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THE WOMAN COMPOSER: CULTURE AND SOCIAL IDEOLOGIES BEHIND HER
SUCCESS IN MUSIC COMPOSITION

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Music is an art that has been enjoyed since almost the beginning of time. This art has carried many traditions and ideologies with it that are still prevalent today. One such idea that began early on and is still an attitude that must be fought in today's musical culture, is that women are unable to be quality composers. For as long as music has been composed, men have dominated in writing and performing their own works. It is men who are well known in almost all societies as the musicians and composers. It is men who have made a living from their musical creativity. And it is men who have the most famous musical compositions ever created. There have been women who have made their mark on composition history, but very few. The lack of women composers throughout history is a subject that has interested many music historians. There are reasons behind this issue and many hypotheses about why there is such an uneven male to female ratio among composers. This paper takes the position that throughout history, there have been significantly fewer female composers than male composers because of the cultural and social bounds that were put on women.

This paper will discuss why women did not pursue composition with more vigor, who and what was responsible for imposing biased ideas about women composers on society, and finally it will take a look at the impact that women have had on the music industry that would never have happened had they not entered the composing scene.

Before delving into specific examples of how cultural biases have influenced women against composing, the idea of a social role must first be looked at. The term social role can be defined as: "a set of behaviors that are expected of someone who holds a particular status."¹ The social role of women and the expectations of those roles have seen a gradual change over time

1. Erin Long-Crowell, "Social Roles: Definition and Types of Social Roles" *Education Portal*, (accessed, October 21, 2014); <http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/social-roles-definition-and-types-of-social-roles.html#lesson>.

but the general assumption of women is that they are to be first and foremost homemakers, mothers and wives. This idea dominated societies all the way up until the nineteenth century when women began to fight for their rights and redefine the social role that was required of them. This means that all music leading up to that point was tainted by the idea that women were not able to compose because that was a job for men. As a homemaker the woman did not need to take the role of the bread winner of the family and therefore did not have any economic reason for pursuing a composition career. And although women have and always will be inclined to music just as greatly as men, if they have other things to occupy their time such as taking care of children, making food, running errands, and other household chores, this leaves no time for their own musical exploration. Jill Halstead stated in her book, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gender Politics of Musical Composition*:

Women who wish to have a family life and fulfil their potential usually find themselves in a position of having to combine their roles of wife, mother and worker. Coping with domestic responsibilities makes competing for career opportunities, gaining experience and developing at the same rate as a male very difficult. This applies to female musicians and composers as it does to every other occupation. It is perhaps above all this kind of imbalance which can still handicap a woman who wants to make a professional career in which she competes directly with men.²

Balance in a person's life has and always will be a challenge. For the woman, it is especially difficult because of the variety of activities and duties that she is trying to juggle as wife and mother. Composing music alongside these obligations is not impossible; it is simple much less probable. This is why we hear of very few female composers who were also devoted wives and mothers. A historical application of this concept can be found in the lives of the first five women composers that historians are aware of who made a name for themselves: Sappho, Xosroviduxt, Sahakdukht, Kassia and Hildegard of Bingen. All five of these women were

2. Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gender Politics of Musical Composition* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997), 70.

successful because they had the same thing in common; few distractions and quality time to compose.

Sappho was a Greek lyrist around 600 BC who put her poems to the accompaniment of a lyre. She was known throughout Greece as being a wonderful poet and composer. “Her wealth afforded her with the opportunity to live her life as she chose, and she chose to spend it studying the arts on the isle of Lesbos.”³ It was because of her wealth that she was able to take time away from the normal lifestyle of a woman of her time to devote to writing composing. Xosroviduxt and Sahakdukht were both Armenian composers. Xosroviduxt was both a “hymnographer and poet. Following the abduction of her brother by Muslim Arabs, Xosroviduxt, who was of royal blood, was taken to the fortress of Ani-Kamakh (now Kemah), where she lived in isolation for twenty years. She is reported to have written the šarakan (canonical hymn), ‘Zarmanali ē inj’ (‘Wondrous it is to me’), which honors the memory of her brother.”⁴ Xosroviduxt was able to compose her music because of the time she spent in isolation. Similarly tragedy threw Sahakdukht into composing. She was known for being a musician, healer, and a music therapist.

