

“Inherently Deficient” or Created Equal?

The Rise of the American Woman Composer

By Hannah Roberts, NCTM

It was a cool, early-spring evening in 1891, and a crowd had gathered in Boston’s Union Hall for a performance that was not to be missed. The program that evening presented a novelty: the premiere of a brand-new violin sonata by a “Madame Helen Hopekirk.” After all, sonatas composed by women were not an everyday occurrence on concert programs in 19th-century Boston! Would this work be worthy of their attention that evening, they wondered? Was it truly possible for a woman to successfully compose a substantial, serious work—a sonata?

As the hall grew hushed and the performers entered the stage, the audience recognized the famed concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Franz Kneisel. Next to him was the renowned Scottish-American pianist and composer Mme. Hopekirk, recently returned to America from her studies with Theodor Leschetizky in Vienna. Hopekirk’s sonata was

the opening work on the concert program that evening.

Scattered throughout the audience were music critics from a dozen of the major Boston newspapers, ready to offer their opinion of both the composition and the evening’s performers. This performance was a rare experience for them, too. American music critics were accustomed to seeing women virtuosi on stage either to perform the works of other composers or to perhaps perform charming little piano pieces or songs they themselves had written. A full-length sonata by a woman was certainly atypical; a sonata by a woman composer from outside of Germany was even more atypical. This sonata was both. As one critic expressed in the following day’s paper, “Female composers in large and classical forms have been comparatively few, and those few not voluminous. Clara Schumann, Mendelssohn’s sister, Fanny Hensel, Agnes Zimmerman, are the principal names...at

this moment” (*Evening Transcript*, 1891). Commenting on the general scarcity of women composers at the time, another critic noted, “The woman has until late years been of influence in music through charm of voice and witchery of finger-play; not through original musical thought expressed in writing” (*Boston Post*, 1891).

This evening’s performance, however, was different. A woman had composed a serious work of substantial length. Upon hearing the work, reviewers of the sonata found it an “interesting novelty” (*Boston Daily Traveller*, 1891) but could not resist blaming any supposed deficiencies of the sonata on the gender of the composer. The *Boston Times* expressed their opinion of the work—and the work’s composer—in no uncertain terms: “[it] is a creditable piece of music, limited, ’tis true, by the composer’s *inherent deficiency of created means*” (Steigerwalt, 11, emphasis added). If published in the 21st century, a statement such as this might be viewed as scandalous. In the 1890s, however, it was not outrageous for such opinions of women’s music to be voiced by prominent music critics. Nor was it inconceivable for such opinions to be published by newspapers in what was, at that time, the most culturally elite city in America.

Due to widely accepted scientific beliefs of the day, women in the 19th century were viewed as intellectual inferiors to men and were restricted to composing in genres and styles that were viewed as being less intellectually rigorous. When women did compose, their works tended to be unduly scrutinized and critically compared to those of their male counterparts. But how exactly did this inferior perception of women composers develop? And how did American women overcome these stereotypes and become accepted as professional composers? This answer requires a broader exploration of the role of women as professional musicians in the 19th century.

Amateur vs. Professional

Prior to the mid-19th century, music had generally been viewed as a social accomplishment for women rather than a career. Women’s music making, and accordingly composition, had been largely relegated to the

parlor rather than the stage. Female instrumentalists were skilled amateurs but rarely professionals. However, as the 19th century drew to a close, it became more widely acceptable for women to enter the professional music scene. As Judith Tick (1973, 97) writes:

Between 1870 and 1900 the piano girl was replaced by the professional musician who viewed music as a means of self support...The redefinition of the function of music from accomplishment to work provided the occupational context for increased mobility for women within the profession. Between 1870 and 1900, music and music teaching became a major female occupation.

As they entered the professional field, however, women largely found acceptance only as performers or music teachers, not as composers of art music. Late 19th-century American culture was influenced by social Darwinism, which popularized the belief that women were less evolutionarily developed than men and led to the disbelief in women’s ability to create high art (Block and Stewart 2001). It was believed at the time that, because women’s brains were anatomically smaller than men’s, women lacked the capability to be men’s intellectual equal (Halstead 1997). Music critics of the day claimed that women were ruled by emotion and accordingly were capable only of absorbing and interpreting music, not creating it. On the other hand, men—perceived as emotionally controlled and mathematically minded—were seen as the only ones who could successfully compose music (Macleod 2001). In 1880, American music critic George Upton (1892, 31) penned an influential essay entitled *Woman in Music*, arguing in favor of this widespread opinion:

[Music] has every technical detail that characterizes science in its most rigid forms. In this direction woman, except in very rare instances, has never achieved great results. Her grandest performances have been in the regions of romance, of imagination, of intuition, of poetical feeling and expression...It does not seem that woman will ever originate music in its fullest and grandest harmonic forms.

