

Women Composers of Keyboard Music: An Historical Overview

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by Nora Gibson

THE role of woman as composer has historically been intricately intertwined with the role of woman in society in general. As the earliest source of Western music, the Church's attitude towards music was *mulier in ecclesia taceat* (let women keep silence in church). Women were not allowed to sing in church choirs, and during the Middle Ages and Renaissance it certainly would have been inappropriate socially for a woman to hold a post as director of music for a church. Opportunities to make music publicly were simply unavailable to women.

However, while excluding women from public music making, the Church did provide one important arena which provided a rich opportunity for music making by women—the convent. Though hardly mainstream, the convent provided socially acceptable opportunities for women composers of chant, polyphony, liturgical drama, and even instrumental music.

Women were able to perform as troubadours and minstrels, but professional positions in courts or theaters were simply unavailable. When women did establish themselves as professional singers in the mainstream in Italy late in the sixteenth century, they were soon replaced by castrati. As instrumentalists, they were encouraged to play privately the "feminine" instruments such as keyboard instruments, the lute and viol.

Just as for men, the role of woman as composer was directly related to her role as performer. Women accordingly came to composition first through the convent, then as secular singers in the second half of the sixteenth century, and as keyboard players in the late-eighteenth century. Just as men, these

women wrote the kind of music that fit their type of professional position. Since the professional positions open to women were so limited, the scope of composition by women was also limited.

Before 1800, women composers outside the convent were generally from the wealthy nobility or from families of professional musicians.¹ Wealthy women were well educated and could hire musicians to play their works. Daughters of professional musicians were taught along with the sons.

During the eighteenth century, music was considered an important "social accomplishment" for a young woman, enhancing her marriageability. The number of women involved in domestic music increased significantly with the expansion of the middle class and the increased popularity of singing and playing the piano.

With the proliferation of conservatories in the nineteenth century, women for the first time had the opportunity to train professionally in public. At first women were restricted to the study of performance, but eventually they were allowed to study theory and composition. However, societal attitudes towards the woman as composer were hardly supportive. If she was tough enough to endure the life of a composer, she could do so only at the expense of losing her "womanhood." But if her music didn't sound like that of a man, she was accused of being too "feminine."

The question of the "woman composer" received much debate at the turn of the century. George Upton in his book *Women in Music* (1880), stated that not only are women too emotional and lacking in stamina to write music, but a woman's mind simply cannot grasp the scientific logic of music making.² As late as 1933, Carl Seashore stated that a woman is equal to man in

terms of talent and ability but her fundamental urge is to be loved and adored as a person, nothing more.³

In the twentieth century the changing role of women in society has gradually changed the role of the woman composer. She is no longer judged on the basis of her sex, but by the quality of her work. A brief description of six women composers will provide an historical overview of the development in Western music of women as composers of keyboard music.

One of the earliest women composers of keyboard music was Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1666-1729). A French composer and harpsichordist, she was the daughter of a harpsichord maker. Precociously talented as a child, she appeared in the court of King Louis XIV when she was fifteen years old. He placed her under his care, encouraging her career as harpsichordist and composer. She married an organist, Marin de la Guerre and returned to Paris. There her reputation as harpsichordist and composer grew.

Her compositions include an opera produced in Paris in 1694, three books of cantatas, a collection of pieces for harpsichord, a collection of sonatas, and a *Te Deum*. Titon du Tillet in his "Parnaise français" of 1732 states, "One can say that never had a person of her sex had such talents as she for the composition of music, and for the admirable manner in which she performed it at the Harpsichord and on the Organ."⁴

Little record remains of other women composers in the Baroque or Classical era. However, two women connected with musical families stand out in the nineteenth century—Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann.

FANNY Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1805 with "Bach Fugue fingers" according to her mother. She and her brother Felix were taught to play the piano by their mother.

