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Master Musician: an Impregnable Taboo?

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I never thought it would come to this. If the music student I was twenty years ago could see me now, she would be horrified. 'Women composers' instead of just 'composers'? Back to that?

I grew up secure in the belief that discrimination against women in music, such as had beset my mother's generation, was a thing of the past. I began my career in a city that was called the musical capital of the world, and I was intoxicated by the diversity of opportunities, by the marvellous range of concerts. I could never have imagined for a moment the effects of the oligarchy of the 1980s.

I came to London's concert halls as a young woman and heard The Fires of London playing Gillian Whitehead, the Allegri Quartet playing Jennifer Fowler, Jane Manning singing Erika Fox, the CBSO playing a new orchestral work of mine . . . . I believed, in my naivety, that this was the beginning of the good times: that all that Elisabeth Lutyens, Priaulx Rainier, my mother Elizabeth Maconchy and the other women composers in that generation had stood for and struggled for was finally bearing fruit.

In 1973 I had an orchestral commission for the BBC Promenade Concerts; there were four commissions that year, and three went to women. (The other two were Thea Musgrave and Rainier.) In the same year I went to the United States on a Harkness Fellowship, and there I came across musicians in the Women's Movement for the first time. I was very smug when asked if anyone had yet started a Women in Music group in England. Oh yes, I said, someone had started the Society of Women Musicians in 1912, and it had just closed down with a triumphant diamond jubilee concert celebrating the achievement of its aims.

So here I am, in 1987, decked out with statistics on gender bias and ready with the jargon of affirmative action. What has happened? I'm going to try and indicate something of the changing circumstances which have led me to a radically different position. In particular, I want to get across what I feel to be positive about the act of singling out women composers.

Aspirations and statistics

I believe, though I don't really have the vocabulary to speak of it, that through the arts, and most particularly through music, we reflect not only the structure of the world as it is, but also the world as it might be. I believe, with Margaret Mead,[1] that any art is much richer, much stronger if it is practised by both sexes. If music has anything to offer this destructive, divided society of ours, won't it need to spring from both men and women, rather than continue to reflect patriarchy back at itself? A musical culture of breadth and diversity: that would seem to be a natural goal for all of us, male and female alike. The means by which we move towards it are, however, not so obvious. In Australia the Arts Council has adopted a special policy on behalf of women musicians; in the United States there are positive discrimination laws. In England such moves are regarded with great suspicion. We distrust them; we think we don't need them.

Most people believe that music transcends gender, that you can't tell if a composition is by a man or a woman. I know, however, that my music is written out of the wholeness of myself, and I happen to be a woman. I'm not bothered by whether I compose better or worse than a man, because I take both possibilities for granted; but I am interested in what I can do that is different. In my thoughts and actions there is much that is similar to those of a man, and much more that is different. Can it really be otherwise in my music? Could there be a music which did not reflect its maker? If we continue to have a musical culture which only draws on the creative talents of one sex, what kind of musical perspective shall we have?

During the spring of 1987, the BBC Singers had a series which offered us a chance to experience a more balanced perspective. In four concerts which contained eleven pieces by women and eight by men, the BBC was celebrating women's music without segregating it. How much I look forward to the time when in all concert programmes of four pieces, two are by women and two by men; in an opera season, three operas by women, three by men. Isn't it crazy that this sounds an impossible idea? It's true, it may not come in my lifetime. But it isn't crazy: I'm only describing what is just beginning to happen in the literary world, so that I can go into a bookshop and have a choice of living writers with men and women more equally represented. Readers, male and female alike, have come to recognise and value the breadth and diversity of a literary culture to which as many women contribute as men. Could music be in this position? I'd say, yes, in a hundred years' time, but only if we begin now.

