

## How Colleges Can Encourage Female Composers

*By Eileen Stempel*



*Eileen Stempel, soprano*

If classical music during the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has become increasingly invisible, as reflected in such depressing tomes as Joseph Horowitz's *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (Norton, 2005), then surely the contributions of female composers are so puny as to be nearly undetectable.

Recently I polled my various undergraduate music classes. I was curious to discover which classical performers currently enjoyed favor. Students' voices rose in pitched competition as they championed their artists. I asked about favorite male composers, and the students continued to respond in a rich and varied cacophony ringing with the names Beethoven, Schumann, Copland, and Ligeti. I asked about their

favorite female composers, and a few names rang out, including Clara Schumann and Alma Mahler. I added the qualifier "living," and the room dropped to near silence. How are the works of female composers (living or dead) to receive recognition, performance, and recording if most people don't know of their existence?

On the very short list my class generated, there was only one Pulitzer Prize winner: Ellen T. Zwilich (1983). Shulamit Ran (1991) and Melinda Wagner (1999) were left off. Although they may earn such coveted accolades, female composers still generally fail to penetrate the consciousness even of music students. But what emerged from the discussion was that the composers recognized by the students, almost without exception, fell into two categories. Either the composer had been commissioned by the university (as in the case of Libby Larsen and her Syracuse University commission for soprano and string quartet, *This Unbearable Stillness: Songs From the Balcony*); or works by the composer had been recently performed on the campus by faculty members or students (for example, works by Lori Laitman that were recently premiered by the Syracuse University pianist Ida Trebicka). Recordings played in classrooms or names in textbooks simply didn't make a significant impact. The effectiveness of live performance, especially when connected to an artist residency and the thrill of an exciting premiere, was crucial to creating a lasting memory.

According to data compiled by the National Association of Schools of Music, in 29 institutions reporting, 14 out of 73 composition doctoral students graduating in 2003-4 were women. The reasons that music composition remains a heavily male bastion are, of course, complex. Traditionally women have been actively discouraged from being composers. As Abraham Mendelssohn infamously wrote to his daughter Fanny, "Music will perhaps become his [Felix's] profession, whilst for you it can and must only be an ornament; never the root of your being and doing." This dissuasion, mired with societal expectations, regrettably continues. Says Larsen: "It's still hard. It's hard for all composers, but especially for women. That one particular prejudice comes up over and over and over again."

Fanny Mendelssohn -- a prolific and talented composer in her own right -- was, in the 19th century, pointedly instructed not to acknowledge composition as part of her public persona. Conversely, perhaps, in the 21st century public recognition is one key to encouraging women to write music. How else can we break the vicious cycle? A lack of visible role models leads to a lack of students leads to a lack of future role models. Visibility implies viability. In the absence of anything near gender parity on current faculties -- and with statistics pointing toward the same for the foreseeable future -- we need to find other means to awaken and nurture women's compositional talents.

Commissioning new work is one way to do that, and colleges and universities are well positioned to be the patrons, but that will require a shift in emphasis. Academe has traditionally served as cultural protector and presenter, not institutional consumer. To commission a work is a powerful gesture, an act of faith and support that encourages the creative life of the composer. By its very nature, commissioning spurs dialogue among the commissioner, the performers, and the composer as the parameters of the commission are decided -- the role in the work of a celebratory or memorial occasion, resources, venues, dates, and so on. Then more-complex discussions concerning musical interpretation and intent develop as the performers gather to rehearse and decipher the various technical, intellectual, and emotional layers of a score.

A successful performance demands the construction of a shared vision. Typical commission contracts ensure the presence of the composer for the final rehearsals preceding the premiere. The impact of Larsen's campus visit, for instance, extended far beyond the actual moments of performance, for between rehearsals she led several provocative round-table discussions for composition students, musicians, and music educators. The composer's efforts may begin with intense solitary work, but the process of musical refinement is relentlessly communal, providing inspiration but also an aesthetic, collaborative, and business role model for young artists.

Ultimately, commissioning works by female composers demonstrates the power of the arts not only to inspire change, but to embody it.

*-The Chronicle of Higher Education, 8/31/06-*

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