

Why So Few Women Composers on the Great American Songbook?

by Michael Curtis



Any note you can reach I can go higher, any note you can hold I can hold longer, sang Annie Oakley when competing with her rival in the 1946 musical *Annie Get Your Gun*. Valid though may be, it does not controvert the reality that a gender gap has been and still remains, though diminishing, in most professions. Nowhere is this more true than in the profession of music composition.

Two generations ago, the question was asked and an answer attempted, why were there no great women artists. A similar question can be raised, why were there in the past and still in the present so few women composers, let alone great ones, when compared to the number of men. Surely the answer cannot

be that women lack certain attributes that are essential to create music. Gender is irrelevant to native talent, or intelligence, or musical temperament. More pertinent were cultural biases that prevented the emergence of women, bans or bars against women composition, late emancipation of women, the problem of chores in marriage and children. The paradox of the gender gap is all the greater because of the richness of vocal performance by women for centuries, and time in the past spent by women entertaining the family, a social skill, and in charge of family music education.

The music industry has always been patriarchal. Yes, there has been a considerable output, in one estimate at least 5,000 entries in a list of women composers, though the music system was biased against women, who were excluded from music academies. In her list of women who composed classical music in her book, *Sounds and Sweet Airs*, Anna Beer presents the achievements of eight women composers, over four centuries, from Francesca Caccini in the Tuscan court in the early 17th century until Elizabeth Maconchy, English composer of Irish heritage, who died in 1994. Maconchy was the first woman President of The Society for the Promotion of New Music, which was committed to gender equality, and the promotion of creation and performance of new music by young composers.

Some women, Caccini, in Renaissance Florence, and Marianna Martines in 18th century Vienna lived under female rulers; Caccini lived when two women were regents, the Grand Duchess Christina of Lorraine, and her daughter in law. She wrote sacred for court activities, and resisted the assaults of the court poet of the time, a 17th century version of Harvey Weinstein. Barbara Strozzi in Venice in the mid 17th century composed secular vocal music and performed erotic songs. Others were servants of court or the Church.

Some women composers are well known, and can be named. Clara Schumann, devoted wife of Robert, a gifted pianist who

performed through eight pregnancies. Lili Boulanger the first woman to win the Prix de Rome, in 1913 but who died at age 24. Her achievement was all the more remarkable because Maurice Ravel, Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas, were among those turned down for the Prix. Fanny Hensel (Mendelssohn) never competed with her brother Felix, and kept her compositions private. Ethel Smyth, was the first female composer to be made, in 1922, a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

Nevertheless, as Beer comments, women were restricted in the forms they were able to compose, rarely large orchestral works. One authoritative list indicates that about 10% of composers were women. A female composer had to be exceptionally talented and lucky to succeed. The women were restrained by the cultural environment, by family life, and were not helped by critics who focused on the sex life of the women.

The gender gap persists in modern times, in the era, 1920-50, of the Great American Songbook whose leading composers were Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Richard Rodgers, and Cole Porter, and hundreds of other less well known men. The era was dignified by outstanding women vocalists, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Nina Simone, and Jo Stafford, and women performers on a variety of instruments, Terri Lyne Carrington, Mary Lou Williams, Lil Hardin Armstrong, Regina Carter, Emily Remler, among others.

Nevertheless, there is a striking discrepancy between the number of women who are composers and those who are lyricists. The few composers include: Irene Kitchings (*Some Other Spring*