

The Recognition of Female Composers

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"I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose — there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one? To believe that would be arrogant..." - Clara Wieck Schumann

As the world of music enters the twenty-first century with nary a title to define itself, the heads of many turn to look upon the "progress" music has made, especially in the last one hundred years. Music has shed its wear of tonality and structure in return for a new wardrobe, where nothing is sacred and nothing is familiar. The question has ultimately shifted from "What has changed?" to "What *hasn't* changed?" Upon exploring these changes and music's alleged "progress," an ardent student of music and history has no choice but to stumble upon the subject of women composers and their place in history. It is a subject that contains a wealth of lesser-known facts and a vast spectrum of opinion and controversy, not the least of which is the lack of recognition of women composers that has existed throughout history. Throughout this essay, I will focus on nineteenth century European female composers, the status that women have held in music over time, and the lack of recognition that women composers, particularly those from the nineteenth century, receive (or do not receive) in the United States; from this I will draw conclusions as to what is responsible for this lack of recognition.

It is impossible to attribute a single cause to the widespread ignorance of female composers of the nineteenth century, just as it is impossible to attribute only one factor to the hindrance of these women's success in their lifetimes. The relative unsuccessfulness of nineteenth century women composers in their time was the result of numerous factors, including social constraints and tight chains forged by the hands of fellow musicians and composers, whose eyes could not see as far as their ears could hear. In the same way, the current widespread ignorance is the result of numerous factors, including the conditions for women composers in the nineteenth century and the attitudes of those inside and outside the music world since then. Today's lack of recognition cannot be understood without having some insight into the conditions that female composers experienced in the nineteenth century.

In this project I intend first, to provide the facts surrounding the lack of recognition given to nineteenth century European female composers today; second, to shed light upon the hindrances that these women composers faced in their times, and third, to draw conclusions as to why there is still a widespread ignorance about these composers today. My conclusions will show that there are several reasons for this ignorance, including the consequences of the lack of recognition female composers received in the nineteenth century, the perceptions that have developed over time that stereotype composers as white males, and the theoretical tendencies that music itself and individual pieces of music have acquired throughout history.

Present Day Recognition of Women Composers

It is an unfortunate truth that the history of music is almost always perceived as moving "from one 'great man' to the next," but it is certainly more disturbing that music's history is almost always presented as moving "from one 'great man' to the next" (Jezic 459). With titles such as *Beethoven and the Boyz*, *Man and Music*, and *The Music of Man*, most reference books offer an image of a "classical" music world that is completely devoid of women. Here in the United States, the chance of running across a person, musician or not, who can name a female composer is far less likely than the chance of running across someone who can name a male composer. Names like Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach are certainly common to many, but how about names like Clara Schumann, Fanny Hensel, Ethyl Smyth, or Louise Reichardt? The truth is that even many musicians are unfamiliar with these names and the name of every other female composer. Simple observation can attest to this fact, but it is also evident in the scant mention of women in reference

books and even in music textbooks, from which students of all ages derive knowledge that they are likely to carry with them their entire lives.

An evaluation of the representation of female composers in music appreciation and music history textbooks published between 1979 and 1985 reveals many startling facts, especially when taking into account the fact that music appreciation textbooks are often the only texts in college curricula used for the education of non-music oriented students, while music history textbooks are the primary texts used for the education of music majors. Of all the music appreciation textbooks published in this time period, twenty-eight percent mention no women composers, more than fifty percent mention either one or none, and only five books mention three or more female composers. Of all the music history textbooks, roughly twenty-five percent mention no women composers, forty-five percent mention either one or none, and only eighteen mention three or more women composers. Out of the five texts written in the US, two mention six, two mention four, and one mentions none; and of all the music appreciation textbooks, two nineteenth century female composers are mentioned a total of one time (Fanny Hensel and Ethyl Smith) and one is mentioned a total of three times (Clara Schumann) (Jezic 447- 465).

These statistics represent both the lack of recognition that female composers are receiving and a dangerous catalyst for further ignorance and stereotyping that will only prolong the mistaken image that the past consisted of only male creative minds. It is a common misconception that there were no women composers, and these texts only further this presumption for another generation of listeners and musicians, who may, in turn, educate the following generations with the same neglect of women composers that they were exposed to themselves. It is evident that a lack of recognition of nineteenth century European female composers still exists, and it is obvious that a widespread ignorance of the subject ensues.

