

What might a feminist history of music look like?

By Marcella Keating

The Oxford English Dictionary defines feminism as being ‘the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of equality for the sexes’. We live in a society that, in the majority of areas, is still dominated by men. Women have to fight to be equal, and this is certainly the case in music. Music, particularly classical styles, has been dominated by men since day one. Nannerl Mozart, for example, was noted as being a brilliant harpsichord and pianoforte player, but was overshadowed by her brother and, as soon as she reached a marriageable age, had to give up music in return for raising a family. Fast-forward a few centuries to the era of blues music in the 1920s, and women, in the shape of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, were finally thrust to the forefront of the music scene, though not without complications and challenges. Today, modern day classical music is still dominated by men, with some notable exceptions such as the great Caroline Shaw. Modern day jazz is even worse for women, despite the emergence of instrumentalists such as Yazz Ahmed. There is much work to be done to unearth and celebrate the great female musicians that have come before, and will come in the future.

Female musicians were composing music as early as 1098, but they are still woefully underappreciated. Many of the wives or sisters of famous classical musicians such as Fanny Mendelssohn (Felix’s sister) or Clara Schumann (Robert’s wife) were overlooked, whilst the music world focussed on their male counterparts. Despite Clara Schumann having a successful career as a concert pianist, she gave up composing at the age of 31, saying that “a woman should not desire to compose - there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?”¹ Modern day players still dispute Clara’s influence. The cellist Steven Isserlis argues that Clara caused harm to her husband and “was only interested in her career”² instead of her husband’s mental health. However, Graham Johnson, an accompanist, points out in the same article that “If she’d been a man, her behaviour would not have been seen as at all remarkable.” The societies that Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn were living in (during the 19th century) were ones in which women were expected to be little more than wives and mothers - there would have been no opportunity for them to become composers or even performers outside of very select groups. Opera allowed women to perform, but the emotional scope of the characters was not extended beyond a typical ingenue until composers like Bizet (1838-75) came onto the scene, and even then women had to rely on men to give them more interesting and more feminist roles. In order for classical music to be truly feminist, we need to acknowledge and appreciate the female voices of the past before we can look towards the voices of the present and the future.

The blues era presents an interesting case, as many of its most prominent performers were women, and more specifically, black women. They performed the majority of all blues records,

¹ <http://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/latest/great-women-composers/clara-schumann/>

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/clara-schumann-the-troubled-career-of-the-pianist-468981.html>

and they became the faces of the era and the music they produced built the era from the bottom up. Musicians dealt with themes such as domestic abuse, sexuality, work and politics, that were not seen in popular music. Artists such as Bessie Smith, Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey and Billie Holiday were at the forefront of the music, and their songs, many of which were very popular, explored a huge range of themes, shaping an entire era. Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues' (1920), for example, sold 75,000 copies within a month. Despite all of these female artists having quite feminist attitudes, the sexualised lyrics of much Blues writing at the time arguably contradict them. These lyrics were often composed by white men, and those scholars who persistently argue that these women do not represent feminist attitudes are also almost always men, as referenced to in Angela Y. Davis' 'Blues Legacies and Black Feminism'.

Blues lyrics contained provocative sexual and homosexual imagery, as well as exploring other themes such as affairs and domestic violence. In Bessie Smith's (1894-1937) 'I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama' she focuses on her cheating husband and how (in her words) 'I swear I'll never love again' after his actions. By using the repeated refrain of 'I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa', Smith is not only employing a typical feature of blues music with the use of repeated phrases, but also highlighting her defiance - she is leaving him and is going completely against the societal norms of the time, where women couldn't leave their husbands, no matter their actions. Blues music pushed the boundaries of what themes could be explored in music. Smith sings: 'You had your chance and proved unfaithful/So now I'm gonna be real mean and hateful'. These lyrics are biting honest in their portrayal of this woman's feelings and explore her true anger rather than, as seen in most popular music of the time, for example musical comedies on Broadway, ignoring true emotion for sweet and sickly love stories. These lyrics also seem to be protecting other women from this man and his deceiving nature (a true feminist notion), with 'To the world I scream/No man can treat me mean' not only informing all of his actions but also empowering other women in the same position to speak out. 'I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama' was written by Fred Longshaw and Leslie Miller, and it is interesting to explore the nature of the lyrics from a male perspective. They are then not necessarily portraying a feminist view and instead are belittling this woman for choosing to leave her husband in an era when that was completely taboo - the use of the proclamation 'But I swear I'll never love again' could be interpreted as being an exaggeration, and that she would return to her cheating partner or another man soon enough. This song, if read from a sympathetic point of view, is celebrating this woman's choice to leave her partner and encourages other women to stand up for themselves - it is incredibly empowering. Women were still underpaid for their work, and thus the music they produced was not only an effect of the circumstances they were in, but also a consequence of their real life situation, complete with money problems.

Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' (1939) became one of the defining pieces of music of the blues era, dealing with the hate and eruptions of violence that threatened black people. Prior to this song, Holiday wanted to reach a mass audience and achieve recognition for her work, refusing to perform the Tin Pan Alley pieces that could have made her commercially successful and choosing to perform subversive versions of conventional and popular love songs. 'Strange Fruit' was a truthful account of the violence towards African Americans that carried over from slave

labour into the era of emancipation, with 'Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees'. These lyrics are looking at the hanging of innocent black people, at the hands of white Southern racists. Lewis Allen composed the lyrics, and, despite suggestions that it was only the men (Allen among others) who made the song the success it is today, Holiday transformed a poem into a piece of music whose meaning stemmed from her rendering of the song. The held note on 'strange' creates an uneasy and somewhat 'strange' opening, with it leading into the political lyrics. The song has a relatively slow tempo, allowing each lyric to be heard in all its explicit glory. Holiday is often known for her drug addiction, alcoholism, feminine weakness, depression and other difficulties, but she was a performer that could take these politically-charged and extremely powerful lyrics and turn them into a piece of music that has survived the test of time and still has an incredibly important and affecting meaning today. It is ironic that Holiday is known for these traits, and yet male artists such as Elvis Presley (who died of a drug overdose) is not seen for his drug addiction and instead is seen as some kind of tortured artist - this highlights further the sexism that undercut this era and still survives to this day. 'Strange Fruit' not only represents a new type of blues music, one that could be politically charged and still highly popular, but also paved the way other protest songs to become popular in the mainstream and create legacies that are still lasting, even seventy years after its release. Holiday's music has helped other feminist composers and performers to emerge, such as Cassandra Wilson or Madeleine Peyroux (both jazz singers). Wilson, who released an album featuring performances of some of her favourite Holiday songs, said in interview with the Smithsonian Magazine in 1993: "Jazz is very male-centered. The men just don't give credit to what the women bring to the music. For all the praise that Billie Holiday gets as a vocal stylist, she's seldom acknowledged as a musical genius. She was the first to prove that you could make soft sounds and still have a powerful emotional impact. She was understating jazz long before Miles ever stuck a mute in his horn; she was the true 'Birth of Cool.'"³

Today female jazz singers are still welcomed in the industry, but female jazz instrumentalists are a different story. Yazz Ahmed is one of the few female jazz trumpeters out there - her new album, 'La Saboteuse', is an ode to her Middle Eastern heritage and she has spoken out about the lack of female jazz musicians - in thirty years of Jazz at Lincoln Centre orchestra, there has never been a female player.⁴ Jazz is perhaps even less welcoming to women than classical music. Jazz orchestras only just beginning to partake in blind auditions whilst classical orchestras have been doing these for years. As Ahmed says, women in jazz ensembles are only expected to be the vocalists - there is still barely any difference between people's typical view of what a jazz ensemble looks like (male instrumentalists, and female vocalists), thanks to the lack of prominent ensembles having female members. If larger ensembles accept female musicians by fair means (helped by blind auditions), there could be more representation and thus an opportunity to inspire young female instrumentalists to get involved with jazz: "male

³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/what-makes-billie-holiday-so-powerful-today-180954893/>

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<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/jazz-at-lincoln-center-adopts-blind-auditions-and-new-selection-procedures-for-jazz-orchestra-300315206.html>

counterparts often don't book female side musicians to play in their own bands."⁵ Ahmed was forced to start her own band in order to get her voice to be heard, and her ensemble is split 50/50 between men and women, allowing for greater collaboration rather than the competition that can be evident within all-male groups.

A more recent figure in classical composition is Caroline Shaw, a New York based performer and composer. She won the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2013 for her acapella piece 'Partita for Eight Voices'. Her music is innovative and new, taking advantage of using interesting instruments such as flower pots as percussion. There are now other signs of progress. Trinity Laban recently announced its Venus Blazing project, where more than 50% of all its concert programmes in the 2018/19 academic year will be made up of works by women.⁶ Classical music as a whole needs to grow in popularity in order to move away from its typical current audience (older, white, middle to upper class people), and, by attending to diversity and exposing more people to more composers and types of classical music, we can finally start to consider it as moving towards being a truly feminist artform.

The music world is still not equal - it is still firmly favoured towards men. Even in classical music, women are often sexualised and objectified and their music comes second in the media to their bodies and clothing choices. Alison Balsom was recently referred to as a 'crumpet with a trumpet' by the FT for complaining about the travel agency British Airways.⁷ There needs to be a change - male musicians and composers need to make the effort to bring female musicians to the forefront of every genre. The leading ladies of the blues era were not necessarily the ones making the decisions - it was their faces and their music that defined the era and shaped it into what we now know it as, but the men were the figures controlling these women and making the era into what they wanted it to be. However, it would be wrong to disregard their music and their legacies as not being entirely theirs. The women of the blues not only helped to shape the period, but produced music that helped to empower other women. Modern and ancient female classical musicians are now being discovered and taken seriously. We are living in an era in which women are still not equal and our gender equality problems are not yet fixed, but the resurgence of female voices in classical and jazz music is helping to inspire the next generation. Music is a way of expressing yourself, and it needs to tell all of our stories, not just men's. A feminist history of music already exists - we just need to listen to it.

⁵ <https://thevinylfactory.com/features/yazz-ahmed-women-in-jazz/?platform=hootsuite>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/07/the-guardian-view-on-diversity-in-classical-music-quality-and-equality>

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<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/19/trumpet-crumpet-alison-balsom-leads-revolt-against-british-airways/>

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