

## What might a feminist history of music look like?

July 1763. Two child prodigies are setting out on a tour of Europe which will shape both their lives. One will come to be seen as possibly the greatest composer of all time. The other, aged just 18, will be forced to surrender a life of music and return home to take a domestic role. The key difference between them? Unlike Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Maria Anna Mozart was female.

The story of “Mozart’s sister” encapsulates many of the reasons why men dominate music history. Her musical career was made possible by men, but also defined and limited – and ultimately curtailed – by them. In most cultures, in most times, women have had roles in music, but subsequent generations of (mostly male) historians have typically ignored or forgotten them, reinforcing the marginalisation that many experienced in their lifetimes. It is this that creates the need to ask what a feminist history of music could be.

This essay is a collection of notes towards what a feminist history of music might look like, and how we could create one. It focuses on the Western Classical tradition, which is perhaps the best documented of any, but many of its suggestions could be applied to any musical culture.

We cannot know what a feminist history of music might look like without first understanding our aims in creating it. Every school of feminism, and indeed every feminist, could have different opinions on what these aims should be, and in some ways the advocacy of one ‘correct’ approach to history is an inherently antifeminist stance: a monolithic approach which excludes those who do not conform to its idea of ‘proper’ history. Feminism covers such a broad spectrum of thought that the creation of aims that all feminists could agree on would make the argument so general as to render it meaningless. The aims I set out below are not the aims of all feminists; they are simply one possible set.

The first edition of *Gender and History* stated its aim as to “examine all historical social relations from a feminist perspective, to construct a comprehensive analysis of all institutions that takes their gender-specific characters into account [and to] illuminate the ways in which societies have been shaped by the relations of power between women and men”.<sup>1</sup> Adapting these ambitions to apply to music history, we can create the following objectives:

1. Re-examine conventional music history from a feminist perspective and propose solutions for any inadequacies.
2. Look at how certain roles in music have become associated with one gender.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gender and History*, Volume 1, Issue 1, March 1989

3. Question how male influence has affected female musicians (both positively and negatively).

What is music history? Dahlhaus sums up the conventional view: “music history is made up primarily, if not exclusively, of significant works of music”.<sup>2</sup> We select these “significant” works because they stand out from those around them. In the words of Nicholas Cook, “a value system is in place within our culture [...] which places innovation above tradition, creation above reproduction, expression above the market-place”.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, this means that what we think of as the ‘mainstream’ in music history is largely made up of composers who were exceptions. And returning to our first objective (looking at conventional music history from a feminist perspective), we can see that this exposes a problem. The composers that we see as innovative, and thus rank highly, are overwhelmingly male. This raises a question: ‘what are the prerequisites for innovation, and why have women lacked them?’

Innovation is inherently assertive, and female assertiveness has been widely discouraged throughout history. Innovation could even be described as organised, well-resourced assertiveness– and female composers have typically not had access to the musical material, social support and personal resources necessary for this. Furthermore, many have faced a permanent crisis of confidence. Even if no one was specifically making them lose confidence in their abilities as individuals, enough criticisms were aimed at female composers *as a category* to increase their artistic insecurity and therefore reduce their power to innovate.

A case study of this insecurity is Germaine Tailleferre. Robert Orledge writes that “her continual financial problems led her to compose mostly to commission, resulting in many uneven and quickly written works. Also, her natural modesty and unjustified sense of artistic insecurity prevented her from promoting herself properly.”<sup>4</sup> The phrase “natural modesty” is revealing – the words are rarely applied to male musicians. Many societies have required female modesty, but modesty is dangerous in a profession as competitive as composition. Female composers like Tailleferre were caught in a two-way trap: if they promoted their own work they were unfeminine, so their music should not be played, but if they didn’t, their music was not played anyway. This Catch-22, in which ‘femininity’ was regarded as trivial but ‘masculine’ characteristics were seen as undesirable in female composers is further exemplified by the reception of works by Cécile Chaminade, whose work was

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<sup>2</sup> Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, p3

<sup>3</sup> Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, p14

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000027390>

simultaneously criticised for being “too virile” and for having “a certain feminine daintiness and grace, but [being] amazingly superficial and wanting in variety”.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond examining its causes, how can a feminist history address the lack of female innovators? One approach would be to re-examine the value system that exalts innovation. We might dream of a history that included every musical event that ever occurred (and perhaps even many that didn't). But in the real world, history is a process of selection. Our feminist history of music should aim to alter this selection process so that women are included.

