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### Abstract

This thesis examines the roles that women have played in the development of Western music from ancient Greece to the present time. Much of the discussion deals with the obstacles that women have faced as composers, teachers, and performers. Women's contributions to music are also examined. Finally, this thesis accompanies a senior recital where the works chosen as representative of some of the wonderful music that has been composed by women.

Throughout the centuries women have struggled in many areas, including music. For example, in the 1600s one woman was accused of being a prostitute for publishing her musical compositions.<sup>1</sup> In the early part of the 1900s George T. Ladd published an article entitled "Why Women Cannot Compose" with some of his reasons being that "women are not listed in Grove's (Dictionary of Music and Musicians) and therefore this proves they are not significant" and "musical talent is hereditary and only inherited by boys."<sup>2</sup> This struggle for equality was happening as late as the 1940s with women musicians fighting for the right to play in the same orchestras as men. By examining women's musical roles from ancient Greece to the present time, one can see that women have faced many struggles for their rights as composers, teachers, and performers; as well as making significant contributions to Western music.

In ancient Greece women had a much greater role in mythology than in actual society. Two important groups of women in Greek mythology were the Muses and the Sirens. The Muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne and many of them presided over music; including Euterpe, the muse of flute playing and Terpsichore, the muse of lyric poetry and dance. The Muses were said to help, but they could also be dangerous to mortals that tried to cross them.<sup>3</sup> The other group, Sirens, were beautiful women that would sing to passing mariners and try to lure the ships into rough waters. The Greeks also believed that the Siren's music could charm the souls of the dead.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Carol Plantamura, Woman Composers, (Santa Barbara: Bellerophon Books, 1994), 3.

2 Jeannie Pool, Women in Music History: A Research Guide, (Ansonia Station: Jeannie Pool, 1977), 2.

3 Plantamura, 3.

4 Arthur C. Elson, Woman's Work in Music, (Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1931), 22.

However, in ancient Greece women were treated as the lowest level of society. They were viewed as subordinate descendants of Pandora and Eve. These were symbols of evil to men.<sup>5</sup> Female children were taught reading, writing, gymnastics, and music; but only the hertairai, or prostitutes were well trained musically. This was in order to provide entertainment for men.<sup>6</sup> The only area of society that women had control over were family and religious life. They also created their own burial and death rituals because women were not allowed to participate in public ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> Many historians have labelled the laments used in these ceremonies as "non-music" because they lack musicality; however, these laments do contain intricate solo and choral interplay, improvisation, antiphony, and pitch alteration.<sup>8</sup>

Even though, as a general rule, ancient Greek society did not hold women in high regards, there were a few prominent women musicians. One named Lamia was an important instrumentalist while Corinna was a poet, composer, and teacher. Perhaps the most famous woman musician in Greece was Sappho. She was the leader of the cult of Aphrodite and much of her music was composed for cult ceremonies. Many of Sappho's compositions are sung antiphonally and use instrumental accompaniment.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Kimberly Marshall, et al., Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 113.

6 Marshall, 114.

7 Marshall, 92.

8 Marshall, 103.

9 Marshall, 157.

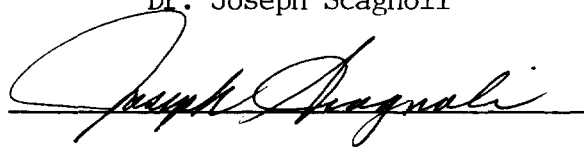
Women's Roles in Music from Ancient Greece to the Present

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Joseph Scagnoli", is written over a horizontal line.

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During the Middle Ages there were not many pieces composed by women, except for the pieces by Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179). She is said to have experienced visions and prophecies while composing over eighty pieces of music.<sup>10</sup> This lack of music in general could be for two reasons: modesty kept women from admitting they had written music or the compositions were attributed to men.<sup>11</sup> Female organists and singers did compose their own songs, but the songs were mainly improvisations and were not written down.

Even though there were not many compositions by women during the Middle Ages, they were still involved in music. Much of the artwork of this time uses female icons to represent music, such as the Muses and St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music.<sup>12</sup> (Figures 1-2) There were also groups of women troubadours that flourished during this time. These groups prospered mainly because of the Crusades when women were left to govern the estate in their husbands' absences. Women also had "noble birth and the ability to inherit land" which helped contribute to the growth of women troubadours.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Carol Plantamura, Woman Composers, (Santa Barbara: Bellerophon Books, 1994), 8.