Whatever way you count the number of composers working in this country, about 15% are women.[2] Since those Prom commissions in 1973, the BBC has given some 40 Prom commissions, and only one has gone to a woman (Maconchy).[3] Between 1978 and 1986, the Arts Council of Great Britain gave out £160,000 in major bursaries to composers, of which just £7,000 went to women: £5,000 to Rainier and £2,000 to Diana Burrell.[4] It also gave 72 minor bursaries, of which four went to women (Alison Bauld, Margaret Lucy Wilkins and two to Lutyens). Over the last five years, it has given 360 commissions, of which women received 22. Statistically, this means that women had 4% of major bursaries, 5% of minor bursaries and 6% of commissions. Similar statistics apply to the Arts Council's Contemporary Music Network, which between 1972 and 1986 toured works by 186 male composers and eleven female. An additional factor here is that no British women composers have been toured in the last ten years; their moment, such as it was, occured in the mid-70s. The 1986 Almeida Festival boasted '100 performances'. Were fifteen of the pieces by women? No – none. There were none in the 1987 festival either.[5] 'Music of Eight Decades' was a prestigious

new-music series on the South Bank for several years: I did not hear a single woman's composition played in it.[6]

The London Sinfonietta is Britain's leading new-music ensemble. I tried to calculate how many hours of live music I could have heard, just in London, just in its own promotions. It seemed to me that over the last ten years it would be about 250 hours, probably more. So how much time can it make for the woman composer? Certainly not the 15% figure of 37 hours. 25 hours? 15? 10? 1? Sadly, I found only fifteen minutes.[7]

These are shameful statistics. Is this what equal opportunity means in 1987? Composers develop through hearing their music played. How are women composers to develop if they are denied access to the leading professional outlets? if every substantial piece they write is ignored? or if, at best, it is played once and then dropped; at worst, refused a hearing? What a complacent, self-satisfied musical establishment we must have to allow such prejudice to flourish unchecked. Have the forces of reaction come to permeate the artistic world as well as the political one? Clearly, one of the dangers of the present conservatism is its insidiousness: people who would be the first to decry Mrs Thatcher, her divisive policies and Victorian values, haven't realised the implications of their own unthinking conformism.

Prejudice and patriachy

It seems to me that we're up against two kinds of prejudice. First, the overt discrimination of the misogynist. Second, systemic discrimination: the way the system is loaded against women. This is the stumbling block for almost everyone, because it's the nature of such discrimination that it's all around us, and we don't see it. No doubt you are genuinely sure it's a thing of the past. Our musical institutions, each aspect of the fabric of our musical life, everything that combines to create what we call musical taste: all these, in their way, reflect the fact that our society is still patriarchal. In the other arts this question has been explored again and again: by Germaine Greer on female artists, for instance;[8] or in literature, by a host of writers from Virginia Woolf onwards. Not so in the world of music, where you still have to begin by explaining what patriarchy means.

All the BBC Controllers of Music have been men. All our major orchestras are run by men. Every Professor of Music in this country is a man, as are all the Principals of our music colleges. Think of the entrepreneurs, agents and festival directors who shape concert policy; think of the conductors. Not all these people are male, but consider what proportion is. To be quite clear, I'm not accusing any individual of prejudice: this is simply a list of musical positions which wield power and a look at the gender of the people holding power.

We could also look at this the other way round. You couldn't have heard my voice on the BBC in 1986, but you could have heard it about every eight weeks on the ABC in Australia. I've worked with some six different music producers there, and they have all been women. After reading this paper in February 1987, I was contacted straightaway by four BBC producers, all women. Which professional ensemble in this country has commissioned and performed more women composers than any other (I suspect more than all the others put together)? Lontano, whose musical director is the composer Odaline de la Martinez. I think the Society for the Promotion of New Music has a better than average record as far as playing women's music goes, and I'm sure this relates to the fact that they have always had women on their executive. Indeed, in 1987 they have a female President, female chair and female administrators. Am I suggesting that everything would be fine if women were in charge? No, of course not; we can thank Margaret Thatcher for saving us from that naive idea. Power corrupts women as well as men. I'm talking about balance, about proportion.