Her brother... was tragically assassinated and after his death, Sahakdukht fell into a deep grief and retired in a cave in the valley of Garni, district of Syunik. Hidden behind a curtain, Sahakdukht played her lyre to heal people suffering from melancholia and nervousness. It was the start of music therapy. She became so famous, that after her death, people continued visiting her grave for pilgrimage.⁵

Those three different women had a low family and social obligation level which gave all of them the time they needed to compose their music.

3. Alix North, “Sappho circa 630 B.C.” *Isles of Lesbos* (2007);
<http://www.sappho.com/poetry/sappho.html>

4. Şahan Arzruni, “Xosroviduxt, hymnographer, poet” *Oxford Music Online* (2006);
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/2022362>

5. “Sahakdukht (8th century)” *Armenian Women* (2012);
<https://armenianwomen.wordpress.com/2012/03/21/sahaktukht-8th-century-4-2/>

These last two women; Kassia and Hildegard of Bingen, shared a lot in common. Kassia was a composer who lived in first century Greece. She chose not to get married but entered the monastic lifestyle. “In 843 she was said to have founded her own monastery, named after her, on the seventh hill of Constantinople, the Xerolophos, near the Constantinian Wall. There she spent the remainder of her life as the abbess, composing music for the services in her monastery and writing her liturgical and secular verses.”⁶

Like Kassia, Hildegard of Bingen also joined the monastic lifestyle. She is one of the first well-known women composers whose music is still performed and listened to today. Her music seemed to have been forgotten for a long period of time but it has been recently rediscovered. She was not only a composer but she was also a well-known mystic, prophet and visionary, abbess, author, correspondent and a religious and secular critic. She was born in 1098 into a family of ten children. At an early age she was sent to a monastery by her family, likely because of the medical issues she had and how they affected her. This is where she grew up and developed into the woman that many came to know and respect. Hildegard began composing music in the church for the purpose of the church. Arguably the reason her music succeeded was because she was in an environment where the church didn't have much of a choice but to sing her music. She was also exempt from the normal duties of a wife and mother as she was a single woman. This allowed her time to devote to her craft. Hildegard is best known for her antiphons, responsorial pieces, sequences and hymns. Her work is still performed today and she is one of the few female composers who have made it into most of the standard repertoire for musicians to

6. Diane Touliatos-Miliotis, “Women Composers in Byzantium: Part II” *The Nest of the Hellenic Mind* (accesses November 22, 2014); <http://www.hellenicnest.com/womencomp2.html>

know and to study.⁷ Hildegard stands as an amazing role model in the women's composition world as proof of the female's musical abilities.

These five women were the women who paved the way for future female composers. However, their situation in life was very different than the average housewife, which helped them to obtain a higher level of success. Nevertheless, their compositions proved that women were in fact capable of creating tasteful and quality music.

Although these women were successful, they did not gain their success easily. They still had to fight many social and cultural expectations. Gender role expectations have seemed to carry throughout society since the beginning of time. One such expectation is that women and men have different callings in life. Carl E. Seashore, a psychologist who specializes in music psychology said:

Woman's fundamental urge is to be beautiful, loved and adored as a person; man's urge is to provide and achieve in a career. There are exceptions; but, from these two axioms arise the countless forms of differential selection in the choice and pursuit of a goal for life.⁸

This idea that women are to merely be beautiful and loved has manifested itself in many different ways. A big issue with this idea is that it leads to a poor view of women themselves. "Women's History in America", a website dedicated to following women's rights states:

Since early times women have been uniquely viewed as a creative source of human life. Historically, however, they have been considered not only intellectually inferior to men but also a major source of temptation and evil. In Greek mythology, for example, it was a woman, Pandora, who opened the forbidden box and brought plagues and unhappiness to mankind. Early Roman law described women as children, forever inferior to men.

7. "Hildegard of Bingen: Visionary, Composer, Writer," *Womenshistory.about.com* (accessed November 4, 2014); <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/hildegardbingen/a/hildegard.htm>

8. Carl E Seashore, "The Psychology of Music. XV. Why No Great Women Composers" *Music Educators Journal* (1940); p.88 <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.cedarville.edu/stable/3385588>.

This poor view of women is in part, responsible for the oppression they have felt in society.