11 Kimberly Marshall, Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 162.

12 Marshall, 143.

13 Carol Neuls-Bates, et. al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 21.



Figure 1: Drawing from medieval manuscript entitled "Women in a Procession Singing and Playing Handbells"



Figure 2: "A Jongleresse with Handbells" from tenth century manuscript

Much of what is known about women and music during the Renaissance comes from Baldessar Castiglione's book, The Book of the Courtier, in which he provides guidelines for proper behavior. He states that "a courtier should be able to read music and play several instruments; a lady, however, should sing or choose her instrument in accordance with the ideal of feminine gracefulness."<sup>14</sup> During this era women were not allowed to play the drums or any brass or woodwind instruments because these instruments caused facial deformities and were not considered to be gentle.<sup>15</sup> Castiglione goes on to say that a lady should not be eager to perform, but rather she should be coaxed into performing, implying that women should be embarrassed by their musical talent. Finally, after a woman has been coaxed into singing or playing a musical instrument she should not "use abrupt and frequent (dynamic changes)" because it is not proper or beautiful. 16

Contrary to Castiglione's opinion that women should not be eager to perform, by 1580 women began to be employed as court singers. One of these women, Francesca Caccini, was the highest paid singer in the Florentine court. In 1615 Caccini published her first book of songs and an opera, La Liberazione di Ruggiero. Her music is very dramatic with many dissonances and ornaments.<sup>17</sup> Another famous court singer of the early Baroque era was Barbara Strozzi. Much of her music is like Caccini's in the sense that it is very dramatic. Strozzi was often criticized for thinking like a man and she was even accused of being a prostitute for publishing some of her compositions. 18

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14 Carol Neuls-Bates, et. al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 37.

15 Neuls-Bates, 39.

16 Neuls-Bates, 39.

17 Carol Plantamura, Woman Composers, (Santa Barbara: Bellerophon Books, 1994), 15.  
18 Plantamura, 16.

Aside from the royal court, music played an important role in the lives of female orphans and nuns during the 1600s. Venetian conservatories were established to teach orphaned girls a trade, but instead these conservatories became the finest schools for musical training. They even attracted some very wealthy students. Famous composers like Vivaldi, Hasse, and Pergolesi served as the maestri di cappella at these conservatories which provided them with numerous opportunities to try their compositions. However, even with the freedom of studying music these women led a restricted life, even needing permission to leave the conservatory. <sup>19</sup>

Outside of the conservatories, Italian nuns developed many new musical ideas and styles. One example is a new style of motet that emerged. This motet broke the traditional biblical/liturgical texts and used the highly personalized and affective language of Italian poetry instead. <sup>20</sup> Other new musical ideas were emerging as well, such as parallel thirds, seventh chords, and more active bass lines. <sup>21</sup> (Figure 3) However the nuns' creativity was put to a halt by Papal edicts. These edicts stated that nuns could only sing in plainchant and they could only play the organ. <sup>22</sup>

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19 Carol Neuls-Bates, et al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 65.

20 Kimberly Marshall, et al., Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 127.

21 Marshall, 129.

22 "Mozart's Sisters: Women's Contributions to Classical Music", National Public Radio Horizon Series, 1981.

The idea of women's musical training in the 1700s was the exact opposite of the 1600s. A good knowledge of music was a sign of "social accomplishment" in the Classical society.<sup>23</sup> This stemmed from the popularity of singing and the piano as well as the expansion of the middle class. Even Marie Antoinette studied composition with Christoph Gluck, one of the most noted opera composers of his time.<sup>24</sup> In the piece, "Tis My Friend", Marie Antoinette composes with a sweet gentleness and charm. (Figure 4)

Towards the end of the Classical period women began to speak out for what they believed. Pianist Maria Therisia von Paradis began touring by herself and giving concerts, which was a big accomplishment for a woman because society did not allow women to travel alone. Composer Corone Schroter wrote in the 1786 edition of the Magazin der Musik about society's negative perception of women. She stated that women musicians suffered because "the work of any lady will indeed arouse any pity to some extent in the eyes of other experts."<sup>25</sup>

With composers like Corone Schroter continuing to speak out, the 1800s became a turning point for women musically. By 1880 over forty-three percent of the musicians and music teachers in the United States were women.<sup>26</sup> However, these women still did not earn the same amount of money in salaries as their male counterparts. The still expanding middle class allowed for a greater cultivation of musical talent in women.

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22 Carol Neuls-Bates, et al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 73.

24 Arthur C. Elson, Woman's Work in Music, (Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1931), 61.

25 Neuls-Bates, 87.

26 Neuls-Bates, 184.

Example 1. Cozzolani, *Tu dulcis, o bone Jesu* (1650), opening.

