

# CONFERENCE REPORT: WOMEN IN MUSIC: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE, MARCH 2024

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A ONE-DAY CONFERENCE entitled, “Women in Music: An Interdisciplinary Conference,” was held on March 9, 2024, as a connection to International Women’s Day and with the support of the Central New York Humanities Corridor from an award by the Mellon Foundation. The conference was jointly organized by faculty from Eastman School of Music, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and Rochester Institute of Technology, and took place at the Gearan Performing Arts Center, Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Comprising sixteen regular session papers and five papers in a session devoted to undergraduate scholarship, the conference included approximately sixty in-person attendees and twenty-five remote attendees from around the world. The conference also featured two keynote events: an address by Dr. Roger Moseley (Cornell University) and a piano concert by Dr. Kristin Ditlow (University of New Mexico).

Reflective of its name, presentations and performances engaged works from numerous disciplines and featured women as composers, performers, critics, filmmakers, muses, archivists, political agitators, pedagogues, students, trailblazers, and authors. The following account is organized around these identities and activities—women as composers, women as performers and artists, women as undergraduate scholars, and the keynote presentation and concert—with brief commentary throughout regarding the current state of inclusion more broadly for women composers, musicians, and scholars. Participants illuminated a set of central themes throughout the day: women musicians’ and composers’ conditions as a subjective other; their sustained and continuing exclusion, perpetuated across time and space; their enterprising and

innovative musical output created despite these limits; and interventions aimed at accelerating progress toward equity.<sup>1</sup> The full program may be found [here](#).

## 1. WOMEN AS COMPOSERS

In addition to the keynote (discussed below), just over half of the regular session papers focused on music composed by women. Among presentations focused on a handful of familiar names, several involved composers with few or no analytical citations, an unfortunately common situation for women composers. Feminist analytical criticism over the past thirty years has sought to address this imbalance, yet the recent publication of Brenda Ravenscroft and Laurel Parsons’s four-volume *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers* cites what reviewer Tim Sullivan (2021) refers to as the “ultimately depressing” need for more such work: “the small numbers are simply staggering: between 1994 and 2013, ‘only 23, or 1.51 percent, of the 1,524 articles published by eight peer-reviewed music theory and analysis journals over 376 issues have been devoted to music by a female composer’” (1960–2000, 3).<sup>2</sup> In each case, these works rewarded attention to their analytical, musicologi-

<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank the editors of *Integral* for their interest in publishing a report on this conference, as well as our conference volunteers: Kaylee Bernard, Maeve Gillen, Hanisha Kulothparan, Nathan Lam, and Ryan Jones (Eastman School of Music); and Lara Schmidt-gall (HWS).

<sup>2</sup> There is a particular dearth of analyses of more recent music as Sullivan (2021) notes: “The current volume [1960–2000] includes eight analytical essays, all of which were, at the time of publication, the first published on these works” (226).

cal, and performance details, as the presentations examined diverse facets including: harmonic, rhythmic, and formal analysis in song; depictions of sexuality and gender in song; larger-scale instrumental and chamber works; and identity and agency enacted in and through composition.

Song literature encompasses a primary and sizeable corpus of women's compositions and nearly a third of the conference's presentations focused on songs and vocality. Two presentations foregrounded the incorporation of musical elements at the borders of Romanticism and Modernism, including harmonic complexity, rhythmic syncretism, and formal experimentalism. Kyle Hutchinson (Colgate University) noted in his presentation on Alma Mahler-Werfel that her entire published output is art songs, due to constraints demanded by Gustav Mahler. Hutchinson framed the normative tonal preferences in *Scheinakkorden*—defined as recognizable harmonic entities that evoke tonal-diatonic interpretations—as subject to sublimation by voice-leading processes that evoke contrasting harmonic function in order to recast diatonic relationships as chromatic. Mahler-Werfel's songs thus create layers of phenomenological interpretations that serve as psychoacoustic trickery and look ahead to modernist twentieth-century post-tonality. James Sullivan (Michigan State University) highlighted multiple layers of syncopation in Florence Price's "Caged Birds" (1940s) as expressions of Price's intersectional identity as a Black woman composer. Using Yonatan Malin's theory of energetics, Sullivan demonstrated local and large-scale musical syncopation as reflective of the caged bird's struggle and argued that rhythmic manipulation is also an important element of the interplay between poetic syncopation, poetic form, and musical form.