What about critics, and books on music, since this is a crucial area in shaping taste and fashion? Not all the daily music journalism is by men; maybe 90%. But in the field of new music, when you start looking at the books available, the percentage is more like 99.

In theory, there's no reason to suppose that this will lead to prejudice against women. In practice, women do not appear in men's histories of music. A striking case to take is that of a 12th-century composer, the Abbess Hildegard van Bingen: according to Ian Bent in the *New Grove Dictionary*,[9] Hildegard was the most remarkable composer of her time. But I went through a thorough medieval musicology course at Oxford without there ever being a mention of her. I was brought up on that well-known tome *Man and his Music*: aptly named, since although its sub-title purports it to be 'The Story of Musical Experience in the West', its text includes not one single reference to a female composer. I do find it distasteful that, in such a book, the only reference to Clara Schumann should be in connection with Brahms:

> When Brahms brings strings and piano together he expresses all the dynamic power and lyrical passion of his romantic youth and of his love for Clara Schumann.[10]

I would not myself make any particular claims for Clara Schumann as a composer. I know, however, that she was one of the most gifted musicians of the 19th century, and I have a fair idea of the factors which prevented her composition from developing.

In 17th-century Italy, some twenty female composers published their works. Composers like Francesca Caccini and Barbara Strozzi were famous in their own day, their music was praised by the leading authorities, they had distinguished patrons, they earned money by their music and they appear to have been treated as equals by their male colleagues. Yet they have vanished from our tradition. For reasons at which we can only guess, male historians to this day have chosen to ignore the contribution made by women.

It is not widely known, for example, that Mendelssohn's sister Fanny Hensel composed 600 pieces, including nearly 300 songs. If you are confident that you don't know them because they aren't worth knowing, then go to Mendelssohn's own op.8 and op.9 and pick out the six songs which are by Fanny, not Felix. They were not published under her own name because of the attitude of her family. Even though he was proud of her great musical gifts, this is what her father wrote to her on her 23rd birthday:

> I will, then, tell you today, dear Fanny, that in all essential points, all that is most important, I am so much satisfied with you that I have no wish left. You are good in heart and mind. 'Good' is a small word, but it has a big meaning, and I would not apply it to everybody. However, you must still improve! You must become more steady and collected, and prepare more earnestly and eagerly for your real calling, the *only* calling of a young woman – I mean the state of a housewife.[11]

I would urge anyone with an interest in the history of music, whether as a teacher, student or general music-

lover, to become acquainted with the growing body of scholarship devoted to women composers. Thanks to people like Jane Bowers, Carol Neuls-Bates, Judith Tick and many, many others, we now have a new perspective.[12] Women are no longer isolated footnotes in history or mere anecdotes in the lives of their illustrious male contemporaries. But I have searched in vain among recent books on 20th-century music for any acknowledgment of the strong tradition of women composers in this country. Even in the 1980s we are invisible. I tried Paul Griffiths' *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s.*[13] This book is a set of interviews with twenty composers (who are, by the way, not so much British as white English). How was it that none of the twenty chosen were women? The list of those included is as follows: Goehr, Benjamin, Maxwell Davies, Bainbridge, Harvey, Knussen, Ferneyhough, Casken, Matthews (both D. and C.), Tavener, Holloway, Osborne, Souster, Oliver, Bryars, Muldowney, Maw, Saxton, Birtwistle. Griffiths does not claim that these are a 'top twenty', although it is inevitable that they will be seen as such; rather he says that he wished to include 'as wide a variety of styles and personalities as possible'. Why Maw rather than Musgrave? they are not dissimilar in stance. Why was Judith Weir not included when her contemporaries like Simon Bainbridge were? As far as women go, there is just one brief reference to Lutyens (a warm tribute from Robert Saxton) and one reference to Rainier in David Matthews' interview when he says:

> I would have liked to study with Tippett, but I gathered that he didn't take pupils and that he recommended either Priaulx Rainier or Anthony Milner. So I studied with Milner for about three years, just showing him things I was writing: he didn't make me do exercises.[14]

If we assume that all this is prejudice on the part of Griffiths and Donald Mitchell, his publisher, I think we're in danger of missing the point. What I think they were doing was trying to reflect current taste accurately. The book is a fine example of how patriarchal values perpetuate themselves, but it also leads to the question: why are men composers more successful than women?