When she was thirteen, Fanny Mendelssohn played the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier* for her father's birthday. Her brother Felix often remarked that his sister actually played better than he. One of his friends remarks, "Had Mme. Hensel (Fanny) been a poor man's daughter, she must have become known to the world by the side of Mme. Schumann and Mme. Pleyel as a female pianist of the very highest class."⁵

However, her father, although he encouraged her, was emphatic that Fanny's musical endeavors were simply as an "accomplishment." On her twenty-third birthday, he admonished her: "You must prepare more eagerly for your real calling, the *only* calling of a young woman—I mean the state of a housewife."⁶ In 1826 she married Wilhelm Hensel, who encouraged his wife not only to play, but also to compose.

Upon his urging she published her first songs, but went no further, lacking her brother's approval. He felt a woman "regulates her house and neither thinks of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music at all, until her first duties are filled."⁷ She and Felix depended greatly upon each other for support and criticism of their compositions. After he married and moved away, she became discouraged and ambivalent about her own composing. However, she did continue to compose until her sudden death at the age of forty-two.

A few of her earliest compositions were published under her brother's name, his Opus 8 and 9. Fanny's published compositions extend to Opus 11, including two books of songs for voice and piano, one book of part songs and four books of melodies and "songs without words" for piano.

Clara Schumann was born in Leipzig in 1819. She was carefully trained as a pianist by her father and made a dazzling debut at age eleven in Leipzig. In 1831, she made her first extended tour and became renowned throughout Europe for her brilliant technique and musical sensitivity. She returned to Leipzig and continued her studies which included score reading, counterpoint, and composition.

In 1840, much against her father's wishes, she married Robert Schumann. In addition to raising seven children, Clara spent considerable time helping Robert to prepare his music. After Robert's sickness and death, Clara resumed her concert career.

Clara Schumann's earliest composition dates from 1828. Her early works were virtuosic piano works designed to

show off her technical brilliance. These included polonaises, caprices, a piano concerto, and sets of variations. The *Bellini Variations* are typical with elaborate flourishes, dazzling arpeggios, and brilliant chromatic runs. During this period she also composed several shorter character pieces, including some unusual types such as a witch's dance and a Spanish caprice. A close examination of her *Scherzo* of 1840, shows her serious artistic purpose as a composer. The introductory theme, which is developed throughout, begins with very ambiguous harmony, even dissonance, modulating five times in the first twelve measures before leading into the main theme. The *Scherzo* is in Rondo form with episodic sections in A-minor and E-flat, each time modulating back to the "A" section in D-minor. Changes in texture and dramatic dynamic markings add to the intensity of the piece. Although not as virtuosic as many of Clara Schumann's works, the *Scherzo* exploits the full range of the piano and, like most of her pieces, is very idiomatic to the keyboard. The D-minor melody and insistent rhythm lend a rather gypsy-like quality to the piece. The persistent eighth notes, the unusual chromatic chords, the use of dissonance, and lucid texture combine to create a much more sophisticated piece than some of her earlier works.

The three *Romances* were written for herself and Robert and continue the originality found in the *Scherzo*.

After her marriage to Robert, Clara was not able to compose as much. Despite the fact that Robert demanded absolute quiet for his own composing, and the reality of bearing eight children, Clara did manage to compose a set of songs (jointly with Robert), three Preludes and Fugues, Op. 16, a Trio, Op. 17, another *Scherzo*, Op. 14, and *Quatres pieces caracteristiques*, Op. 15. In 1853, she composed a set of variations for Robert, Op. 20, and three piano *Romances*, Op. 21. Clara no longer composed after Robert's death in 1856.

