

Reclaiming the Muse: Discovering Music Composed by Women.

An address to the annual conference of the incorporated Society of Musicians, April 2009

My purpose today is two fold. I'd like to play you some music that you may not have come across, and introduce you to some composers who may be unfamiliar. I'd also like to reflect on whether its appropriate, in 2009, to be singling out composers because of their gender; and if it is why is that so?

About twenty-five years ago, a number of us became concerned about the invisibility of women composers in this country. I felt that since I had not myself suffered from discrimination, I ought to speak out on behalf of people who might have. So in 1987 I took three months off composing to research the whole topic of women working in the music profession, and especially, women who were making careers as composers. What I found was very disturbing; things were far worse in the nineteen eighties, than they had been in the nineteen sixties. As the end of the twentieth century approached, opportunities for women seemed to be declining rather than increasing.

It does not surprise us that concert programmes or examination syllabuses so rarely contain music by women composers from before the twentieth century, since they were clearly a minority, for well understood social and economic reasons. Nevertheless, their music exists, quite a lot of it, and there is no reason why it should not be in the repertoire; and I'll be briefly playing some, and talking about how you can get hold of it. But in the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first, when women in the West have equal opportunities for musical training, why should there still be an imbalance in their representation?

In talks like these, I used in the past to ask people to brainstorm and name some female composers whose music they knew; usually only a few names were offered: perhaps Chaminade, together with two or three more recent names, like Musgrave, Lutyens or Maconchy. Nowadays, people are much better informed; I am sure that we could quickly come up with three or four times that number of examples. But what if I asked you 'how many Cds do you have in your collections that are of music composed by women?' there might be a rather different answer.

So what has happened over the last twenty-five years since I first researched this topic? On the one hand, I have been very pleased at the success of a number of British composers who happen to be women. Judith Weir is one of the best known of all British living composers, and there are plenty of young women in their twenties who are making waves. Nevertheless, it seems that the imbalance in public recognition is disproportionate.

The composer Jennifer Fowler has kept statistics for over twenty years on the representation of women musicians at the Proms. Women conductors, music composed by women, women soloists – it's extraordinary to discover that in every category they are in a minority, and moreover there is no discernible improvement, or at least no consistent improvement, across the years. In 2006, there was quite a lot of attention in the Press after Jennifer Fowler published an article pointing out the absence of women musicians in the Proms that year: there were no conductors or composers at all, and only nine of the 65 instrumental soloists were female.

The next year, the BBC Press launch made quite a feature of pointing out the women they were highlighting. Yet, the numbers were not very impressive; two conductors out of 67; five instrumental soloists out of 53, ie less than 10%; and of the five women composers performed, only one was placed in a main Albert Hall evening concert.

This year's programmes were announced a couple of weeks ago, and a critic in *The Times*, noting that there are five new compositions by women, wrote that 'this season is practically oestrogen-soaked.' There are thirty five works by living composers, many of them new; that five of these are by women does not seem to me a very high proportion.

I don't want to bore you with too many figures, but I want to alert you to the danger of thinking that nowadays, all is well for women musicians; things don't change unless we keep alert and help bring about change. The proportion of female instrumentalists who are soloists at the Proms seldom rises above 15%; once, in 2005, it rose to 25%, but then the average fell back to 13%.

Unless you are a soprano - and these days, that's something men can't aspire to - your chances of appearing at Britain's biggest and best music festival are decidedly poor if you are female.

This seems unforgivable in the twenty-first century, especially when you consider that equal numbers of men and women study music up to professional level. Nor are the Proms exceptional, rather the contrary; if you move on to look at concert series and festivals around the country, to syllabuses for exams and competitions, to shelves of Cds or reference books about music, the story is not very different, and often worse. Around 20% of this country's present-day composers are female, but neither the Proms nor any of the major concert series or festivals has ever represented anything like that proportion.

I am not suggesting that quotas for female musicians should be imposed, but that their representation should be proportionate. Similarly, we can't pass judgement on music by composed by women unless we are familiar with it.

Luckily, it is much easier nowadays to become familiar with it, since there has been quite an industry, chiefly in the United States, of rediscovering forgotten composers, many of whom are women; and perhaps, as Virginia Woolf said, anonymous was a woman. Certainly Hildegard of Bingen has now been allotted her rightful place in the music historians' canon and thus her beautiful melodies are now secure in the repertoire; and you can buy modern editions of madrigals and sonatas by women, whereas when I was a student at Oxford and the RCM, I never heard a single reference to a female composer who lived before the twentieth century. Whereas in the past it was awkward to programme neglected music, because it was so difficult to track it down, the Internet has made it much more possible. Publishers' catalogues are all at your fingertips, and if a composer is not published, technology today enables her to produce printed copy and send it to you electronically.