When a person has feelings of oppression, it is difficult for her to perform under that oppression.

Early women were thought of as low and disposable. They were not given the same rights and privileges that they are given today. They took their place in society as mother and wife because that is what was expected of them and that is what they needed to do in order to please the general population. This is not to say that these women did not enjoy their roles as wives and mothers, it is just that if a women desired to go in a different direction, society did not often give her that option.

Although men and women both have the same opportunity to choose music composition, the pressure society has put on the women's role as homemaker causes her to more often than not decide against composing. An outcome of women staying at home with their children is their inability to attend school or participate in an apprenticeship. Education is a very important part in one's ability to compose an exceptional work. If we take a look back through history, we see very few women who have obtained an education, much less a university or conservatory level education. Edith Borroff wrote that during the Medieval period "In Italy and Germany patterns were now set for three centuries of restrictive education for women. In Europe as a whole, creative musicianship for women would depend upon three factors: monastic life, birth into a family of professional musicians active in the apprenticeship system, and nobility of birth (which meant good private tutoring)."⁹ Composing music takes skill and this skill is often nurtured through education. It was not until the nineteenth century that women even began to have access to a higher education. The National Women's History Museum online page states: "Until recently, women have largely been excluded from the educational system. It may surprise you to

9. Edith Borroff, "Women Composers: Reminiscence and History." *College Music Symposium* 15 (1975); 29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40375087>

know that while Harvard opened in 1636, the first college to admit women did not do so for another 200 years.”¹⁰ Men who composed often attended schools that taught specifically in the area of music to broaden their musical abilities. An example of such a school would be the Saint Martial School, which was an important school of composition at the Abbey of Saint Martial, Limoges. Schools like this were an important precursor to the later, more well-known, Notre-Dame school. Men like Vivaldi, Rameau, Monteverdi and Schütz all participated in some kind of private music teaching, whether it was through an apprenticeship, school, or private tutoring, to become masters at their art. The women who did compose did so with little to no educational background. Composing a quality piece is a very hard task to accomplish, much less with no guidance.

Perhaps the greatest argument as to the small number of female composers is that women have not been given the same opportunities as men. Consider what Edith Brower says about the missed opportunity for the woman composer:

No, women have not produced great music, not even remarkably good music. What is the reason? When it is asked, in regard to other matters, why women have accomplished so little, the question is promptly answered by stating that they have not been given the opportunity, or that opportunity has not as yet been theirs long enough to show their full capabilities.¹¹

This gives a very interesting perspective on this issue of women composers. Brower points out that in the past women were not given opportunities to compose; however, this is no longer the case, which is why in recent history we have seen a greater rise in women composers.

10. National Women’s History Museum, “The history of women and education” (accessed November 22, 2014);

<https://www.nwhm.org/html/exhibits/education/introduction.html>

11. Edith Brower, “Is the Musical Idea Masculine?” *The Atlantic Monthly* (1894); <http://www.unz.org/Pub/AtlanticMonthly-1894mar-00332>.

In order to get to the top of any field there is a lot of hard work. Sometimes a person will have to work extensive hours, almost to the point of obsession in order to gain a better position in their desired field. This is where women have fallen short. Women, simply put, have not been given the same opportunity as men have been given to devote such focused time on something like composing music. Women were not only limited by their lack of time to compose, but they were also lacking in proper opportunities to have their music performed. Music is not composed to never be played. Music is always composed for a purpose and often already has performers lined up waiting for the piece. Therefore, even if women had a desire to compose music, it would likely have been greatly dissuaded by their lack of proper ensembles to create compositions for. Mary F. McVicker commented on this issue saying:

Many, perhaps most, women wrote small pieces for small ensembles, which has often been a subject of criticism or has been cited as “proof” that they couldn’t write larger forms of music. But those small, limited venues were all they had available. Their lack of access to working with an orchestra and hearing their orchestral music played confines many women to producing works for solo instruments or small ensembles.¹²

The music world was and still is all about connections. Women have not had the luxury of making those connections because of their other social duties. It is impossible to rehearse an empty chair or to write music for one. Women did find other outlets to be involved in music; however, they still performed under great limitations. Carol Neuls-Bates, in her book, “Women in Music” points out:

Women’s work in composition in the past was directly related to the restrictions placed on them as singers and instrumentalists, for it must be remembered that until the nineteenth century the roles of composer and performer were totally intertwined... Typically these women wrote the kinds of music that fit in into their professional situations, which were more limits than men’s. They did compose large works but not in the same proportions as men, simply because they did not hold the prestigious positions that offered optimum opportunities for performance as well as crucial on the job

12. Mary F. McVicker, *Women Composers of Classical Music* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 2.

training.¹³

Carol Neuls-Bates makes a good observation that on the job training is extremely important to the success of any person in her desired occupation. One cannot simply be thrown into something and be expected to do well if she has not had the needed experience. For example, athletes take a very long time to get to get to the professional level in their sport. When they were in high school they may have been pretty good, but thrown into a game with professionals they would not do well. However, if they take the appropriate measures to participate in the activities, teams, lessons, and specialized training, over time they will develop into a very skilled player. This is the same concept behind any composer and her work. John Hayes, a cognitive psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon University conducted a study that examined successful composers and how they got to where they were.

He analyzed thousands of musical pieces produced between the years of 1685 to 1900.... Eventually, Hayes developed a list of 500 pieces that were played frequently by symphonies around the world and were considered to be the “masterworks” in the field.... What he discovered was that virtually every single “masterwork” was written after year ten of the composer’s career. Not a single person produced incredible work without putting in a decade of practice first. Even a genius like Mozart had to work for at least ten years before he produced something that became popular.¹⁴

Simply put, composing takes an extremely long time to do. Not only do you need the background skills, but training and experience are also vital to success. This success was hard to come by for women. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick state in their book *Women Making Music*:

Women composers were not leaders in style change, in part, at least, because they were excluded from the professional positions that engendered new developments. They came

13. Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music. Revised Edition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), xiv.

14. James Clear, “Lessons on Success and Deliberate Practice from Mozart, Picasso, and Kobe Bryant” *jamesclear.com* (accesses November, 2014); <http://jamesclear.com/deliberate-practice>

late to new forms and genres; their ability to compose in the “higher forms” (orchestral music and opera), for example, were questioned.¹⁵

Men on the other hand were the ones who were responsible for style changes and establishing the characteristics of genres. This was because:

Men possess the vast majority of jobs in music (conductor, artistic administrator, university composition faculty member, award and fellowship committee member); statistically speaking, bosses tend to promote employees who are more like them; gender roles are still the victim of obsolete, if ingrained, trends and messaging in mass culture.¹⁶

It is hard to change something that has been ingrained into our cultures since the beginning of music composition. Women who have composed music and have gotten it published have had the strength to overcome these gender biases and have therefore obtained a great feat. All of these factors lead us to conclude that a major contributing cause behind the lack of women composers is due to minimal opportunities for women. This is obviously not the only reason why there are significantly fewer women composers than men, but it is certainly a factor to consider.

Another added disadvantage for women composers is that composing takes a lot of money, which is something not many women had. The money went to paying the performers and to actually getting the piece printed and published. Sooner or later the composer would start seeing compensation from performances of their pieces, but it took a little while to establish a position in the music realm where that was a common enough occurrence to finance further compositions. Women had a very hard time getting their name out and so could not support a desire to compose music. As history has progressed women become more independent and have been able to bring in money for their compositions; however, finding an ensemble to perform their music still proves to be a challenge. Over time women have become less overlooked

15. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, *Women Making Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3-4.

16. Alex Ambrose, “How to talk to a female composer” *WQXR’s online station* (2014); <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/how-to-talk-female-composer/>

because of political forces encouraging feminist acts and the equality movements which have in turn, caused an increase in female composers.