One way to do this would be to consider works according to the musical impact they had when they were written. So, for instance, we could include both the songs of Maude White<sup>6</sup> and Beethoven's symphonies, because they both affected the musical lives of the many people who came into contact with them. This might be a similar approach to New Historicism, focusing on historical significance instead of perceived artistic significance. But it would also need to consider the mechanisms through which Beethoven's works continued to be popular – in fact, increased in popularity – after his death, like those of most other ‘great composers’, while those of women composers, less promoted by performers and publishers, fell from favour.

One factor in this may be the restrictions in the musical education that was historically available to women. Their access to lessons in harmony and counterpoint, for example, was often limited. So much music written by female composers was often not very developed, and was therefore seen as more ephemeral. How could a feminist history of music address this?

We could write about female composers alone, without making value judgements on their works. This would be a history of women writing music, but would it be a feminist history of music? Not really. With little sense of artistic progression or cultural continuity, it would be more like an album of social vignettes. There is a tradition of ‘separatist’ histories and dictionaries of women in music, dating at least as far back as 1888.<sup>7</sup> But biographical dictionaries fall outside the scope of this essay, and a separatist history of music, although useful to highlight the contributions of female musicians, is ultimately Hamlet without the prince.

How else could a feminist history compensate for the fact that, in most cases, the education available to men (like much else available to men) was significantly better than that available to women? I don't think it could. Although we can address exclusion from history, we are powerless to

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<sup>5</sup> Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, pp186-187

<sup>6</sup> Fuller, *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers*, p330

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000052554>

correct historical exclusions. A feminist history must accept the gaps left by female composers who never realised their full potential. It should be self-reflexive, examining the reasons for and distribution of these lacunae instead of trying to fill them. In one sense, the injustice *is* the history.

Another approach (addressing our first objective) could be a form of feminist critical theory, analogous to feminist literary criticism. One problem would be that music tends towards the abstract, making it difficult, if not impossible, to find something in the music itself which tells us about a composer's (possibly subconscious) views on gender. But there may be other ways to scrutinise instrumental music from a feminist perspective. For example, people have, throughout history, used gendered terms to describe music. In one example among many, WSB Mathews, in 1891, wrote that Chopin "is a woman's composer [...] he is exactly opposite to Schumann and Beethoven, whose works, however delicate and refined, have always a manly strength."<sup>8</sup> A feminist history could consider how such gendered 'musical' language reflects broader gender relations.

One way in which composers have specifically used gendered terms in instrumental music is in sonata form, where the first subject used to be called 'masculine' and the second 'feminine'. As Citron notes in *Gender and the Musical Canon*, it is "ironic that the typical key of the first appearance of the feminine theme, at least in major key movements, is called the dominant, for in the end the dominant is subordinate."<sup>9</sup> This is self-evidently true; however, before reading too much into it, we might be wise to question whether composers were genuinely thinking in such gendered terms when they wrote in sonata form. Certainly some were - Citron cites D'Indy and Riemann<sup>10</sup> - but showing this requires an external source. Charles Rosen suggests that "the masculine-feminine distinction amounts to nothing more than the fact that the very opening of a sonata is often more direct and forthright".<sup>11</sup> Regardless of which view you take, it is clear that by attempting to study gender relations in instrumental pieces, we risk learning more about ourselves than about the music.