Publication has often been an issue for women composers, though not always; in seventeenth century Italy, as many women as men published songs - the *Nuove musiche* monodies - and the most published of all the composers, was Francesca Caccini. In the nineteenth century, as you no doubt know, professional careers and publication were generally frowned upon for women; Felix Mendelssohn thought it unseemly for his sister Fanny to publish, so he published her songs under his own name; when Queen Victoria told him that '*Aus Italien*' was her

favourite song, he did have the grace to say, 'it was composed by my sister'. Today, Fanny Hensel is esteemed under her own name as a gifted composer of lieder and chamber music and her music is gradually entering the repertoire. Robert Schumann did not think it wrong for Clara to publish, since she had had a career as a professional musician since she was a child. A year after their marriage, he wrote to his publisher 'my wife has composed some very interesting songs, which have inspired me to compose a few more. Together they form a very nice whole which we should like to publish in one book'. The edition of Ruckert settings was duly published under both their names, as opus 37/12, op 37 for Robert, op 12 for Clara. But the songs were not individually ascribed, so the reviewers were completely confused as to who had written what.

I am going to play you a couple to see if you too are confused. I am not suggesting that Clara was as wonderful a composer as Robert; I don't think she was, though by all accounts she was certainly a superb musician. But I do think that her music deserves to be better known.

Here are two of their Ruckert settings:

PLAY: Clara Schumann *Er ist gekommen; Liebste du um Schönheit*

CD cpo 999 127-2 (cpo/Radio Bremen)

As I am a composer not a musicologist, it is more appropriate for me to talk on music of recent composers, rather than those from the distant past. I shall choose another historic example first, though, as I want to play you an aria by the Italian composer Barbara Strozzi. In the seventeenth century she was a well-known figure, in demand both as a composer and as a singer. Then she was forgotten and her name disappeared from the history books; she does not even get a mention in Bukofzer's magisterial 'Music in the Baroque Era'. But now she has been revived with great success; her music is published in Germany and in the States; you can buy it online. She has been much recorded, and is heard frequently at early music festivals. This is not because of any quotas, but because her music is rewarding to perform and to listen to. The change has come about thanks to a number of musicians who were determined to expand our horizons by drawing attention to what had been overlooked for so long.

PLAY Barbara Strozzi *Amor Dormiglione*

CD 'Ardo' from Insitut fur Alte Musik, Trossingen.

So are there more recent composers who are overlooked? Certainly there are, both men and women, and my task today is to highlight just a few of the latter. How about Germaine Tailleferre, always listed along with her French contemporaries, as one of 'Les Six', yet her music is hardly ever heard. When Odaline de la Martinez revived the Tailleferre piano concerto, it was enthusiastically received, but people talked about how it was 'of course, influenced by the Ravel piano concerti'. Far from it - it was written and premiered seven years before the Ravel works were composed! If there is time, I'll play part of the Tailleferre later.

(CD Tailleferre vol 2 Helicon HE1048.)

Or, for example, Priaulx Rainier, who was born in 2003, and although concert programmers love to celebrate centenaries, hers passed almost entirely unmarked. Yet there is plenty for recitalists to choose from, for she wrote a lot of

chamber and instrumental music, often in shorter forms. Here is no 3, just a minute or so long, from a suite of piano pieces, published by Schott.

PLAY Rainier no 3 from Five Pieces for keyboard (1952)

CD 'No Title Required' Metier MSV CD 92056

Rainier was an accomplished string player as was Rebecca Clarke, born in 1886. At her death in 1979 she had been quite forgotten; but now, many string players include her works in their repertory, and many singers include her songs in their recitals. This is the second movement of her 1919 Sonata for Viola and piano.

PLAY Rebecca Clarke mvt. 2, *Vivace*, from Sonata for viola and piano

CD (Beach, Clarke) ASV DCA 932

One of the most remarkable women composers from the earlier twentieth century was the American, Ruth Crawford, better known perhaps as Ruth Crawford Seeger, creator of a famous dynasty of folk singers. I used to play her string quartet to my students and ask them when they thought it was written. I'll play you the last movement, and you can see why they were puzzled to put a date to it.

PLAY Crawford String quartet , mvt. 4

CD 'Ruth Crawford Seeger Portrait', DG 449 925-2

It was written in 1931, but my students often suggested the sixties, and you could hear why. The techniques in the quartet are strikingly modern: this movement follows an exact number series and is constructed as a palindrome; the previous movement, an adagio, has a counterpoint of timbre and dynamics to reveal its hidden melody.