What constitutes 'importance'?

This was the question that used to disturb me all through my childhood. Why was the music of William Alwyn, Arthur Benjamin, Benjamin Frankel and Edmund Rubbra played more than that of my mother? Or Constant Lambert, Alan Rawsthorne, Humphrey Searle: why were they preferred over her? How did all these men come to be regarded as more 'important'? Her symphonic suite *The Land* enjoyed a startling success at its Prom première in 1930 and had the championship of Henry Wood and Donald Tovey; why has it been neglected ever since? William Glock, Robert Ponsonby and John Drummond have all refused to revive it at the Proms. The SPNM revived it on 1 March 1987; at the performance, the audience rose to give the composer a standing ovation.

One of the answers to my question is a simple one. Our society is very slowly coming to terms with the idea, and practice, of men and women working together as equals. But it has the greatest difficulty in accommodating itself to the next step: men and women working in an unequal relationship, where the woman may be the boss and the man the subordinate. Music, in the classical traditions of the West, is very far from being an art practised by equals. Consider the hierarchy of an orchestra: rank and file players, section leaders, leader, all at the beck and call of a conductor and all, conductor included, submitting to the authority of the score – that is, all at the service of the composer. Small wonder that of the various taboos which our particular society has imposed on women's practice of music, the taboos on conducting and composing are proving hardest to shift.

What about the not-so-simple answers? I can imagine that while some may be shocked by the London performance statistics I have given, others will want to condone them. If, the argument runs, there were a woman composer who was a major figure, of course she'd be included in the Almeida Festival or 'Music of Eight Decades' or whatever, but there isn't.

What constitutes a 'major figure'? How does a composer become 'important'? It may be more helpful at this moment to invert the question. What happens to the large number of undoubtedly talented young female composers that come to attention during their school and university days? For anybody of talent, man or woman, there is a series of hurdles to be cleared, hurdles which in themselves are not related to musical ability but to the ability to manipulate the social structures of the musical world. Some of these hurdles are peculiar to women, and therefore it is necessary to enlarge on what they are.

Succeeding on a man's terms

Schoolgirls are not presented with models of female composers. Student women composers say they find the male-dominated world of university music oppressive. (I know of only two women composers in British university posts, Rhian Samuel and myself, and only one in a London music college, Melanie Daiken.) Most competitions, invaluable for their opportunities for professional performance and exposure, are for composers in their twenties and early thirties. This effectively excludes those women composers who choose to have their families at the most natural time. These women re-enter the profession in their late thirties or forties and find it almost impossible to gain a place other than on the periphery, since our society puts such value on the norm of early success. In this position, they are unlikely to obtain influential commissions and performances. (I use the word 'influential', since one success generally leads to another, and recognising this is a part of the answer to the question of what constitutes 'importance'.)

For those women composers who do achieve early success, there is the question of how to sustain a career. Lutyens used to say, 'What I need is a good wife'. It is true that many highly successful male composers are managed by their spouses. I can think of no example of a woman composer whose husband is her agent (as well as her cook and secretary). What a remarkable man it would be who was sufficiently free of conventional ambition that he could fulfil such a role.

It may be the case, and it's certainly widely accepted, that it is a male trait to be ambitious for oneself, for one's individual power, whereas the female trait is to be less egocentric, more concerned to get on with the job itself. There are certainly more men than women for whom career status in itself is important. However you view this, it's easy to see that men do fit each other into the stereotype 'major figure' or 'master musician', where for women such a concept isn't a very useful one.

