recording.

Although not very sexy reading, a few statistics are worth a thousand words of anecdotal experience in demonstrating the meager opportunities for woman



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composers today. First, women receive over 1/3 of all degrees in music theory and composition at the Bachelors, Masters, and doctoral levels. Yet only 17% of the theory jobs and 6% of the composition jobs went to women in 1986, with the composition jobs actually down from a high of 10% in 1976. (See Table) So much for affirmative action. Regarding grants, 112 (or about 10%) of the 1,110 fellowships in composition awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts since 1973 have gone to women. To be fair, the odds have improved slightly if one compares the figures for the first seven years of operation with those for 1980-1986. The improvement is much greater regarding Guggenheim Fellowships as the figures for 1923-1970 could hardly be worse. In the first 45 years of awards, the Guggenheim Foundation gave woman only 7 composition grants out of a total of 323, that is, about 2%. In recent years (1970-1987), the percentage has increased to 11% or about the same as the Endowment grants to women. Again, to be fair, it may be the small pool of women

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applicants rather than the Foundation that is responsible for the low percentages in the early years. (According to other writers on the issue, women are less likely to apply for grants than men, but those who do apply are likely to be extremely well qualified.) In Massachusetts our state arts council has had about as good a record as the NEA and recent Guggenheim Foundation, as the table reveals (see page 23), with about 11% of New Works commissions going to women in the last four years. However, only one woman has received a New Works commission in the last two years, a low 2% of the grants.

Perhaps even more revealing of the odds against women composers (and more interesting to performers) is the record of performing organizations. There is little point in even looking at the statistics for mainstream orchestras and chamber ensembles as they perform so little new music in the first place and secondly don't think of performing the historical works by women like Rebecca Clarke or Amy Beach. But a quick glance at the table shows that even the groups devoted to new music don't perform much music by women. Only one Boston group performed more than one piece by a woman per year, while another played only one woman's work in five years and that one only because a woman won the group's annual composition competition (judged by anonymous submission, incidentally). One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry at these figures, especially in view of the fact that women sit on the boards of the groups. One wonders why the women trustees are not prodding the groups into at least tokenism. Are they meeting resistance? Are they simply ineffectual? Don't they care? Or are they afraid to speak out? The answers might make another column and some interesting reading.

By now you may be wondering if the scene is unremittingly grim. Not so. A few courageous individuals have taken risks and begun special projects and alternative institutions. There is the National Museum of Woman in the Arts in Washington with an auditorium for concerts and lectures. There is Leonarda Records in New York with some 30 discs at last count, most of which feature at least one work by a woman. There is also Arsis Press in Washington, with more than ten years of publishing experience and over 70 handsomely printed women's works in the catalogue. There is the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic with its clever and successful marketing strategies. And there is pianist Virginia Eskin whose vision has led to an exciting series of recordings through Northeastern Records with both historical and contemporary music by women. The scene is not unremittingly grim, but one notices that for every two steps forward, there is one backward. For example the Fall/87 Schwann Catalogue lists some 123 women composers, up from a total of only 33 in the October/75 issue. On the other hand, the April/87 Catalogue contains not a single new listing for women composers out of a total of 205 for men on tapes, records and compact discs.

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What can any of us do about this seemingly intractable situation? My impression from experience on various boards and panels is that one person can make a difference, that it doesn't take much to move a group on affirmative action if one person feels strongly about it. When reminded, most people know they should be doing something for women (whether they personally care or not) so that the organization does not appear sexist or outdated. Further, musicians can take responsibility for becoming informed about specific works by women. Managers and conductors are more likely to respond to an enthusiastic plug for, say, Joan Tower's "Petrushskates" than to a general plea to perform women's music. (I hasten to add that I have become informed about performer's wage scales for concerts and recordings and am adamant that groups I work with pay at least those minimums.) Finally, instead of complaining about request from composers for "favors," performers should suggest program ads, grant writing and other practical fundraising efforts so that young composers learn early the alternatives to begging or paying from their own pockets. Talented women should not have to wait for 80th birthdays, like Louise Talma and Miriam Gideon to have major concerts of their music in New York and rave reviews by Andrew Porter in the New Yorker.

(Elizabeth Vercoe has been a composer at the Cite' Internationale des Arts in Paris, the Charles Ives Center for American Music, and the Cummington Community of the Arts. Her music has been performed in England, Germany, Sweden, Holland, Belgium and France, and she has won awards in international competitions in Germany, the U.S. and Puerto Rico, as well as grants from the Artist's Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Meet the Composer. In 1985 she won a Massachusetts Artist Fellowship in Composition. She has written works on commission for Wellesley College, Austin Peay University, and Hampshire College as well as for numerous soloists.

She earned a doctorate in composition at Boston University where she was a student of Gardner Read. Since then, she has been active in the women's music movement promoting women composers as a founding member of a composer collective, co-director of the Women's Music Festival/85 in Boston, and board member of the International League of Women Composers. Her music is published by Aria Press and the American Composers Alliance and recorded on Northeastern and Coronet Records.)

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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.					352	34%
	M.A.	n.a.		n.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%	5732	17%
COMPOSITION		1160	6%	1231	10%	1493	6%

Table 2. Profile of Performing Groups &amp; 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		10	32	34	16	92
	Women		4	5	0	1	10
	% Women		40%	16%	0%	6%	11%
MASS. ARTISTS FELLOWSHIPS	Fellows			4	4	4	12
	Women		n.a.	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