Feminist criticism might be applied more fruitfully to vocal music. Leaving aside children and castrati, vocal music is unique because the sex of the performer is immediately apparent to the listener. It would be interesting to analyse how composers used male and female voices in lieder: what words did they choose to set and how did they set them? Unfortunately, very often a voice type is not specified, so it isn't possible to tell if the composer is writing from a male or female perspective. However, a feminist history of music could look at which songs have been 'adopted' by male and female singers, and use this to explore shifting gender relations.

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<sup>8</sup> Mathews, *A Popular History of the Art of Music: From the Earliest Times Until the Present*

<sup>9</sup> Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, p139

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp135-136

<sup>11</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart*, p81

Obviously voice type is clearer in opera, and Citron makes interesting comments on how operatic musical devices (disjunct leaps and jagged rhythms) can represent heroism when sung by a man but hysteria when sung by a woman.<sup>12</sup> A feminist history of music might examine the variety of ways in which men and women are characterised in opera and how this characterisation relates to wider social attitudes.

Opera's need to include women for musical, not social, reasons raises another area which a feminist history of music could address. Female opera singers formed a community which, by definition, did not compete with the equivalent male community. And music history includes a number of all-female communities, from the religious (literal) communities such as Hildegard of Bingen's and the Venetian *ospedali*, to examples from more recent history such as the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago and Zohra, an all-female orchestra from Afghanistan. Such communities show that women with a greater degree of autonomy, in situations where they have not been required to compete with (or compromise for) men, have achieved innovation and high musical standards.

A crucial question is why women in these communities were often so much more successful than those outside. We might speculate that musical women have been able to behave in ways considered more 'masculine' when not constrained by the presence of men.

Perhaps we can find another clue in the story of a great male musician, Haydn. Reflecting on his many provincial years with the Esterházy court, Haydn said: "I could make experiments [...] I was isolated from the world; no one in my vicinity could make me lose confidence in myself or bother me, and so I had to become original".<sup>13</sup> He meant, of course, that he was isolated along with a choir, an orchestra and two opera houses. Perhaps female musicians fortunate enough to be "isolated" in similar ways have enjoyed advantages that their counterparts, suffering from more conventional sorts of personal musical isolation in society, have lacked. A feminist history of music could examine these isolated communities and their causes and effects (both positive and negative).

Another area of interest, in terms of our second objective, will be women's history as performers. While there have been professional female musicians since the sixteenth century, their scope has frequently been restricted by social prejudice and convention. In Regency England, for example, playing the piano (or to a lesser extent the harp) was a social 'accomplishment' for a young lady, rather than a career. It is interesting to note the choice of instrument; a piano – or a harp – is 'part of the furniture' and so part of the domestic fabric in a way that, say, a violin is not. (The author of *The Girl's Own Indoor Book*, looking back from the 1880s, recalled that she had "in former days known

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<sup>12</sup> Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, p73

<sup>13</sup> Sisman, *Haydn and his World*, p3

girls of whom it was darkly hinted that they played the violin, as it might be said that they smoked big cigars, or enjoyed the sport of rat-catching".<sup>14</sup>) This does not mean that there were no female woodwind, brass or bowed string players – just that the few women who did play tended to be from musical or theatrical backgrounds. It wasn't something a 'respectable' girl could do. A feminist history of music might explore what made different instruments 'suitable' for different women at different times in history. It might also try to illuminate some of the amateur music making done by women – particularly of chamber music (whose name emphasises its domestic associations) and vocal and choral music.

In conclusion, there cannot be just one feminist history of music. A variety of approaches is required, and not all of them will be appropriate to all places and times. Fluidity, self-reflection and creativity are also needed. A feminist history of music cannot believe in its own infallibility or universality. It will not just know its own limits, it will be about its own limits. A feminist history of music is one in which we can hear, however softly, Maria Anna Mozart playing the fortepiano for her own amusement in Salzburg, writing the pieces we know she wrote but which are now – probably forever – lost.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://songofthelarkblog.com/2011/11/25/>

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