Three additional presentations on song repertoire during the conference's morning session drew attention to the role of sexuality, gender, and transgressive narratives in less familiar twentieth-century works. Yan Gao (Stony Brook University) turned a critical eye to recently unearthed video footage of Diamanda Galas performing *Plague Mass* in 1991, highlighting the ways Galas reimagines and reconstructs the notion of the "abject" by incorporating dominant cultural symbols in her performance. Galas then queers these symbols through vocality, sonic transgression, and embodiment that places her own body as an expressive space to interrogate liberalism and call attention to the AIDS crisis. Anna Stephan-Robinson (West Liberty University) highlighted the use of subtle yet significant alterations to strophic repetitions in Katherine Ruth Heyman's "Tortie-Tortue" (1920). The song's protagonist is a woman who lost her husband and is being questioned about the event by curious children; Stephan-Robinson explored the role of these alterations, alongside key relationships and voice leading, in illustrating key concepts

of disconnection, reticence, and ambivalence. Closing out the morning's presentations on songs, a presentation and live performance of Lili Boulanger's *Clairières dans le ciel* by vocalist Elise Noyes (Eastman School of Music) and pianist Gina Hyunmin Lee (Eastman School of Music) examined the cycle's omission of its protagonist's gender, a strategy linked by Noyes to questions about Boulanger's sexuality and one that informs advocacy for more performances of the song cycle by singers of all genders.

Due to the legacy of historical prohibitions on public and professional music making, larger-scale instrumental and chamber works by women remain underexplored by music scholars and are also generally absent in the world's orchestral halls. A June 2024 report by the Donne Women in Music Equality and Diversity in Global Repertoire initiative covering 111 orchestras in thirty countries finds that 7.5% of the 16,327 scheduled compositions were by women, 5.8% were by white women, and only twelve women had their works played twenty or more times.<sup>3</sup> Three presentations by Gui Hwan Lee (James Madison University), Christopher Segall (University of Cincinnati), and Joe Davies (Maynooth University and University of California, Irvine) featured music by three composers from this group of twelve: Unsuk Chin (#6, twenty-six performances), Sofia Gubaidulina (#3, twenty-nine performances) and Clara Schumann (#10, twenty-one performances), as well as Amy Beach (not listed in the report). Their analyses shed welcome light on each composer's musical responses to societal and autobiographical experiences and detail their sonic depictions of stereotypes, societal collapse, and the renewal of creativity during widowhood, respectively.

Gui Hwan Lee's analysis of Unsuk Chin's *Gougalon* (2009/2012) detailed how the work's third movement, "The Grinning Fortune Teller with the False Teeth," depicts Korea's *mudang*, or female shamans, who are figures typically derided and stereotyped in Korean culture. Drawing on Yayoi Uno Everett's (2021) notion of intercultural anal-

<sup>3</sup> In an excellent accounting of demographic representation in orchestral repertoire, Donne supplies information on global majority representation rates, each orchestra's percentages, and year-over-year changes. Among the highlights: 78.4% of programmed works were by deceased white men; 30.6% of programmed works were by the top ten most-performed composers (Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Dvorak, Ravel, Strauss, Rachmaninoff, Mahler, and Sibelius); works by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky comprised a larger percentage (7.64%) than all works by women combined (7.47%); Lili Boulanger was the most programmed women composer, with fifty-two performances; and thirteen orchestras programmed 100% works composed by men. In a survey of twenty-one US ensembles, 23.8 percent of works were composed by women. For information exclusive to the United States, see "By the Numbers: 2024–2025 Repertoire Report" by Women's Philharmonic Advocacy, [https://wophil.org/by-the-numbers-2024-2025-repertoire-report/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1749572620.1721310615539550781250](https://wophil.org/by-the-numbers-2024-2025-repertoire-report/?doing_wp_cron=1749572620.1721310615539550781250)

ysis, Lee positioned Chin's musical caricature of the *mu-dang* as a unique, energetic, and novel depiction of Korean shamanism within both contemporary East Asian and Western sound art circles. Christopher Segall employed interdisciplinary research on Soviet spectrality and Derrida's notion of hauntology to analyze shadow tuning in post-Soviet works by Sofia Gubaidulina. Two groups of chamber group players are tuned a quarter tone apart, which Segall interpreted as a means for Gubaidulina to consecrate the missing disappeared during Stalin's Terror and to symbolize musically Soviet spectrality, depicting the haunted state and lack of closure that still exists decades later for those who survived. Joe Davies's presentation on composition and widowhood—often stereotypically framed as a time of absence, loneliness, weakness, and passivity—unearthed the creative wellspring that accompanied widowhood for Clara Schumann and Amy Beach, and the ways piano culture shaped their works and their identities after losing their husbands. Davies centered primary source materials with the objective of incorporating women's lived experiences and complex emotions as critical evidence of widowhood's role as catalyst for renewed creativity.