Many factors contributed to the irregularity and brevity of Clara's career as a composer. As Robert stated, "But children and a husband who is always living in the realms of imagination, do not go well with composition. She cannot work at it regularly, and I am often disturbed to think how many tender ideas are lost because she cannot work them out."⁸

Nineteenth-century society certainly did not support women composers. Hans Van Bülow, a student of her father, said: "Reproductive genius can

be admitted to the pretty sex, but productive genius unconditionally cannot . . . There will never be a woman composer."⁹

Clara herself lacked confidence in her ability as a composer and by twenty had already absorbed commonly-held attitudes: "I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to? It would be arrogance, though indeed my father led me to it in earlier days."¹⁰

SOCIETAL attitudes against women composers prevailed not only in Europe, but also in the United States. In America, the tradition of native composition lay in the hands of the singing masters (no singing mistresses). For the most part, the American concert scene was dominated by European music until the second half of the nineteenth century, when John Knowles Paine returned from Europe to found the New England School of composing. One of the first fully American-trained composers to emerge from the New England school was Amy March Cheney Beach.

Amy March Cheney, born in 1867, was taught piano as a child by her mother. The family moved from New Hampshire to Boston so Amy could study both piano and harmony. In 1883, she made her debut with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In 1885 she married Dr. H.H.A. Beach, who encouraged her to compose.

A self-taught composer, Amy Cheney Beach translated treatises of Berlioz and Gevaert on instrumentation and orchestration. In 1892, her first large work, *Mass* in E-flat, was premiered in Boston which one reviewer claimed "may well be considered a wonder . . . and is certainly matter for hearty congratulations and great national and local pride."¹¹

By 1896, Beach had produced sixty shorter works for piano, violin, voice and several cantatas. Especially praised at the time were her *Four Sketches for Piano*, Op. 15. Her *Gaelic* symphony was the first symphony composed by an American woman. The C#-minor Piano Concerto in 1900 was her last big orchestral work.

After her husband's death in 1910, Amy Beach toured Europe, including many of her own compositions in her concerts. She continued to compose and concertize throughout the United States after her return. She offered advice to aspiring young composers:

"One thing I have learned from my audiences is that young women artists and composers shouldn't be afraid to pitch right in and try. If they think they have something to say, let them say it. But let them be sure to build a technique with which to say it. The technique mustn't be visible, but it must be there."¹²

Amy Beach's style essentially remained unchanged over her long career. She had a natural gift for long, lyrical melodies, with a tendency sometimes to be over-sentimental and often over-elaborate. Her composition was technically sound, incorporating complex harmonies, chromaticism, frequent modulations, Neapolitan sixths and altered chords—all typical of the late nineteenth century. She was considered conservative by many of her contemporaries since she never ventured into atonal or serial experimentation, the growing edge for composers in the early twentieth century.

An example of Amy Beach's piano music, "Out of the Depths," illustrates her style, beginning with fortissimo octaves in sequence, regularly interspersed with ambiguous chords in the bass. The motif played in octaves is harmonically and rhythmically developed throughout the piece, in a manner more Wagnerian than that of earlier Romantic composers. The piece is extremely dramatic with dynamic markings ranging from *fff* to *ppp*. In the third and last section of the piece, the motif is expanded with elaborate scale-type configurations. The texture is thick in the two outer sections and thinner in the middle section and homophonic throughout. The harmony for the most part is straightforward; however it does incorporate some chromaticism and rather unconventional chords, such as the opening in the bass. Like much of Beach's instrumental music, this piece is programmatic, the intensity, especially in the bass, portraying the words of Psalm 130.

The next generation of American composers includes Ruth Crawford Seeger who was one of the first originals in American music. Born in East Liverpool, Ohio, in 1901, she was the daughter of a Methodist minister. She began studying piano with her mother, continuing with a professional teacher when she was six years old. After high school, she taught music in Jacksonville, Florida, until she had saved enough money to enroll in the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Her studies began with piano and harmony, with courses later in counterpoint, com-

position, and orchestration. Upon receiving her teaching certificate from the conservatory, she began teaching and by 1929 was considered one of the most promising young musicians in Chicago.