A History of Women in Music

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the role of women in the world began taking a positive shift, primarily due to certain political and social changes in Europe and, more importantly, due to the emergence of the piano-forte (the piano) and the vast repertoire of literature that ensued. Contrasting views of women's place in society, brought about by such minds as Montesquieu, Condorcet, and Rousseau, granted women the "permission" that they had never had to show that they could do more than just housework. Many families would have their young daughters trained to be musicians, so that guests could be entertained at family gatherings, and this step forward opened the door to an entire world that had previously been off limits to the vast majority of women (Citron 224).

The piano, which made its debut in 1750, served as the most important factor in the development of women as musicians and composers. With almost unlimited capabilities regarding dynamics, action, and style, the piano quickly became the most popular instrument throughout Europe, purchased by almost every family that could afford it (Ripin 682). The piano's versatility and unparalleled ability to stand alone made it the ideal instrument for women to play, and just as family pianos were being purchased at a rapid rate, parents began seeking piano teachers for their children. A young girl could entertain family guests with grace and sophistication, maintaining her stature as both a developing woman and a musician (Reich "European..." 159). However, most musicians did not realize that the piano's versatile nature and rapidly growing repertoire would be one of the greatest mediums for women to try their hand at composition.

The development of the piano coincided with the emergence of a new genre (not completely new, but for the first time almost considered a true genre) called *Lieder*. The *Lied* was a highly popular form of German art song, involving the piano and a solo voice, or pop song in today's terms, which attracted many who desired a divergence from the popular music of the times, namely Classical music. The Classical Period, which lasted from 1750 to 1820, is categorized by its catchy melodies that were often based on folk tunes. The music was very straightforward and usually took the form of either orchestral symphonies, choral masses, sonatas for solo instrument, concertos for a solo instrument and orchestra, or operas. The

Lied was one of the first steps in a divergence from the Classical style in favor of a style of music that would label most of the nineteenth century as the Romantic Period, characterized (as the name suggests) by much more passionate music that was not as firmly based on melodious content (Citron 232).

At this point, the distinct emergence of women in the field of composition can be seen. With the assistance of the piano's virtuosity and seeds of social change, a fair number of *Lieder* that were written by women appeared. Names such as Corona Schroter, Maria Theresia Paradis, and Louise Reichardt emerged from the darkness in the eighteenth century, paving the way for the likes of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Josephine Lang, and Clara Wieck Schumann (Citron 224). Though *Lieder* became the primary output for women composers in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, some composers dared to enter "no woman's land" by writing in the popular forms of the day, those which are considered "real" music. Clara Wieck Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel are the most notable of those who produced music outside *Lieder*, composing in several genres throughout their lifetimes, including piano music, chamber music, and eventually some orchestral music (Citron 225).

These and several other women did emerge into a field that had before been almost completely male, composing music (also performing that music, a different tale altogether) and having some of their compositions published; however, female composers still had deterrents that kept them from achieving everything that their potential suggested. Many of these obstacles were social, dealing with the role of women in society and the jobs they were expected to perform. Despite the changes that were beginning to take place, the expectation of a woman in society was, basically, to please her man in all aspects of life. Rousseau writes,

The education of women should always be relative to men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young and to take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable—these are the duties of women at all times and what they should be taught in their infancy. (qtd. in Citron 225)

Women's job, in almost every instance, was the upkeep of the home: both the house itself and the children. A woman often managed the family while her husband was at work, taught the children, kept the house in good shape, and had to have dinner ready when the man got home from work. A working woman was often seen as "unladylike" and thus heavily criticized by both sexes; in fact, a married woman who worked was not just seen as "unladylike," but also negligent, a bad mother, a bad wife, and that view probably reflected quite negatively on her household. Needless to say, few women could overcome these social constraints and gain success within the society that implemented these attitudes. Female composers who did manage to gather the courage to try their hand at composition were often stopped by their desire to have a family as well. Unknowingly following in the footsteps of many women before, those dedicated to both home and music would fall victim to the duties of raising a family, and, even if they did compose music, they were unable to become known because they had no time to perform their works to the public outside of their homes.