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She will always be the recipient and interpreter, but there is little hope she will be the creator.

This perception of women musicians reinforced the expectation that women should focus their energies on performance and teaching and limit their attempts at composition.

Masculine vs. Feminine Music

When women did compose, critics judged their music based on a system of sexual aesthetics developed in the late 19th century that defined what genres and styles were acceptable for a female composer. In this system, music was classified as either masculine or feminine, based on its content and form. Feminine music was expected to be graceful, delicate, sensitive, melodious and limited to smaller forms, such as songs and piano music (Neuls-Bates 1996, 223). Critics of that day—all male—believed that women were incompetent to perform the abstract thinking necessary to compose large-scale works (Bomberger 2003, 167) and viewed women as emotional creatures who were “supposed to rely on their imaginations, from which ‘beautiful melodies could flow’” (Tick 1986, 336–337).

Conversely, masculine music was described as “powerful in effect and intellectually rigorous in harmony, counterpoint, and other structural logic” (Neuls-Bates 1996, 223). Because it was believed that only men could successfully compose with structural adhesion and logical organization, large-scale works such as symphonies and sonatas were categorized as “masculine,” and 19th-century women composers largely confined their writing to “feminine” forms such as songs and small-scale piano works. Regardless of whether women wrote large- or small-scale works, critics used the music women produced

to justify and reinforce their stereotypes of female inferiority:

Music composed by women can only confirm or try to deny “femininity.” If a woman composer writes delicate, refined melodic music in a small form, this immediately “confirms” beliefs about her feminine temperament of which such musical expression and content is an extension. However, if a woman composes music that is dramatic, large-scale and intellectual in character, this only “proves” that she was adopting a masculine style in order to step beyond the limitations of her sex. Either way, the composer reinforces her “natural” position as inferior (Halstead 1997, 142–143).

In the closing decades of the 19th century, women composers throughout Europe and America gradually overcame this perception of female ineptitude and found growing acceptance of their work. Public performances of their compositions garnered increased visibility and publishers regularly printed their music. Audiences and critics slowly began to accept their works both in small-scale, “feminine” forms and large-scale, “masculine” forms.

Shifting Trends: 1870–1900

In the United States, the American female composer rose to prominence between the years 1870 and 1900, with the activity of these women becoming especially prominent in the 1890s. Leading women composers in the United States at the time included prominent names such as Clara Kathleen Rogers, Margaret Ruthven Lang, Amy Beach, Helen Hopekirk and Mabel Wheeler Daniels. These women comprised the first group of professional women composers in the United States (Blunsom 1996, vi). They all centered their professional activities in Boston and warmly supported each other’s work by maintaining collegial relationships, attending concerts of each other’s works and performing each other’s music.

With their expanding acceptance and influence as professional musicians, American women composers began to explore large-scale compositional forms. The 1890s saw



Helen Hopekirk

a series of historical firsts by these women, and Lang, Beach and Hopekirk are credited with the earliest symphonies, piano concertos and large-scale choral and chamber works by American women. For example, the year 1893 saw Margaret Lang’s *Dramatic Overture* performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the first orchestral composition by a woman to be performed by a major American symphony orchestra. Other firsts by these American women include the first symphony, Amy Beach’s *Gaelic Symphony* (1896); the first piano concertos, by Amy Beach and Helen Hopekirk (both premiered 1900); the first large-scale work for chorus and orchestra, Amy Beach’s *Mass in E-flat* (1890); and the premieres of what appear to be the earliest large-scale chamber works by American women, Hopekirk’s *Violin Sonata in E Minor* (1891 premiere) and Roger’s *Violin Sonata in D Minor* (1893 premiere).

Whereas in the 1870s, American women had largely restricted themselves to writing parlor songs and a few small piano works, by 1900 there had been premieres of works by American women in nearly all large-scale genres (Tick 1986, 326). Although these women still battled gender-based stereotypes, they slowly found growing acceptance of their works in all genres, including those large-scale forms previously considered too intellectually demanding for women. By challenging the accepted *status quo*, these American pioneers opened the door to professional composition for future generations of women composers. Their influence endures to the present day.

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