Teaching about the History of Women in Western Music

Jane M. Bowers
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In the summer of 1976, a course entitled "Women Musicians and Composers in Western Europe and the United States between 1100 and the Present" was offered for the first time at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. Since this may have been the first course of its kind offered by any college or university, I would like to describe the course and briefly evaluate it. The principal objective of the course was to study the various works of women in Western music, particularly but not exclusively in relationship to the professional music world, from the Middle Ages to the present. Women as composers received the most extensive treatment. We studied their lives; the special obstacles they faced as women in obtaining education and developing careers in music; the kinds of works they wrote; their patterns of composing (e.g., whether they wrote only early in life or throughout); how they felt about themselves and their work; what relationships existed between their access to professional or semiprofessional positions as musicians and their compositional activities; and what historical forces permitted or encouraged them to flourish in certain times and places and not in others. We listened to recordings of some of their works, performed others ourselves, and invited guest performers to play works for which we did not have the performing resources.

Other work of women in music that we considered included that of amateur and professional singers and instrumentalists, teachers, conductors, and participants in the independent musical institutions that women themselves established and maintained, such as those in convents. We considered the opportunities or lack of opportunities that women had in the major male-dominated musical institutions—those of churches and courts, public and private concerts, orchestras, and the like—and how these influenced the kinds of musical activities women engaged in. We found, for example, that the exclusion of women from some musical institutions led them to create their own opportunities in the private sphere, for example, as teachers, recitalists, and founders of their own orchestras.

At present there is no single work that can serve as a useful textbook for a history of women in music. The following sources, however, identify some of the significant women musicians and composers and suggest further sources of information about some of them:


Hixon, Donald, and Don Hennese.


Encyclopedia and dictionary articles about specific figures can be useful as well; those in Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart are particularly so (but check the supplement to it for those women you don't find in the main volumes). For women in American music, the biographies in Notable American Women are helpful.

At the beginning of the course, we read and discussed the following articles that deal with various ways of studying women in history and that identify some of the kinds of obstacles women have faced in entering and pursuing fields of artistic endeavor:


We then looked at women's relationship to music in the Middle Ages. We discussed women troubadours and trouvères (listening to the Countess of Dia's "A chantar" performed by the Studio der frühen Musik on Telefunken SAWT 9567-B); the various ways women and girls participated as amateur performers in other kinds of secular music, as revealed in literary and pictorial sources; the professional activities of women as jongleureuses and menestrelles; the musical practices and composition of music that took place in nunneries; and the participation of women in music of the early Christian church. Sources for this unit included:


Maillard, Jean H. Anthologie de chants de troubadours. Paris: Zurfluh, 1967, 10 and 63-64 (for Queen Blanche's "Amours").


Next, we took up the development of new roles for women in music in Italy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the establishment of semi-professional ensembles of women singers at northern Italian courts; the development of large numbers of professional women singers brought about by the birth and growth of opera; and the burgeoning of excellent individual performers and ensembles in convents and Venetian orphanages. We observed that women's new opportunities in these areas seem to have been the crucial factor behind their creation of the first significant body of both secular and sacred music by women composers at the same time. Sources for this unit included:


Bonaventura, Arnaldo. "Le Donne italiane e la musica," Revista Musicale Italiana, XXIII (1925), 519-34.


MacClintock, Carol. The Solo Song: 1580-1730. New York: W. W. Norton, [1973], 7-8 and 81-88 (for works by Leonora Orsina and Barbara Strozzi).


Raney, Carolyn. "Francesca Caccini, Musician to the Medici, and her Primo Libro (1618)." Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1971.


Although very few compositions by women from this period have been published in modern editions or recorded, Francesca Caccini's opera, La Liberazione di Ruggiero, has been edited by Doris Silbott and published in the Smith College Music Archives series (No. 7; 1945), and a few recorded excerpts from this work are available in an anthology, Woman's Work: Works by Famous Women Composers, produced by Marnie Hall (Gemini Hall Records, 1975).

From the activities of women in Italian vocal music, we turned to women's entrance into other areas of music in other countries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, into the field of solo instrumental performance at the rapidly increasing numbers of private and public concerts. We observed how this new field of activity for women influenced, in turn, their increasing composition of instrumental music. We also looked at women who established themselves as music teachers and composers of music for the domestic market. We considered the development of the woman singer/song composer and the woman piano virtuoso/piano music composer—two distinct types of women musician/composers that continued to flourish in the nineteenth century. We also discussed the aristocratic woman composer, particularly as represented by the German princesses. Useful sources of information for this unit were:


Recordings of works by women in this unit include:

Jacqueline van La Guerre, Elisabeth, Air from the cantata *Jacob et Rachel* and air and recitative from the cantata *Susanne*.

Anna Amalia, Princess of Prussia, *Four Regimental Marches*; Anna Amalia, Duchess of Saxony-Weimar, selection from *Erwin und Elminie*; and Maria Theresia Paradis, *Sicilienne*.


——. *Suite in D Minor.* Nancy Fierro, piano. Avant Records AV 1012.

In a unit on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we observed women composers' belated but definite adoption of the largest dramatic and instrumental forms of music. We also looked at the development of "sexual aesthetics" in the press and its function in attempting to force women back into more restricted areas of musical activity, just as they were breaking out of them in increasing numbers. We discussed special difficulties women in the United States and England experienced in trying to break away from the parlor music sphere. And we traced the late nineteenth-century establishment of all-female chamber music and orchestral ensembles and women's attempts to gain entry into exclusively male orchestras.