Suppose that a woman possessed in equal measure the talent, the genius if you like, of Stockhausen, and suppose she behaved as he does, acting as if he were a

simultaneous incarnation of Beethoven, Krishnamurti and von Karajan? Would she be lionised, or would she be laughed at? Can we even imagine a woman wanting to be like that? If a woman were asked, 'What is your present attitude to your works of the 1960s and 1970s? Do you have an urge to go back and revise?', can we imagine her replying:

> With me this has never once been a successful enterprise – largely because each work is so firmly embedded, for good or ill, in its particular biographical and stylistic context that any attempt to create a latterday 'creation myth' for it synthetically is pretty absurd.

as Brian Ferneyhough once replied?[15] Ethel Smyth is one of many women who have wanted to succeed on a man's terms in a man's world. Why is she represented as a figure of fun? Was she really, or was it because ridicule is the traditional weapon against someone who challenges sexual stereotypes?

If we can show up some of the taboos which are hedging in our concert life, it will benefit male composers just as much as female. To my mind, that's how it should be. For me, the inspiration of the Women's Movement comes not from any sexist standpoint but from the vision it offers us of radical changes to society. Patriarchy is bad for men. It has always seemed to me, in any case, that people who choose to live their lives as creative artists tend to be androgynous: people in whom male and female principles may be differently balanced than the norm. Rigid stereotypes will not allow us to develop that balanced culture I mentioned earlier. I value music by men which is as much 'yin' as 'yang'; I am bored by a concert diet of music by little boys.

Maybe the people who need the protection of the 'master musician' taboo will be around for a few generations yet. Never mind, let's leave them for now, on the grounds that like dinosaurs they will look after their own extinction, overtaken by all those insignificant warm-blooded creatures. What of the person who says, 'I would love to play more women's music, but I can't seem to find suitable scores for our programmes.'?

Suitable scores: does he, if this person is a man, mean that the ones he looks at are in some way amateur or unskilled, perhaps exhibiting a lack of professional concert experience? No: there is no shortage of fully competent scores by composers who happen to be women. Does he mean that he literally can't find them? Quite possibly. Consider publishing: among the established publishers, Novello has a fine record, publishing Bauld, Musgrave, Weir and myself, and just now taking on Judith Bingham. But this is not typical; if you look at publishers' catalogues you will find, once again, that the number of women composers represented is disproportionately small. Most women are forced to tackle the problem of marketing for themselves.

Take the case of Erika Fox. Here is a composer of strong, original, highly individual music, a mature musical mind whose orchestral music we should be hearing, who should have the opportunity to compose her projected opera with Ruth Fainlight, but who instead is consistently rejected, a classic case of systemic discrimination. How will she come to the notice of our well-meaning promoter? He won't find her in Griffiths' book, or any other book, because she didn't have the prestigious performances which would have warranted her entry. How will she get them, and thus escape from this vicious circle?

Any woman who enters a profession in which very few of her sex are represented is by definition a non-conformist, whether she likes it or not. Whether she is a judge or a mountaineer, a mechanic or a minister, she has to have remarkable tenacity to stay on a path which her society thinks odd, and she has to contend with being appraised not just for how she does her job, but how she does it as a woman.

Individuality

If I compose out of the wholeness of myself, surely some of that tenacity, that non-conformity, will be reflected in my music? One of the things I value in women's music is its individuality, its freedom from the fashions of the day. At its best, when it's most itself, women's music has an idiosyncrasy which seems to me a crucial reason why my hypothetical male can't find suitable scores. What he finds doesn't fit his idea, or current received ideas, of how the music should be. How else should I explain the position of the many women composers whose music I admire? Where are the performances of Melanie Daiken? What happened to Helen Longworth? Julia Usher's orchestral music is played by youth orchestras, so why not by professionals? Why is Jennifer Fowler treated as if she'd just flown in from Perth, when she has been living and working here for almost twenty years? Suppose, from the women whose music I like, I single out one I specially admire, Gillian Whitehead? Or if I say that out of all the younger composers working today, male and female, Helen Roe is the one whose promise I trust the most? How can we relate these statements to the accepted canons of today? If their music is not in the repertoire, how can you begin to discuss my opinions, let alone judge their music for yourself?

