

What to Do About Women Composers!



Sharon Mabry

Over the past few years, “New Directions” has brought attention to works by several women composers. Those works were chosen for discussion due to their musical/aesthetic qualities, programming possibilities, or textual significance, not solely because they were written by women or because they were better than other works written by men. However, given the student response this writer received after delivering a guest lecture about women composers at a recent Sigma Alpha Iota Province Day, an article addressing the issue of music by women seemed appropriate.

During the question-and-answer period, several students in the all-female audience expressed dismay concerning their information about and performance experience with music by women. It was soon evident that there was a complete lack of exposure to the music. More than half of

the group were singers, and only one had sung anything by a woman composer. Several commented that their teachers were either uninterested in the subject, never sang anything by women, responded badly when the student asked about studying the music, felt the music was inferior, or never gave any of the music to their students. The students were most saddened that their private instructors were not taking their need for female role models seriously. Of course, many teachers now include works by women in studio teaching, but obviously this is not yet done with regularity. Most declared that music history courses at their universities were still talking about “man and his music,” with an occasional woman mentioned as an afterthought, if at all.

When asked the following questions, only one student responded in the affirmative.

1. Have you performed works by women composers?
2. Have you purchased music or CDs of music by women?
3. Have you heard any live concert performances of music by women?
4. Can you name five successful women composers?

In essence, the students felt betrayed by an educational system that had not caught up with the research. We now have numerous books on this subject. Aaron Cohen’s *The International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* and the Norton/Grove *Dictionary of Women Composers* are but two of the many excellent ones that give valuable information about thousands of successful women composers, listing works and discussing

style. These sources show that there is an abundance of good repertoire available, both published and unpublished, for all voice types and all levels of vocal study.

As teachers, performers, conductors, music critics, and listeners, today’s students will be the future for women in music. It is up to us, the educators and performers of today, to introduce this exciting new music to our students and the general public. Now that women have won all the major composition prizes from the Pulitzer to the Prix de Rome, the Grawemeyer to the International ASCAP Award, we can say that they are being judged on an equal basis with men for the first time in history. We must provide a platform for the performance and criticism of music by women. It is important to take pride in the past contributions of women and not dwell on the negative. Many composers feel it is best not to talk about or perform music by women as a separate entity. Rather, their music should be incorporated into a normal programming format. Whatever approach is used, the goal should be to present the idea that composing music is something that is normal for women and not a curiosity.

There are numerous ways to present this music. One could develop recitals of music by one composer, music from a particular historical period, chamber repertoire only, or music with a specific textual theme. Since many of the composers may be unfamiliar to the audience, biographical notes are helpful in establishing an understanding of the composer’s background and influences.

All of these elements will help to illuminate qualities in each composition that make us feel, see, hear, and express ideas that we may not have known existed.

Without question, the solution is education. Some universities are taking a stand and offering courses in music by women. Others are including the music of women regularly in their music history classes. However, too many still avoid the topic altogether. We who teach and perform need to consider including works by women on our own recitals and those by our students. This effort will help to make them aware of all the musical possibilities. As more research is done, more recordings become available, and more performances occur, the music will become part of art song

literature classes and chamber music classes. Then we will feel wonderful about having done our part, and our students will be informed, confident and able to answer "yes" to all of the questions posed above.

Mezzo-soprano Sharon Mabry first received national recognition in the 1980 National Public Radio "Art of Song" series, when she was a featured recitalist. She has performed at international music festivals and is in demand as a recitalist and master teacher of vocal techniques. Her recordings have received outstanding critical acclaim and international air play. Her latest CDs feature music by American composers Persis Vohar, Christina Kuzmych, Kenton Coe, Jeffrey Wood, and Michael Rose.

In 1986 she made her critically acclaimed New York recital debut in Merkin Concert

Hall, Abraham Goodman House. She was awarded both a Solo Recitalist Fellowship and a recording grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition to her concert career, Dr. Mabry is Professor of Music at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN. She received the Bachelor of Music degree from Florida State University, studying with Elena Nikolaidi, and the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from George Peabody College for Teachers, studying with Louis Nicholas. As a scholarship recipient to the Franz-Schubert-Institut in Austria, she studied with Walter Moore, Erik Werba, Hans Hotter, Norman Shetler, and Brigitte Fassbaender. Mabry's book, Exploring Twentieth Century Vocal Music: A Practical Guide to Innovations in Performance and Repertoire, will be available from Oxford University Press in the summer of 2002.

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