Even if a woman did manage to gain the courage to work outside of the home and defy her limiting role in the household (which most women could only do by remaining single their whole lives), and if she then attempted to compose, she would also face the obstacle of becoming accepted, or even noticed, in the world of music. The most powerful people in the world of music in the nineteenth century were male composers, musicians, critics, and theologians; most of whom were under the influence of the male dominant social practices that had existed for so long. Some composers and critics disliked the idea of women entering the field of composition, but many others based their skepticism upon their impressions of the works that some women composed. A great many men saw the women's music as lacking either genius, soul, or inspiration, eventually drawing a line between MUSIC and "women's music" (McClary 19). Whether or not many of these musicians' critiques were influenced (even subconsciously) by presumptive opinions due to the social status of women up until that time will never be known, but it can surely be

assumed that it played a role in the disregard of music by most female composers. Even in the Romantic Period, many leading composers and critics criticized music for being too “feminine,” and the works of women were almost always placed in that category.

The struggles that nineteenth century European female composers faced can be best illustrated through direct examples of the true stories of some of those women composers. Each composer has a different story, but three are worth examining in detail because they are quite different from one another in lifestyle, in music status, and in what prevented their success as composers both then and now. These three composers are Louise Reichardt, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, and Clara Wieck Schumann.

Louise Reichardt (1779-1826) was born in Germany and raised in a very musical home, having a mother who died young but who was a renowned keyboard player and a bit of a composer, and a father who was concertmaster and composer in the court of Frederick the Great. The influence of her family and the instruction given to her by family and family friends molded her into a talented vocalist and vocal teacher. After the Napoleonic invasion of Germany, Reichardt’s father lost his position in the court, and the family was thrust into financial peril. In 1809 Louise Reichardt moved to Hamburg and began her own vocal studio. She remained single her entire life, thereby eliminating many responsibilities that she would otherwise have held in a household with a husband and children. By her jobs as an instructor and by the *Lieder* compositions she wrote, particularly for her students, she was able to support herself and help her family back home (Reich “European...” 152).

Her *Lieder* were praised for their tunefulness and simplicity, and her modest demeanor allowed her to gain publication without seeming a threat to the population of male musicians. Her access to many vocalists and her popular status in the community gave Louise Reichardt the opportunity to premier her works, all of which used texts by some of the leading German poets of the day, most of whom she knew personally. She published hundreds of *Lieder* in her lifetime, but she was often judged in relation to other women composers of her time. She never ventured outside of the category of *Lieder*, and thus she was not hindered by many of the obstacles that many of the other female composers during that time had to face (Citron 234). Her primary profession was as a vocal instructor, and she never acknowledged her accomplishments as a composer or musician (Reich “European...” 153).

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847) was fortunate enough to be born into a wealthy Berlin family, paving the road for her and her siblings to be trained by the best instructors in Berlin. She is best known as the talented older sister of the famous Felix Mendelssohn, a very accomplished composer of the Romantic Period. From the very beginning, Fanny fell victim to the double standard, being given almost identical training to that given to her brother but being forbidden to perform publicly for money or seek publication for her music. Her father and brother both ardently believed that the music profession had no place for women, and that instead, she should stay at home tending to her home and child and enjoying music as merely a hobby. Fanny composed regardless, and her first compositions were published under her brother’s name in a few of his collections. She composed an impressive number of *Lieder* in her lifetime (close to three hundred songs), several works for piano, organ music, choral music, and an overture for orchestra (Reich “European...” 154-155).