Finally, identity and agency were themes in two presentations featuring composition as a means to diversify spaces still governed by male-centered and colonizer norms. Composer Chieh Huang (University of California, Irvine) explored the rhythmic, pitch, and metaphoric contours found in the language of the Ayatal, an indigenous group in Taiwan, whose dialects and culture were severely curtailed during colonization. Exploring her Ayatal lineage through an endangered language that she does not anticipate being able to learn to speak fluently, Huang described the intricacies of using technological tools (Max/MSP, MalletKat, Mugic, and more) alongside deep exploration of and engagement with the syntactic and acoustic nuances of her ancestral language. This "weaving worlds" served as a re-creating of both linguistic vivacity and cultural production, wherein Huang used her compositions as an urgent means to communicate the musicality embedded in the Ayatal spoken word. Michael Callahan (Michigan State University) incorporated composition into a pedagogical approach that subverts dominant canons of male-centric repertoire by using model compositions as a means of student empowerment. Through examples of model composition assignments and qualitative data from student reflections, Callahan observed how women students reported a sense of expanded musical identities from their compositional assignments. Students also reported expanded agency to compose music that is meaningful to their experiences within the institutional spaces that traditionally discount and marginalize both their experiences and identities.

Taken as a whole, these presentations illustrate the means whereby women created and honed their individual harmonic, formal, and timbral dialects; experienced agency and creativity in the act of composing; and used their agency then and now for actualization, formation, transgression, and political and autobiographical commentary. Presentations on women composers at the conference represented a broad range of musical styles, racial and gender identities, and national origin. This broad inclusion is particularly necessary in combating a paradox at the heart of gender and music reception history: the act of composing as a woman has historically been viewed as both transgressive and banal, with women's works simultaneously considered dangerous and mundanely inferior. Against this backdrop, work that provides a greater and broader understanding of music by women is a key means of combating gendered misconceptions of who is and is not a composer.

## 2. WOMEN AS ARTISTS, STUDENTS, AND MUSES

Complicating notions of performer, muse, agent, and professional musician, several presentations traced women artists and performers from various disciplines, and their navigation of labels throughout their careers. Two presentations focused on performances of vernacular and popular music genres, noting how the act of performance itself may empower women in their efforts to be seen as agents of musical, political, and social change, and not merely as performers. Emily Tam and Chris Stover (Griffith University, Queensland Conservatorium) examined the ways that the label "muse of bossa nova" estranged Brazilian musician Nara Leão from the political and social impact of her works and the innovative musical and artistic elements of her performances. Extending work on popular music and political resistance, Tam and Stover analyzed songs performed by Leão in 1964's *Opinião de Nara* as displaying her active contribution to the performance's activism: this shift in positionality—from muse to musical agent—demotes the idea of Leão as simply a means toward a performative-political end and highlights her active role in critiquing governmental oppression.

Monica Hershberger (Lehigh University) retraced the musical journeys of performers Nina Simone and Wé Ani through the connection of Simone's 1965 rendition of Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse's 1964 song "Feeling Good," which Ani would perform to acclaim in 2016 on the television show *The Voice*. Hershberger ultimately traced the artistic and personal trajectories of three black women singers: Simone, whose rejection from the Curtis Institute of Music shifted her musical identity from classical pianist

to protest singer; Dorothy Maynor, who performed at the Eisenhower inauguration and founded the Harlem School of the Arts (HSA); and Ani, who studied at HSA.