Oh how good you are, how soft  
 how joyful, my Jesus:  
 Oh how kind you are, how sweet  
 how delightful, O Mary:  
 Loving, sighing  
 having, tasting you.  
 Oh happy, blessed me:  
 here I feed from his wound,  
 here I suck from her breast,  
 I do not know where to turn next.  
 Life in his wound,  
 salvation in her breast.<sup>42</sup>  
 His blood strengthens me,  
 her milk purifies me,  
 his blood refreshes me,  
 her milk revives me,  
 his blood intoxicates me,  
 her milk gladdens me.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 3 : Motet  
 "Tu dulcis, o bone Jesu"

'TIS MY FRIEND

FLORIAN  
 English version by  
 Louis C. Elson

QUEEN MARIE ANTOINETTE

Figure 4: First page of "Tis My Friend"  
 by Marie Antoinette

Even though women were demanding more rights in the Romantic era, there were still problems. Besides not being able to command the same fees as men for teaching, women were still being dictated to when it came to what instruments to play. By 1871 the flute had been accepted as a more "feminine instrument", but other wind instruments could not be played because women "lacked strength and furthermore would ruin their looks."<sup>27</sup> Women still could not play in the same orchestras as men and many still published their compositions under different names for fear of the critics. An example is Fanny Mendelssohn who published her compositions under his brother, Felix's name.<sup>28</sup>

The 1800s were a century of great women performers and composers. Cecile Chaminade was the first woman to make a career of composing. Many of her pieces were known as "parlor music" and were in reach of many amateur players.<sup>29</sup> Her Concertino for flute even won the annual contest at the Paris Conservatory in 1905. Unfortunately after World War I many critics dismissed her music as "light and superficial" and much of it has not been played until recently.<sup>30</sup>

Other famous composers were the Boulanger sisters. Lili was the first woman to win the Prix de Rome for her opera Faust et Helene, which she entered under a pseudonym so it would not be disqualified.<sup>31</sup> However, Lili's musical career was cut short when she died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five. Her sister, Nadia was more famous for teaching composition than actually composing. In 1921 she began teaching at the American Conservatory in Paris and taught many famous composers, such as Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein.

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27 Carol Neuls-Bates, et al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 192.

28 Janet Nichols, Women Music Makers: An Introduction to Women Composers, (New York: Walker and Company, 1992), 11.

29 Carol Plantamura, Woman Composers, (Santa Barbara: Bellerophon Books, 1994), 34.

30 Plantamura, 34.

31 Nichols, 203.

Another composer that was probably more famous for her performing than composing was Clara Schumann. Many of Clara's compositions contained ideas that would later be used by her husband, Robert, and Johannes Brahms. Two of these ideas are found in her Concerto for Piano, Op.7 where there are not pauses between movements and the slow movement contains a duet between the piano and solo cello.<sup>32</sup> Even though Clara wrote beautiful music she concentrated more on her performing career possibly because of her father's lack of support or her own self-doubt. In her diary she wrote "I once thought that I possessed a 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."<sup>33</sup>

By the turn of the century very few women shared Clara Schumann's sentiments. By 1924 Amy Beach helped found the Society of American Women Composers and between 1920-1940 thirty all-women orchestras were founded. These orchestras were formed because even though women were allowed to play any instrument they were barred from major orchestras. Women were barred for the following reasons: they could not play as well as men and they could not endure the long rehearsals.<sup>34</sup>

As of 1940 women were beginning to be accepted in some of the same orchestras as men. Today, even though women are still overcoming obstacles in being accepted in professional areas, they are contributing a great deal in many areas in the field of music. There are many composers, teachers, and performers, including Ellen Zwilich who was the first woman to earn a doctorate in composition from Julliard and to win a Pulitzer Prize for music.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Janet Nichols, Women Music Makers: An Introduction to Women Composers, (New York: Walker and Company, 1992), 39.

33 Nichols, 11.

34 Carol Neuls-Bates, et al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 249.

35 Carol Plantamura, Woman Composers, (Santa Barbara: Bellerphon Books, 1994), 47.

In conclusion, women have had a long, hard struggle in the world of music. Many historians are starting to realize that women have significant contributions to make in the field of music and are making their contributions with their compositions and performances. Women are still continuing to move forward in their quest for equality in the professional area and try new areas despite what many critics say. Even though in the 1990s women have not been accused of being prostitutes for publishing their music compositions they are still not considered to be on an equal professional level as men. Finally, women need to have confidence in themselves as composer Amy Fay said, "the greatest obstacle facing women... (is) their failure to take their own talents and aspirations seriously."<sup>36</sup>

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36 Carol Neuls-Bates, et al., Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 217.

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