

Women Composers: Continuing!

by Elizabeth Morrison

At our fall workshop last year, CMNC devoted one day to celebrating women composers. We had 28 groups on Saturday, October 3, 2015, and 27 of them, including seven preformed groups, played music by women, while one preformed group took advantage of the opt-out to play a late Beethoven they had committed to working on.

I loved the day and was thrilled with how happy many people were to be playing fine pieces that were mostly new to them. I'd like to say that I enjoyed the music for itself and not just because it was composed by the gender that holds up half the sky, but it wouldn't be completely true. I got an added measure of pleasure from knowing that we were honoring composers who had to work extra hard, against significant social strictures, to find and express the music within themselves, music which moreover had often vanished from the canon far too quickly.

I took away from the day two important pieces of information about music by women: first, there is a lot of it, much more than I originally thought; and second, so much of it is so good. This fall, when I am again taking my turn as workshop director, I haven't proposed a day of women composers, but I do plan to assign 20-25% of the groups to music by women on each day. A chamber music workshop seems to me to be ideally positioned to bring these overlooked pieces into the mainstream. A classical concert, whether by an orchestra or a chamber group, usually presents three pieces, of which one may (or more often, may not) be by a woman. A weekend workshop has the opportunity to program as many as 50 different pieces. Of course many of them will be chosen from the illustrious male canon, but we might well have 10 or 12 pieces by women. We could easily present as many women in a single weekend as a professional group does in years. Besides, we actually play them, as opposed to listening to them, and thus we engage with them most intimately. I think this is a fabulous opportunity, and I would love to see other workshops jump on the bandwagon.

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Elizabeth Maconchy (pronounced, I am reliably told, Maconky), of whom I had literally never heard. I assigned myself to her clarinet quintet, which was actually requested by not one but two clarinetists and so was played by two different groups. It's a good piece, but my group was not able to meet beforehand and we found it a bit difficult to put together in a single day. Afterwards I read up on Maconchy and found that she is a composer of the very first rank who has been called, in an article by Martin Anderson, "[Our finest lost composer](#)."

It turns out I had heard Maconchy's music long before I knew her name. She won a competition to compose an overture, *Proud Thames*, for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. My mother let me stay home from school and watch the coronation when I was in the second grade, a great occasion for me. Terrie Baune lent me two of Maconchy's 14 string quartets at Humboldt, and I am hoping to try them soon. If they seem suitable I would love to assign one this October. Terrie also lent me a quartet by Thea Musgrave which I have now played with my marvelously game quartet. We agreed it is assignable to people with the energy to try something new and challenging.

Another composer new to me turned up on a marvelous CD called "[Vive la Difference, String Quartets by 5 Women from 3 Continents](#)," issued on the Leonardo label. It was recorded in 1981, is still readily available, and I recommend it. The five composers are Sarah Aderholdt, Ruth Schonthal, Amy Beach, Priaulx Ranier, and Lucie Vellère. We were especially taken with the Vellère quartet, but the score and parts were not easy to locate. The recording on *Vive la Difference* was done by the Crescent Quartet, and cellist Irene Hermann managed to contact the violist, Jill Jaffe, and obtain a copy of the handwritten score and parts. I had the pleasure of playing it at CMNC in May. We are still investigating the copyright situation; if we can find a copy for sale, CMNC will buy it, and if not we will use the copy we have. I think the Vellère is a perfect candidate for assigning several times at workshops until it is as familiar to us as, say, the Elgar. It's accessible, challenging and rewarding—just what we are looking for in a new work.

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Clara Schumann or Madeleine Dring trios, the Farrenc Nonetto, Amy Beach's flute quintet, or anything by Claude Arrieu. (Speaking of Arrieu, Mary Moore announced, before playing an Arrieu quintet at Humboldt, that she had been asked at lunch what she was playing. She said, "Arrieu," to which her questioner replied, "I'm fine, but what are you playing?") Ethel Smyth is well on her way to being a household name among CMNC participants, and so I believe is Harriett Bolz, whose

septet for winds and strings was a sleeper hit at Mills. I would love our pieces by Dahlberg, Zwillich, Bacewicz, Pejacevic, Carreño and many others to become familiar features of the repertoire.


Looking to broaden my knowledge, I signed up for an OLLI course this fall called *Classical Music and Gender: A Wonderfully Tangled Web*, taught by Dr. John Prescott. The first session was on women composers. He discussed and played works by Hildegard of Bingen, Francesca Caccini and Clara Schumann. The first two are out of CMNC's time range, and Clara is already well known to us, so I looked forward to the second class, where he discussed gender associations with different instruments. This was interesting in itself and also because gender associations are related to the obscurity of composers who would certainly be in the canon were they but male. Dr. Prescott had time only for a brief discussion; we listened to a concerto composed by Vivaldi for his orchestra of nuns and female orphans, a performance by the deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie, and a piece for harp played by an unusually gendered (i.e. male) harpist.

This only brushed the surface, and clearly there was much more to the topic. I found a Ph.D. thesis by Amy Louise Phelps called "[Beyond Auditions: Gender Discrimination in America's Top Orchestras](#)," where I discovered many interesting things. Instruments are historically gendered, a fact which is still relevant today when orchestras, having finally gained a significant number of female string

players with the advent of blind auditions in the 70's, still have gender imbalance in the higher-paid wind, brass and percussion sections. Women were traditionally steered to smaller instruments (flute, violin), instruments that could be played in the home to accompany singers (piano), and instruments that made them look like angels (the harp). Big, heavy instruments were considered masculine, and women were specifically discouraged from playing instruments that distorted their faces, which were supposed to remain serene and composed at all times (not easy on the tuba.)

I was interested to learn that the most gender-neutral instruments are piano and cello. Piano I understand, but has enough thought been given to the fact that a cello sits between the legs and rests on the breastbone? I remember years ago hearing a talk by cellist Zara Nelsova to the Los Angeles cello club. She spent the whole time discussing her concert outfits, especially her use of very wide skirts. The idea was that female cellists should not appear even to have legs.

Finally, I was delighted to hear a PBS segment on a new book called *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music*, by Mary Beer. I ordered it immediately. It turned out to consist of brief biographies of Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Marianna Martines, Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, Lili Boulanger and Elizabeth Maconchy.

I am sorry to say that the book is rather carelessly researched (for example, Francesca Caccini is said to have turned 13 in 1600, and then, four years later, to be approaching her 15th birthday) and a disturbing absence of attribution (she often follows quotations with expressions like, "in the words of one music historian," without letting us know whom she is quoting). Beer, and the women she writes about, deserve a better editor. But flawed as it may be, I am glad she wrote it. It was good to see Francesca Caccini again, to learn more about Elizabeth Maconchy, and to make the acquaintance of the others. Let these women be known to us all! I am doing my bit to spread the word with a piece I wrote for my college alumni magazine, the *Swarthmore Bulletin*. Onwards! 

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