Respecting the wishes of her brother and father, Fanny Hensel used to premier her works at Sunday musicales that she hosted in her home with the support of her mother and her husband, Wilhelm Hensel. In 1846 she mustered the courage to defy her father and Felix and accepted an offer given by a publishing company to publish a number of her works. Hearing of this through his mother, Felix responds in a letter reading:

If she does resolve to publish anything, I will do all in my power to obtain every facility for her, and to relieve her, so far as I can, from all trouble that can possibly be spared her. But to *persuade* her to publish anything I cannot, because this is contrary to my views and to my convictions... She is too much all that a woman ought to be for this. She regulates her house and thinks neither of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music at all, until her first duties are fulfilled. Publishing would only disturb her in these, and I cannot say I approve of it. (*Composers on Music* 87)

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel chose to respect the beliefs that her brother and father shared with the great majority of musicians during the nineteenth century because of the love she had for her family. Her family, though holding her back from the recognition she might have had, did so with her, as a woman, in mind. They never questioned that her natural place was in the home and refused to support her desires to be a professional composer. She published less than a year before she died, and the rest of her works remained in her family for several generations before they were published (Reich "European..." 154).

Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) is often considered the most notable female composer of the nineteenth century. She was taught piano by her father Friedrich Wieck, who was extremely possessive of her throughout her young life, constantly pushing her to make her successful. She became most famous for her skill at the piano, actually premiering many of the piano works of Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin and Robert Schumann (her husband), and standing among the first to play without music; but at a young age she also began experimenting with composition, often programming a few of her songs or an improvisation at her recitals. However, the time required by being a touring pianist left little opportunity for developing her composition skills. A publishing company wrote to her father once asking for new music from Clara to publish; he responded, "There were only two hours when she had time to compose — between nine and eleven in the evening. All her other time was committed" (Reich "Clara." 250).

Clara Wieck had the fortune and misfortune of meeting and falling in love with Robert Schumann, who would become one of the leading composers of the nineteenth century. The two married just before she turned twenty-one, blatantly defying her possessive (and quite selfish) father's orders. Robert and Clara's marriage was a difficult one: Robert constantly needed to be home for composing, while Clara needed to tour and perform, leaving little time for the duties of home and family. With children, a household to take care of, and a "high maintenance" husband who had difficulty composing while she was away, Clara had a great deal of difficulty continuing as a performing artist. Robert encouraged her as a performer but also wanted her home to tend to the house and take care of their seven children; however, Clara was a dedicated performer, unique among the women musicians of her time in that she considered herself an artist first and a mother second (Reich "Clara..." 275).

As a composer, she had little time to develop truly and even less time to compose, but she was constantly encouraged by Robert up until his death (after a two year stay at a psychiatric hospital, the result of a suicide attempt). Being in the constant presence of one of the greatest male composers of the nineteenth century, however, made her uneasy about composing. Even though she gained pleasure from her compositions, she still presented them to her husband and others with humility, never having confidence in her talents. She seems to have felt that her role was that of an interpreter, probably taking refuge in the conventions that women should not be composers. She writes in her diary in 1839: "I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose — there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one? To believe that would be arrogant" (Reich "Clara..." 267).

These three women composers and many others from this period as well were raised in musical households, and thus became surrounded by music and musicians their entire lives. Women in this situation were often the only ones able to truly learn the ropes of music and the music business; there are very few who reached any level of fame who did not have the advantage of being surrounded by musical people. While this situation acted as a catalyst for musical growth, it also served as the final chains that held the brightest female composers down. These women were under the constant influence of the male music critics, and were thus developed certain self-esteem problems in both public and private life. Also, perhaps the most stifling aspect of this situation was that these women whose merit entitled them to more recognition in their day were immediately destined to end up in the shadows of the male composers who surrounded them (Scott 53).

Reasons for the Lack of Recognition Today

It is impossible to attribute only one factor to the lack of recognition that the composers above have received in the twenty-first century; therefore, I will attempt to cover those areas that seem to provide the best explanation for this general neglect of nineteenth century European female composers. These areas include first, the consequences of the lack of recognition female composers received in the nineteenth century as explained in the previous section, second, the tendencies that music itself has acquired throughout history, and third, the perceptions that have developed over time to stereotype composers as white males. These three areas interact together to create the condition of ignorance that exists today toward these women composers.

The first area, namely that of the hardships women composers experienced in their time, has already been discussed in the previous section. These hardships include social constraints, prejudice from the music community (primarily as a result of years of social constraints), and the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the women who did manage to gain an adequate music education (namely, being overshadowed by the men that surrounded them). As a result of these hindrances in their time, their music was seldom performed and quickly forgotten, leaving little chance for the circulation of their compositions. Though these hardships have become less onerous to female composers over time, the effects of a history without representation have made it difficult for many women to make names for themselves and for most of the compositions of nineteenth century women to spark interest in today's society.