Her earliest compositions includes *Five Preludes for Piano*, composed in 1925, and *Suite for Small Orchestra*, 1926. The Preludes are in a late Romantic style with twisting and quite chromatic melodies. There are no key signatures but the music is not (yet) atonal. Crawford included many repeated patterns and sequences with each repetition not quite exact, but involving slight changes (a very characteristic Crawford technique). These pieces, like most of her compositions, are quite short; Prelude No. 1 is only 12 measures, and the longest, No. 2 consists of 46 measures. Another set of piano pieces, *Four Preludes*, was composed in 1927, these being more rhapsodic than the first set.

In her *Suite for Strings and Piano*, 1929, Crawford replaces a conventional melody of several bars by a brief (4-note) motif of closely spaced pitches (all within a fourth) which is interwoven with motifs of two, three and six notes, and is reworked in each movement. The Suite gives a clear suggestion of Schoenberg's 12-tone technique although not in any fixed order. Also produced at this point were *Five Songs* which were panchromatic.

In 1929, Ruth Crawford began studying composition with the noted musicologist, Charles Seeger, who shared Crawford's interest in the twelve-tone system. As an exercise in composition, she composed *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*. Its purpose was to "take a single melodic line and keep it dissonant for as long as possible, using only major and minor seconds, sevenths, ninths and augmented fourths, avoiding consonant intervals."¹³ *Piano Study* gives the performer optional dynamic directions, a rather unconventional practice for the time.

In 1930, Crawford was the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition, and spent one year abroad composing. During this time she wrote her "String Quartet," her most remarkable composition to date, and the one she felt most representative of her work.

Crawford married Charles Seeger in 1930, and by 1932 had composed three songs, further experimenting with contemporary techniques including *Sprechstimme* and unusual performance instructions. With these three songs, Crawford's original work came to a halt.

In 1933 her first child was born, with three more to follow in addition to three children living with them from her husband's previous marriage.

During the next fifteen years Crawford transcribed more than one thousand folk songs from field recordings of the Library of Congress. She established the most significant collection of American folk songs for children ever published.

In 1952 she returned to her original composing with the *Suite for Wind Quintet*, which won first prize in a competition of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors. After her untimely death from cancer (1953) she was remembered for her work with folk music. But gradually, she began to be recognized as one of the best and most original composers of the first half of the twentieth century.

Ruth Crawford summarized her style in describing elements she felt essential for her composition:

- Clarity of melodic line
- Avoidance of rhythmic stickiness
- Rhythmic independence between parts
- Feeling of tonal and rhythmic center
- Experiment with various means of obtaining at the same time—
 - organic unity and various sorts of dissonance¹⁴

The piano piece, Prelude No. 6, is written on three staves, with the three different parts written almost as for three different instruments. The elements she strove for in her composing can be found within this Prelude. The top staff provides an ostinato with a mystical effect over the melody in the middle staff. A repeated pattern in the bass provides a second ostinato in the bottom staff. All three parts are rhythmically independent of each other. The melody in the middle staff emerges plaintively between the ostinatos. In the last section of the piece, the middle staff melody picks up the ostinato motif which had been in the upper staff, while the upper staff develops the ostinato which had been in the lowest staff. The given time signature is $\frac{3}{8}$ and changes often during the piece. Ties, syncopation, and the rhythmical independence of the three parts add to the mystical quality of the piece. The texture is fullest at the beginning and gradually thins out towards the end. Unity and a feeling of centeredness (though not tonal) are provided by the use of the ostinati and the use of sevenths throughout the piece.

