

Women and Music at Luther College: The Women Composers' Festival November 19-22, 1999

by Leon W. Couch III

I think this is a very important weekend for students and women in general. Thank you also for the comments you made in CHIPS. They were very sensitive, and, as a woman, I appreciate them greatly. On a final note, good luck with this weekend — I know it will be a terrific experience for everyone and a great success. (An excerpt from a student's note.)

Introduction

In their undergraduate studies, students often master fundamental techniques with traditional repertory, and thus, do not venture into the less familiar realm of women's music. Women in history thus become invisible, and without models, female students infer that their creative potentials must be limited — they are not capable of possessing genius and producing great works like men. Thus, despite impressive numbers of female music majors nowadays, composition programs throughout America are dominated by men and their male mentors.

Contrary to many claims and evidence in recital halls, women have always composed music, often of equal quality without the benefit of formal training nor easy access to performing venues. Why do we not know these works and composers? One cause is the questionable claim that history invariably picks the best works of every age. We must reevaluate our musical canon taught throughout our curriculum by first performing the works of women.

Music is arguably the most conservative art in the academe. (It seems appropriate that art music is often concentrated and preserved in conservatories!) Because of limited class time, music history must deal primarily with tracing influence, i.e. development of musical styles, often teaching the "great" composers. Thus, expanding the canon also requires venues beyond the classroom (festivals) and making resources easily available to studio teachers.

Purpose and Conception of the Festival

I designed the festival to maximize student involvement in every aspect. While researchers discover neglected artworks, these students will further redefine or expand the musical canon in the new millennium through their own teaching and performing. With the assistance of studio professors here, most student performers researched a small segment of repertory and selected a composition for one of our concerts. Other students contributed extensive program notes on composers, their historical setting, and the compositions themselves. Some students helped with receptions and advertising.

The festival centered around three concerts and interaction with two guest experts: Dr. Bonnie Miksch from Mercer University and Miriam Zach from the University of Florida. These professional guests first engaged students in classrooms, and then presented three lectures, two

masterclasses, and numerous private lessons. Surprisingly, Drs. Zach and Miksch agreed to such a rigorous weekend schedule. They seemed to become more excited and energetic with every encounter, apparently impressed by our talented, intelligent, and well-prepared student body.

The Masterclasses

Dr. Zach, a musicologist and organist, coached half the students while Dr. Miksch, an active composer and early music performer, simultaneously assisted the other half in a second room. Students gained valuable performance experience in the masterclasses, ensuring successful public debuts in the following concerts. Since I attended the second masterclass, I will briefly comment on it. Students discovered that a composer's point-of-view often diverges from the issues performers routinely concentrate on. Here, a real, living composer conversed with them, sometimes on pieces written by that very person! Art is created by people and not just inherited from the past.

In private lessons the next afternoon, composition students enthusiastically shared their works with Dr. Miksch. They found that different teachers bring different yet valuable experiences to their teaching. Our two female students found support from a female role-model particularly rewarding and consoling. Kristin Hett, a talented young composer here, sang one of her own works later in a concert, magnificently fulfilling one of the goals of the festival!

The Concerts

Luther College students and ensembles presented three concerts. The first was a brass concert with a few impressive women's works attractively transcribed by Ben Kirby for large ensembles. This was the brass groups's first performance at Luther. They performed with great gusto!

I was stunned by our students's accomplishments on stage in the second program entitled "Women Composers after 1750." Some vocalists already sounded professional, reflecting both strong student motivation and good teaching in our department. It was a joy to see many of my theory students making music! They looked confident as they walked on stage, and proud as they exited.

The Collegium Musicum performed Miksch's "There is No Rose," one of the choir's most favorite and difficult pieces. The singers were overjoyed to meet the composer and perform it for her in person. Some students had the opportunity to perform with seasoned professionals, Dr. Zach and Professors Fox, Wharton and Couch.

Dr. Miksch composed the song "Do Not Press Me to Leave You" on the famous text from Ruth. This heart-wrenching work is truly difficult. A student organist and singer worked out their parts for months. A week prior to the concert, the organist broke her foot. So, I figured out a way to rearrange it for one foot and two hands. She then developed severe tendinitis four days beforehand. Despite all the concert preparations, I tackled the piece. Fortunately, I had all the student's marks as suggestions. We played the work for Zach in a private coaching, Miksch at the masterclass, and then, the concert. Both coaches were entranced by Sarah Woltjer's singing. I almost wept through the powerful song, and the audience held silent after its performance.

Right before the concert, the singer of Libby Larsen's *Songs from Letters* became ill. Melissa Malde valiantly volunteered. With a few hours of preparation, she sang the two songs

from memory!

Only a couple men performed. Next time, we need to include more men and help them value these works not only for women, but for humanity as a whole. Both sexes should discuss the issues surrounding these works and the festival.

The Collegium Musicum program "Women Composers before 1750" included works from 9 AD to 1750 in a variety of genres and moods (religious, bawdy, quiet, massive, serious, silly). When I announced the theme to students and even some faculty, male and female, they looked at me with suspicion. Did women composers exist back then? Did they write anything good? How could you do this to us! In Collegium choral rehearsals, however, we proceeded learning music without mentioning the theme. They found the works delightful, and later discovered the composers's gender later. They seemed proud to be part of such an endeavor!

Kathy Reed-Maxfield coached a chamber group that performed what may be the first North American performance of Wilhelmina von Bayreuth's harpsichord concerto. This attractive work has never been recorded. We do not know if this work preceded the first keyboard concertos by Bach and Handel, but it certainly is known as the first keyboard concerto by a woman composer. Reed-Maxfield captured the audience with her elegant playing while strings and a flutist responded just as stylishly.