How else should I explain my own position? In 1986 I had over 30 professional performances, but not one of them was in London, even though I've always worked here. How should I react to that kind of experience? Should I live with what Lutyens said of herself, 'If I wrote a masterpiece tomorrow nobody would notice.'? Should I be self-assertive and ask, 'Is there a piece by Oliver Knussen which is a finer work than my monodrama *The Old Woman of Beare*?' That doesn't get us anywhere, does it? Who am I asking? Who are the arbiters of quality?

Should I wait for that golden age, that culture of breadth and diversity of which I spoke earlier? No, I can't wait for any golden age, as I find that it has already arrived, and women are not included. I quote from Michael Vyner in *The Times* of 16 January 1987, under the headline '. . . a new golden age':

> The music being written now is even more wonderful than before. We've entered a phase of the most ravishing diversity: Brian Ferneyhough, James Dillon, Simon Holt, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Oliver Knussen, Nigel Osborne, Colin Matthews, Robert Saxton, Chris Dench, Michael Rosenzweig . . .

If we are going to break the stranglehold of what, in new-music circles, has come to be known as 'the mafia', then we must begin by opening our eyes and ears to all that music by women, but also by men, which at present only circulates in *samizdat* manuscripts or tapes. We must alert ourselves to the discriminations of a system which we all foster, willy-nilly, by acquiescence; a system which is claustrophobic for men as well as for women.

In February 1987 a group of men and women organised a special weekend festival in London celebrating women composers, which gave a glimpse

of the wide variety of fields in which women are working. We adopted the name 'The Hidden Sounds' in the knowledge that a substantial literature exists which has been denied breathing space. Since then, the response has been greater and more constructive than I dared hope. Everyone was taken aback by the statistics I gave earlier, and which were widely reported by the media. Several bodies took immediate action to ensure better representation for women, and an organisation called 'Women in Music' has begun. Equally important, there has been general recognition that these are as much issues for men as for women. As I have emphasised throughout, no-one benefits from a culture which is narrow and conformist.

I wonder what the future holds. When we look at the other arts, I think we can take heart: who, ten years ago, would have predicted the stunning success of Virago and The Women's Press? Music is a social art and a performing art, and as such it poses us a quite different challenge, I suspect a far more difficult one, than that which faced the women writers and publishers. Nevertheless, we can learn a lot from their example, not least the courage to challenge the *status quo*. For it is still the case in 1987 that in the musical world it's men who call the tune. But it's not necessarily men who write the best tunes.

1 Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; first published in the USA, 1949).
2 Statistic based on the holdings of the British Music Information Centre, London.
3 Statistic from BBC Information Services, London.
4 All Arts Council statistics taken from information held at the library of the Arts Council of Great Britain, London.
5 Information from Almeida Festival brochures.
6 Information from BBC and London Sinfonietta publicity material.
7 Information from London Sinfonietta publicity leaflets. I am grateful to Sophie Fuller for supplementing my own holding, so that I had a complete ten-year set.
8 Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1979; Pan Books, 1981).
9 Ian D. Bent, 'Hildegard of Bingen', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 8, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp.553-6.
10 Alec Harman and Wilfrid Mellers, *Man and his Music: the Story of Musical Experience in the West* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), p.696.
11 Quoted in *Women in Music: an Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Carol Neuls-Bates (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1982), p.146.
12 For example, the already-mentioned *Women in Music*; also *Women Making Music: the Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986; London: Macmillan, 1986).
13 Paul Griffiths, *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s* (London: Faber Music, 1985).
14 Ibid., p.94.
15 Ibid., p.69.