Ruth Crawford, much like Clara Schumann, seemed to become sidetracked in her journey as a composer by

her work with her husband and family. Unfortunately, her death deprived us of the emerging Ruth Crawford as a mature composer. In 1948 she described her course as a composer:

I am still not sure whether the road I have been following the last dozen years is a main road or a detour. I have begun to feel the last year or two that it is the latter—a detour, but a very important one to me in which I have descended from the stratosphere onto a solid well travelled highway, folded my wings and breathed good friendly dust as I travelled in and out of the thousands of fine traditional folk tunes which I have been hearing and singing. . . . Whether I ever unfold the wings and make a start for the stratosphere and how much of the dust of the road will still cling to me is an interesting question. If I do, I will probably pull the road up with me.¹⁵

ONLY in the second half of the twentieth century have opportunities for women as composers begun to be available. Thea Musgrave's life as a composer is a fine example of a woman who does not feel her sex has hindered her success as a composer.

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1928, Thea Musgrave entered Edinburgh University as a pre-med student. She later switched to music, receiving a traditional background in harmony, analysis, counterpoint, and history of music. With a post-graduate fellowship, she studied in France for three years at the Paris Conservatory and with Nadia Boulanger.

One of the earliest performances of Musgrave's music was her *Cantata for a Summer Day* presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1955. She was greatly aided in exposing her music through live concerts of the British Broadcasting Network. She has written a considerable amount of chamber music including two piano sonatas, a violin sonata, and a string quartet. During the sixties, Musgrave wrote three chamber concertos and a concerto for orchestra in which she experimented with solo players moving physically about the orchestra. The instruments were to take on a "personage."

Musgrave increasingly turned to theatre music, composing *Beauty and the Beast* in 1969, a full-fledged ballet using taped music for the first time. *Space Play*, 1972, involves the chamber players in a game with the instruments literally "playing" games with each other.

As an example of her piano style, *Monologue for Piano* begins with a chromatic melody lyrically set between mystical chords. This melody becomes the kernel upon which the entire piece is constructed, somewhat of a theme and variations. In the second section, the melody is in the middle of three staves, with an ostinato in the bass and elaborate flute-like configurations in the upper staff. The third section becomes more rhythmical, building rhythmic intensity with the fourth section marked "molto ritmico." This section builds in intensity, rhythmically, dynamically, and texturally, culminating in slow chords melding into the fifth section which is a fugue built on the original theme. The fugue gathers momentum, building to the final section, "tumultuoso," which accelerates, cascading to the end with sixteenth notes broken by loud chords and silences, still building on the original motif of the piece. The texture of *Monologue* is quite thin throughout, rather like that of a string quartet. Being instrumentally constructed, it is not so idiomatic to the keyboard. Passages do not fall automatically beneath the fingers. The intricate and intelligent construction and lyrical motif make *Monologue* an exciting piece both to hear and play.

Thea Musgrave considers composing to be a unisexed profession and never encountered any particular problems in the field of professional composer. Musgrave is recognized for her talent, the only basis upon which any artist should be judged.¹⁶

Through the history of Western music, women, for many reasons, have not been prolific composers. Social mores, family responsibilities, lack of training, and models have all contributed to the most important factor in the lack of women composers—and that is the ability for women to believe in themselves as composers. Thankfully, the women's movements of the twentieth century have opened many doors to women previously unavailable. Hopefully, like Ruth Crawford, we will be able to rise to the stratosphere and spread our wings.

Notes

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2. Neules-Bates, Carol, ed. *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982) 209.
3. *Ibid.*, 301.
4. *Ibid.*, 64.
5. Warner, Jack. "Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn." *Music and Letters*, 37/4, 326.

6. Neules-Bates, *op. cit.*, 147.
7. Warner, *op. cit.*, 330.
8. Neules-Bates, *op. cit.*, 154.
9. Susskind, Pamela. *Selected Piano Music of Clara Schumann*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), vii.
10. Neules-Bates, *op. cit.*, 154.
11. Ammer, Christine. *Unsung: A History of Women In American Music*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 77.
12. *Ibid.*, 84.
13. *Ibid.*, 130.
14. Neules-Bates, *op. cit.*, 310.
15. *Ibid.*, 309.
16. Le Page, *op. cit.*, 149.

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