These women's careers serve collectively as case studies on the effects and legacy of race, gender, and class on agency and the role of performance in providing opportunity for marginalized musicians. Indeed, the transition from roles as "voice" or "muse" to positions of agency, authority, and leadership in commercial music spaces has been uneven. Though its percentages are better than orchestral halls, popular music—loosely defined by the University of Southern California Annenberg Inclusion Initiative as a genre chiefly recorded, produced, labelled, and marketed by record labels, featured in Billboard rankings, and included in Grammy nominations—still relegates women to the role of "the singer" and maintains a sizeable (and largely racialized) gap between women artists and songwriters/producers. While total percentages of women artists in popular music have increased from 22.7 to 37.7 percent over the last twelve years, Annenberg's 2024 report indicates percentages of women solo performers have stalled at 38.9% and women songwriters are credited in 18.9% of songs; 55% have no women songwriters and less than 1% have only women songwriters.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to minimizing their compositional and performance efforts, contributions to music by women authors, librettists, directors, choreographers, and other artists also regularly go unacknowledged. A presentation by Margarita Bonora (University of Cambridge) emphasized the co-creative role of choreographer Maya Plisetskaya in the composition and reception of Rodion Shchedrin's ballet *Anna Karenina* (1972). *Anna Karenina*'s underlying references to Plisetskaya's successful career as a dancer were a source of cohesion and female expressiveness, one that affected not only the creative production but also the public's response to experimental works in Soviet Russia. Peter Silberman (Ithaca College) accepted an analytical invitation extended by Jennifer Egan (2010) in her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Egan's book features musings by a fictional character about the "haunting power" of pauses in rock songs and rates the songs on a haunting-power scale. Silberman's innovative analysis connected high haunting ratings to the telescoping pre-outro pause, a structural caesura after the song's final

<sup>4</sup> While artists of color are down from a survey high of 61% in 2023 to 44.6% in 2024, women of color are less than half of that total. Women producers comprise only 5.9% of the total, and women of color are virtually absent as producers: only 21 of the 2,209 producing credits were women of color. For data on gender gaps in the UK music industry, see Bain (2019), which includes information about classical, jazz, and popular music, and the 2024 UK Music Diversity Report, which presents a thorough set of demographic information on UK musicians.

chorus before an outro that is telescoped outward, or unexpectedly lengthened. This technique creates a haunting temporal expansion just before the song's final section.

Compared to cultural and institutional limits regarding composition and publication, women have faced fewer prohibitions on access to private music instruction. As a result, educational materials produced in magazines and other periodicals, instructional volumes, and sheet-music collections have become a rich source of inquiry into gendered ideas surrounding music and sites of education and resistance for women students and instructors. Gareth Cordery (Columbia University) shared the physiopedagogical work of British teacher Edwin Ward-Jackson, whose published lectures and exercises echoed contemporary Victorian ideas surrounding women's frailty and the benefits of exercise and harm reduction on amateur playing. In contrast, Elizabeth Busch (University of Maryland, College Park) contended that the inclusion of a Sapphic-themed exercise, polkas, and other additions in a bound sheet-music volume by "Miss Tillou" was a subtle yet subversive challenge to the volume's professed goals of promoting respectability, heterosexual marriage, and domestic gentility. Such materials, long hobbled by stereotypical depictions as simple, served as substantive and sophisticated means of developing theoretical, compositional, and performance abilities. As Rachel Lumsden (2020) notes in an article on music theory in women's popular press, in prematurely dismissing these kinds of materials "for being "superficial" or "weak," we run the risk of replicating the very same binary oppositions" that have marginalized women for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

The conference's early afternoon session was devoted to presentations by five undergraduate scholars. The organizers programmed this as a sole session to encourage greater attendance from all conference participants, and the presentations were followed by a break that allowed time for the presenters to interact informally with the other conference attendees. Two presentations analyzed the music of Florence Price: Virginia Jansen (Boston University) argued that the inclusion of Spirituals in Price's "Counterpoint" pieces (*Five Folksongs in Counterpoint* and *Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint*) mediates the relationship between Price's identity as an African American and as a classically trained composer; and Catherine Hechtman (Oakland University) explored Price's *Piano Sonata in E minor* as a site of

<sup>5</sup> See Lumsden (2020) for a comprehensive account of British composer and pedagogue Oliviera Louisa Prescott's music-theoretical publications in Victorian ladies' periodicals.

both subtle and overt expression of numerous tonal, harmonic, textural, and rhythmic vernacular elements, housed within more traditional Western genre and form.

Papers by Katherine Wynn (SUNY at Fredonia) and Allannah Egan (SUNY Geneseo) explored the potential for opera to provide a vehicle for self-expression and for educating audiences about history and oppression. Wynn's analysis of an aria from *Giovanna D'Arco*, an opera by Russian aristocrat Princess Zinaide Aleksandrovna Volkonskaya, offered a musical introduction to the self-taught royal's iconoclastic musical style and her unconventional views on art, religion, and women. Egan compared George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* with Toni Morrison and Richard Danielpour's opera *Margaret Garner*, noting that the complexity and honesty of *Margaret Garner* not only offers a more honest depiction of racism in American history but also encourages more conversation about systemic barriers. Lastly, Kelly (Ziyue) Yang (Brown University) drew on her own ethnographic research in Yunnan, China, and argued that the Nakhi, an indigenous matrilineal society, was transformed from a matrilineal group that encouraged women's participation in music into a patriarchal society that curtailed women's musical opportunities. Nakhi women's pursuit of "musical feminism" in the twentieth century, unfolding in three phases, has made progress in allowing women to regain their access to music-making while simultaneously resurrecting their matrilineal musical legacy.