The second area covers a fascinating hypothesis involving the theoretical aspects of music itself and the effects that it has on gender issues in the music community. Susan McClary offers perhaps the most insightful look into the subject in her book *Feminine Endings*. McClary covers several topics, including gender-related aspects of both traditional music theory and musical narrative (7).

Music theory, the fundamental building blocks of musical compositions, contains several gender-related connotations. The most dangerous example lies in the definitions of masculine cadences and feminine cadences, where a masculine cadence is a phrase whose last chord is on a strong beat, and a feminine cadence is a phrase whose last chord is on a weak beat. Other examples can be seen in the perceptions of various aspects of music theory by numerous musicians, composers, and theorists throughout history. For example, an interesting description of major and minor triads is given by eighteenth century theorist, Georg Andreas Sorge:

Just as in this universe there has always been created a creature more splendid and perfect than the others of God, we observe exactly this also in musical harmony. Thus, we

find after the major triad another, the minor triad, which is indeed not as complete as the first, but also lovely and pleasant to hear. The first can be likened to the male, the second to the female sex. And just as it was not good that the man (Adam) was alone, thus it was not good that we had no other harmony than the major triad; for how far would we come in a progression from one chord to another? and just as the womanly sex without man would be quite bad, thus with music it would be in a bad way if we had no other harmony than that which the minor triad gives. We could not once make an authentic cadence. (qtd. in McClary 11)

Gender-related perceptions of musical narratives also play a large role in the theoretical chains that have thwarted women composers throughout history. McClary explores the sexuality of music and what connotations certain musical forms have regarding gender (13). One of the most obvious is the sonata-allegro form, which contains two themes, the first of which is usually strong and energetic, while the second is usually tender and flexible. The first is often considered to be masculine, while the second is often thought of as feminine. The sonata-allegro form consists of the first theme being played, then the second, then a recapitulation of the first theme. Here the question then arises about what the listener is being invited to desire — the first, most masculine theme (McClary 13).

This perception of music itself, shared by many musicians and composers from the nineteenth century up to now, has had detrimental effects on the view of women, especially concerning the ability of women to compose music. Though the effects are less obvious now than in previous centuries, they still affect a number of musicians and composers throughout the world. In the nineteenth century the negative views of “feminine music” were a predominant force that kept many women from achieving success as composers. Now these attitudes act as a much more subtle force, lurking in the minds of many musicians and composers, maintaining the gap between “women’s music” and MUSIC.

The third area, dealing with the perceptions that have developed over time and that stereotype composers as white males, is an ongoing situation that has neither beginning nor end but can be pinpointed in many aspects of culture throughout history. It would not be incorrect to attribute the stereotyping to the hardships that women composers have faced and to the lack of recognition that they received in their lifetimes, but the continued neglect of the entire gender is the primary cause for this predominant stereotype.

The textbooks (discussed earlier) that fail to cover the topic of women composers are certainly a factor that perpetuates the stereotype that all composers were (and are) males. The absence of women in the texts often results in the lack of classroom coverage so that this phenomenon continues the cycle of ignorance both outside the music community, and more dangerously, inside the music community. In addition, many reference books that can be found in local bookstores and libraries contain titles such as *Beethoven and the Boyz* and *Man and Music*. With even the titles of books telling readers and listeners that music is “man-made” and excludes women, it is no wonder that people today are entirely ignorant of the female gender’s contribution to the music literature (Jezic 448).

Ending the Ignorance

To end this blatant neglect of women composers, we must first realize that “the absence of women in standard music histories is not due to their absence in the musical past” (Scott 51). Some actions are being taken to reverse this cycle of ignorance by creating an awareness of the neglect of women composers in today’s society. Conferences and concerts are being held featuring the music of women

composers, and music educators are using the guidelines of the National Standards of Music Education to create opportunities for teaching about women composers (Scott 50). Surely these are the first steps towards ending this ignorance, and possibly a giant leap towards exploring the music of female composers of the nineteenth century.

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