In the midst of all this talk of how women were overlooked and have not had much opportunity to compose music, it may come as a surprise to know that women were actually quite involved in the music world. If they were not writing great compositions than what exactly was their role? Karin Pendle points out that “Women played many roles in music: amateur and professional singers, dancers, and instrumentalists, composers; benefactors; educators; and copyists... Music making by women was woven into the fabric of life.”¹⁷ Obviously women had a large part in society when it came to performing the music itself so why does there seem to be a disconnection between performing and composing? It is not that women are incapable of composing quality music; in fact many would argue that music seems to be more of a feminine activity than a masculine; rather, it seems that there are significantly fewer compositions published by women, therefore their music often gets overlooked. Carol Neuls-Bates says:

Because of male domination in the composition field and the age-old association of musical creativity with masculinity, naturally some women composers in the past – particularly the earliest known women – were hesitant about advancing their work. Madalena Casulana, for instance, in the mid-sixteenth century and Barbara Strozzi in the mid-seventeenth century both wrote in the dedications of their earliest publications about the humility they felt as women.¹⁸

It is unfortunate that there were women who did not desire to advance their work because of this male domination.

In 1786 a composer by the name of Corona Schröter wrote in her diary:

I have had to overcome much hesitation before I seriously made the decision to publish a collection of short poems that I have provided with melodies. A certain feeling towards

17. Karin Pendle, *Women and Music. 2nd ed.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991), 27.

18. Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music. Revised Edition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press. 1996), xiv.

propriety and morality is stamped upon our sex, which does not allow us to appear alone in public, and without an escort: Thus, how can I otherwise present this, my musical work to the public, than with timidity? For the complimentary opinions and the encouragement of a few persons...can easily be biased out of pity.¹⁹

This is coming from a woman who is living at a much later time than many of the women who faced even greater oppression for their compositions. Even the well-known female composer Clara Schumann echoes Schröter nearly a hundred years later. She writes in her diary: “I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to? It would be arrogance, though indeed, my father led me into it in earlier days.”²⁰ Based on those few examples of women who actually had their music published, we can see an overwhelming sense that even successful female composers felt their music was unwanted. Hans Van Bülow, a German conductor, virtuoso pianist, and composer of the Romantic era held this view. He stated “Reproductive genius can be admitted to the pretty sex, but productive genius unconditionally cannot.... There will never be a woman composer, at best a misprinting copyist.... I do not believe in the feminine form of the word "creator.”²¹

What would have happened if all women had succumbed to the opinions of men like Hans Van Bülow or society’s pressure on them to simply be homemakers and not further their desire for the arts? What music would be missing from our repertoire today if women had not composed? The music industry as we know it would look very different today because of the numerous works created by women that have forever changed our music.

19. Marcia J. Citron, “Corona Schröter: Singer, Composer, Actress,” *Music and Letters*, Vol. 61 No. 1 (January, 1980); 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/733474>

20. Grace E. Hadow, *Clara Schumann: An Artist’s Life Based on Material Found in Diaries and Letters*. Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1913), 241-244.

21. Pamela Susskind, *Introduction to the score, Clara Wieck Schumann, Selected Piano Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1979), vii.

“If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make any sound? If women composers wrote beautiful music throughout history, but were ignored or suppressed by society, did they exist?”²² This is a quote from an article about women composers written by Sue Fay Allen and Kathleen Keenan-Takagi that expresses the need to notice music written by women. This is a wonderful quote that really gives perspective on how women have been greatly overlooked in the music composing scene throughout history. Perhaps there were many more female composers; however, very few compositions by women have survived, therefore we have no proof of their existence.

Women from all over the world have overcome many difficult circumstances and prejudices to get to where they are today. Music specifically is an area where they are still trying to be seen as equals with men, and they have made immense progress. The times are changing and the music world is changing with it. What early women faced in the music world has led to the success of many proceeding women’s compositions. Women like American composer, Amy Beach, may not have been able to spend about twenty-five years of their life devoted to composing, and then see such extreme success as she did.²³ As with any new development in history, it takes time to establish itself. This has definitely been the case with the development of the women’s role in composition. Societies and cultures throughout the world, since the beginning of music composition have caused there to be fewer women composers than man. As time has progressed and those barriers broken down, there has been an increase of women publishing their music. Women composers have faced cultural and social oppression, and they

22. Sue Fay Allen and Kathleen Keenan-Takagi, “Sing the Songs of Women Composers” *Music Educators Journal* (1992); <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.cedarville.edu/stable/3398360>.

23. “Enjoyment of Music – Amy Beach” *vivokeys.com* (accessed November 26, 2014); <http://vivokeys.com/enjoyment-of-music-amy-beach/>

have triumphed. It was not an easy journey but it was one worth taking. And it is one still being walked today.

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