#### 4. WOMEN AT WORK AND PLAY

Roger Moseley's keynote presentation, "Japanese Women at Work and Play: Sonic (Re)creations from the Arcade to the PlayStation, 1982–1998," engaged the work of Japanese women who composed music for video games during the genre's iconic early days. Positioning their work as responsive and transformative, Moseley's presentation highlights two key points. First, Moseley noted that the presence of so many women composers in Japan's early video game studios was an anomaly that indicated the (at that time) low status afforded to game music composers and programmers and the high skill level these women brought to their work.<sup>6</sup> Second, through live demonstra-

<sup>6</sup> The relatively large number of Japanese women composers for video games remains an extreme anomaly in the realm of multimedia composition. A 2021 survey of game audio employment by Brian Schmidt noted that women represented an "all-time high" of 16% of the workforce. Women composers on Broadway would number in the single digits per decade until the 1970s (Greenberg, Maestra Music Survey) and the 2024 Celluloid Ceiling report from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University notes that 12% of film composers are women, an all-time high and up from 9% in 2023.

tions of various musical and technological elements on original Nintendo technology, Moseley showed how the work of Yuriko Keino, Kinuyo Yamashita, Satoe Terashima, and Yuko Shimomura was especially amenable to and encouraging of play. Moseley thus positioned the imaginary space of the musical and virtual within the material reality of the technological and embodied, declining to separate these women's compositions from their physical and ludic environment. Kristin Ditlow's recital, "Femmages: Five Centuries of Keyboard Music by Women Composers," featured a variety of works spanning familiar names (Amy Beach, Clara Schumann) as well as newer works by Karola Obermüller, Sara Karina Greif, and Ditlow herself. The concert concluded with *Fantasia on Norma* by Teresa Carreño (1853–1917), whose score is missing a page that Ditlow completed. The recital's chronological breadth and stylistic variety powerfully demonstrated Moseley's characterization of the keyboard as a exceptional location of ludomusical behavior, or "a platform on which musical motives, gestures, propositions, and ripostes can be put into play" (2016, 67).<sup>7</sup>

The keynote and concert served as compelling encapsulations of the primary themes running through the day's presentations and performances: women's access to performance, to composition, to enfranchisement, to opportunity, to work, to play, to scholarship, and to representation, has always been dependent on proactive efforts to complete the unfinished work. Each of the conference presenters highlighted the range of work undertaken to that end, from scholarly analyses and concert programming to pedagogical interventions and informal mentorship for young scholars.<sup>8</sup>

The conference design itself sought to provide interventions that counter prevailing patriarchal and institutional frameworks, not only by creating spaces for scholarship, compositions, and performances, but also by fostering relationships that form and inform those working toward gender equity and by generating interest in, and resources for, those wanting to work on music by women. To this end, the conference centered an interdisciplinary and

<sup>7</sup> See Moseley (2016).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to data provided throughout this report on women composers, songwriters, and producers, demographics for women membership in scholarly societies, a rough measurement for women's participation in musicology, music theory, and ethnomusicology, are trending slowly upward, though data are largely limited to information gathered from professional society membership surveys. The Society for Music Theory completes an annual demographic report: its 2024 membership identified as 31.3% female. The American Musicological Society's most recent report, dated 2017, lists 51.2% female-identifying membership. The Society for Ethnomusicology's most recent demographic information, listing 52.2% female-identifying membership, is from a 2014 survey, displayed in its Spring 2015 newsletter.

multidisciplinary program, offered multiple coffee breaks near the presentation rooms, and solicited scholars of a wide spectrum of genders, nationalities, and educational and career stages. A catered lunch covered by the grant further afforded the attendees opportunities to share ideas and discuss each other's presentations. Having the means to support such a variety of musical scholarship and performance is both a testament to the continued progress academia has made in supporting women's visibility and an invitation to continue making these efforts as often and as enthusiastically as possible.

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