Crawford wrote the quartet while she was in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship and just a year or so earlier my mother Elizabeth Maconchy was also in Europe on a travelling scholarship; both composers were highly praised by their contemporaries, and by critics, for their innovative and modern style; both were given introductions to major publishing houses who turned them down; my mother was told by Boosey and Hawkes 'we might publish a song or two by a young lady..'; and this was after she had had an acclaimed success when Henry Wood presented her orchestral suite 'The Land' at the 1930 Proms.

PLAY Maconchy Symphony for Double String Orchestra, mvt. 1

CD 'Elizabeth Maconchy' Lyrita SrCD.288

While Crawford and Maconchy were praised, or sometimes feared, because they were modern, some writers have maintained that women are less innovative than men, and therefore less visible in the musical canon. It leads me to wonder, how important innovation may be. Here is a song by a composer whose music I much admire: Judith Weir. There is nothing innovative about it, yet it is easy to hear why her music is so deservedly popular with its performers and listeners.

PLAY Weir 'The Romance of Count Arnaldos'

CD 'Mary Wiegold's Songbook' NMC D003

Two younger composers whose music I'd like you to hear, are Sally Beamish and Sadie Harrison. Sally Beamish was born in 1956, and like Rebecca Clarke, began

her career as a viola player. Now, she is one of Scotland's most active composers. As you might expect, she writes particularly sympathetically for strings, and I am going to play the opening of a work for cello solo 'Gaia Water'. The cellist is Robert Irvine

PLAY Beamish Gala Water for solo cello *Lento*
CD 'Bridging the Day' BIS CD 1171

Sadie Harrison was born in 1965; I find her one of the most striking composers of her generation and not as well known as she should be, though at least she is well represented on CD. Here is a movement, Labyrinth, from her suite for piano, Impresa Amorosa. The title refers to renaissance love tokens, with pictures and mottoes; the motto for this movement is '*Forse di si forse di no*' or 'maybe yes, maybe no'.

The pianist is Adrian Schorr.

PLAY Harrison Labyrinth
CD 'Taking Flight' Metier MSV CD92053

I'll just make a little advertisement before moving on: the Harrison piano suite is in 'Pianthology' a volume of pieces for advanced students published by UYMP – the University of York Music Press.

My talk this morning has the title 'Reclaiming the Muse'; its not a new title, it is one that I gave in 1994 to a volume I edited with Sophie Fuller for Contemporary Music Review, in which we had articles on nearly one hundred living female composers from the British Isles, Australia and New Zealand. What emerged strongly from that volume was the independence of all these composers; they could not be pigeon-holed into a school, or even into a movement such as serialism or minimalism. Could this be one of the reasons why so many of them are not better known?

Ethel Smyth wrote rather well on the subject of why women composers were not as visible as they deserved to be. Her memoirs are far too long, but they can be very amusing. She says:

QUOTE

'In the case of the incipient girl-composer...I fear an independent outlook will not simplify her career. All music tradesmen, (publishers, musical institutions, concert promoters) want everyone to hammer away on whatever note is the fashion. ..

But perhaps what women are called upon to pass on cannot be found on the road up and down which every one is tearing.. I have always felt it must be, for women, a question of something as yet unvoiced.'

Smyth is pointing to a controversial issue: is women's music somehow different, or does music transcend gender? Are artists generally, and therefore composers too, more androgynous than other people? Does a composer's music reflect his or her gender in some way that we cannot recognise? For we don't recognise it – and most of us are glad of that, since we don't want to be singled out as women; we want our music to be judged on its own merits, alone. Yet which is more unsatisfactory for a composer; to appear in a programme or a reference book that

has made a point of highlighting women musicians, or not to appear at all? Very few people choose anonymity. If you are familiar with the diaries or letters of women artists, you know how passionately they have cried out for recognition. If there were to be a follow-up volume now to our 'Reclaiming the Muse', we would need to add many more names, of the newest generation. But how can we be sure that this next generation will not vanish like so many of their predecessors? The history of women in music is a cyclic one; each generation feels that there is no longer a problem, yet a glance at the status quo shows us that this is not the case.

If there is an ISM conference in 50 years time, I wonder if a balance will have been achieved that would make a talk like this one, unnecessary. I think it will depend on everyone of us making sure that our musical life reflects the contribution of women as much as men. I am going to end by playing you a tiny song of my own, from the beginning of my song cycle, 'A Penny for a Song'. I do this because the only authority I have to speak to you, is my music. And after it, I am very happy to take questions, and perhaps to play a few more illustrations. The text of this song, an old Irish text about winter is:

Here's my story; the stag cries
Winter snarls as summer dies
The wind bullies the low sun
In poor light; the seas moan.
Shapeless bracken is turning red
The wild goose raises its desperate head
Birds wings freeze where fields are hoary
The world is ice; that's my story.

(Irish, trans Brendan Kennelly)

PLAY 'A Penny for a Song',
CD 'Tracey Chadwell's Songbook' BMS 420/421

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