Valuable sources of information for this unit were:


Useful recordings of works by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women composers include:

Andréé, Eldrida, Allegro molto vivace from the *Quintet in F Major*; Lili Boulanger, *Nocturne*; Jeanne Louise Farrenc, Scherzo from the *Quintet*, op. 31; Louise Hérité-Viardot, Serenade from the *Quartet*, op. 11; Germaine Tailleferre, *Quatuor* (1918); piano works by Cécile Chaminade and Clara Schumann; songs by Lili Boulanger, Ingeborg von Brunsart, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Josephine Lang, Maria Malibran, Clara Schumann, and Pauline Viardot. *Woman's Work: Works by Famous Women Composers*, produced by Marnie Hall, Gemini Hall Records, 1975.


——. *Piano Quintet in F-Sharp Minor*, op. 67. Mary Louise Boehm, piano. Turnabout TV-S 34556.

——. *Symphony in E Minor (Gaelic)*. Karl Krueger; The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. The Society for the Preservation of the American Musical Heritage MIA 139.


Schumann, Clara. *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, op. 7; piano works, opp. 10, 14 and 20; *Four Fugitive Pieces*. Michael Ponti, piano.


——. *Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, op. 20; *Two Romances*, op. 21; *Mazurka in G*, op. 6, Skyes, piano. Orion 75182.

For lack of time we did not study women composers who principally flourished after the first few decades of the twentieth century. Instead we focused on two professions in which women have made important advances in this century—conducting and orchestral playing—and on the obstacles they faced and still face in obtaining serious consideration in them. Sources pertaining to these professions include:


During the last two weeks of the course, the students gave “in progress” reports about subjects on which they were preparing final papers. They were enthusiastic about sharing their work with each other, and this contributed greatly to the enjoyability of the class. The reports and papers were generally of high quality in spite of the problems everyone faced in locating material. Through this work, the students became aware of the very real difficulties associated with doing research on largely forgotten women in music. As one student in the course observed, they probably would have changed their research topics in any other course, because of the difficulties they experienced in finding source materials. But because they could not turn to easier topics within this area, they learned, some of them for the first time, how to do research, and they developed a real respect for it as well as a sense of joy in doing it. The subjects the students’ reports dealt with were wide-ranging and important in introducing various aspects of women’s work in music that we would not have dealt with otherwise. The topics included a history of women and the cello; the role of Negro women slaves in music in the 1860s; a survey of Black women
music; a look at new directions in women’s music in the last five years; and biographical studies of four women composers formerly active in America (Julia Rivé-King, Helen Hopckirk, Margaret Ruthven Lang, and Mary Howe), and studies of Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre, Clara Schumann, Teresa Carreno, Cecile Chaminade, and Ruth Crawford Seeger.

The course proved to be highly successful. It was exciting because the subject matter was almost completely new to everyone. Women having, until very recently, been virtually denied their history as musicians, everyone was starting from the same position of ignorance and was discovering something of that history for the first time together. A real sense of community developed in the class. It was astounding to all of us to learn together that women indeed by women, though one I liked less well was also by a woman). In listening to a report on Ruth Crawford Seeger, who turned from the composition of avant-garde music to the teaching of children and to collecting and arranging American folk songs after her marriage to ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, I became aware that I had adopted a male-oriented system of values in assigning a higher value to her composition of avant-garde music than to her work with children and folk music. Subsequently, I began to alter my view of her work and to give much more credit to her later musical activities, which demonstrated her concern for common people and for the music education of the young. Such a reevaluation would scarcely have taken place in a traditional music history course.

The essential task facing the instructor is to reinterpret from and adapt the available materials to a feminist historical perspective. I think it would make little sense to study women composers and their works without relating them to the problems women in music faced in different societies and times and without considering the relationship between women’s access to the musical mainstream and their compositional activities.

One problem I did not solve was how to integrate the study of women’s compositions with a feminist historical perspective. Neither a traditional analysis of a given piece of music on its own terms nor placing it alongside other compositions from its period will reveal whether women’s works as a whole or the works of particular women composers exhibit different expressive values from those of men composers. Serious work needs to be done in this area. Until it is, women’s compositions can perhaps best be studied as personal statements of particular composers and as examples of the valuable artistic products women have created in music that can speak to us and enrich us today.

In closing, I’d like to call attention to three discographies that list recordings of works by women composers. These would be useful for studying in more breadth music by twentieth-century women composers. I am also including the titles of several recordings of special interest not mentioned in the discographies. My warm thanks go to Roberta Lamb-Mossman, an auditor in the course given at Portland State University, for supplying me with information about all the recordings and discographies cited herein as well as with the titles of many other recordings too numerous to include.


Bacewitz, Grazyna, Second Sonata; and Louise Talma, Alleluia in Form of Toccata. Nancy Fierro, piano. Avant Records AV 1012.

Crawford Seeger, Ruth; Two Movements for Chamber Orchestra; Thea Musgrave, Chamber Concerto No. 2; and Joyce Mekeel, various works. Pittman; Boston Musica Viva, Delos 25405.

Dlugoszewski, Lucia. Space is a Diamond. Gerhard Schwarz, trumpet, Nonesuch H71275.


——. Night Music for Two Horns and Orchestra. Tuckwell; Chiddell; Praunitz; London Sinfonietta. Argo ZRG 702.

The course was not repeated. Jane M. Bowers now lives in New York City.