Two of the concert programs contained extensive program notes along with texts and translations. Professors Weigel and Couch edited them. Through our suggestions, they learned how to relate to an audience and intelligently draw them into art music, an important skill these days. Students said they wanted to pursue this repertory more after reading about their composers and studying their music.

The Lectures and Classroom Discussions

In her lecture "Uncommon Voices: The Experimental Vocal Music of Contemporary Women Composers," Dr. Miksch presented four famous composers and performance artists: Meredith Monk, Joan LaBarbara, Laurie Anderson, and Pauline Oliveros. Not only have these women contributed new compositional techniques and superb compositions, they also serve as the first true female role models to young composers these days. Miksch shared how they influenced her own composition. She discussed why women composers are so often attracted by the voice.

The lecture itself started with the audience sitting in a circle at the center of the lecture room around a candle. There, we all performed one of Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* as a group. At first, students contained their laughter, but they soon became entranced by the unusual progression of sounds and their implications. In this piece, one develops a sense of community where every participant has an equal voice. Each performance varies widely. This setup challenges the standard concert "one-way" paradigm: composer->performer->audience. Extra credit essays later collected from my theory students demonstrated how engaged they were with the ideas and the presentation.

In the keynote lecture, "Introduction to Feminist Thought and Gender Issues in Musicology with Bibliography and Discography," Dr. Zach discussed fundamental issues affecting women in music. She related historical figures and ideas to current situations. She discussed how women contribute across the arts without falling into stereotypical venues, genres, and expressions. Zach discussed how canons form and evolve, inspiring us to actively participate in her cause. By

including women, we expand all people's range of experience.

Dr. Zach provided extensive bibliographies. Inquiry into women's music suffers from the tremendous barriers of common stereotypes such as "women only compose art songs." I.e., one needs to know of the existence of works. The next problem is finding and accessing them. Few performers have the persistence to trek through dusty libraries in obscure monasteries. Fortunately, many collections and books have become available in the past decade. Zach made these known to the students.

In her pre-concert lecture "Women Studies and Music: Gender and the Musical Canon," Dr. Zach related stories about more famous women composers to the general community while encouraging discussion of the true subject, gender and the musical canon. In addition, she presented novel ways of programming women's works to first engage the audience, and second, to avoid ghettoising their accomplishments.

Dr. Zach visited my counterpoint class. In classroom discussions, we discussed musical style in various fugues. Such historical context naturally led to gender and racial issues, breaking many stereotypes while augmenting our normal counterpoint exercises.

Dr. Miksch visited sophomore music theory classes and helped students with their group compositions. Her insightful comments were well-appreciated. Often when I came to observe, the groups were giggling in joy.

Unexpected Outcomes

Students connected with our guests better than I could have imagined. Some interacted by email prior to their arrival. During events, they exchanged email addresses and even suggested their favorite women composers to each other. This professional networking and mutual support is vital to the careers of our students, men and women.

Dr. Miriam Zach organizes a prestigious international festival of women composers annually at the University of Florida. She was particularly impressed with our ensembles, and has standing invitations for many students and faculty to perform there.

Professor Weigel reported that discussion of the gender issues and the festival popped up in philosophy classes. She intends to pursue this more in the spring with a unit on music and gender.

Students expressed how new ways of hearing and thinking were opened to them. Now that they have tackled library resources, many can confidently find scores of lesser known, but good composers. Since students now own editions of women's works in their personal libraries, they tend to pick them for their recitals.

Generous Support from Luther Administration and Faculty

This festival brought faculty closer to students. Unlike many performance professors at established conservatories who resist implicit gender issues surrounding music studies, most of our faculty realized the benefit for the students and community here.

It was a joy to meet faculty throughout campus who were especially encouraging throughout the whole process. We have some wonderful resources called faculty members. At first I felt apprehensive about such a large endeavor, but everyone helped out! For instance, Byron Stayskal, Ruth Caldwell, Rebecca Lister, and Marjorie Wharton provided word-for-word translations.

Professor Weigel helped me edit program notes. Many voice and most instrumental teachers helped students select repertory and prepare for performances. Jessica Paul kept all the singers on track with excellent organization, suggestions, and coaching during the semester.

At first, the Lecture and Arts funded the cost of one speaker, but as word spread, other sources sprang up. The Humanities Division and Women Studies contributed towards the second speaker. Furthermore, Women Studies provided a popular reception following the keynote lecture, drawing students interested in their minor. The Dean's office offered a large sum to ensure the festival's success. Upon hearing that Dr. Zach, a recorded organist, was not only speaking but also performing, coaching, and accompanying, the NE Iowa Chapter of the American Guild of Organists contributed towards one concert's reception. Music expenses were minimal because our library acquired good research materials in this field over the past decade, and students wanted to purchase scores. Miraculously, the whole festival boasted a \$9 surplus!

Nathan Gerth from CHIPs wrote an articulate article promoting the festival, and Christy Black advertised it so well that everyone on campus had our guests' photographs memorized. As a result, students met our guests with instant familiarity. Dr. Zach and Miksch seemed almost embarrassed by such overwhelming popularity!

Good job Luther!!!

Details of the festival are available on the following website:
http://www.bigfoot.com/~ProfCouch/womenfest_index.html

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Pictures:

Collegium Musicum Singers (photo by Chip Peterson)

Dr. Miriam Zach
Guest Musicologist and Organist

Dr. Bonnie Miksch
Guest Composer and Early Music Performer

Melissa Malde and Leon Couch at a Reception

Jessica Paul and Dr. Miksch at a Reception