

The Kapralova Society Journal

A Journal of Women in Music



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The Woman Composer Question: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives

By Eugene Gates

A major topic of public debate in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the so-called "woman question." A sub-category of this controversial subject was the "woman composer question"-- or, as one contemporaneous writer termed it, "the much-vexed question of the woman composer." ¹ References to the woman composer question loomed large in Romantic philosophy, treatises on female education, and music criticism. This article examines some of these writings in order to demonstrate their relationship to both the limited content of music education for women throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--specifically, the lack of adequate instruction in theoretical subjects--and the double standard in music criticism, a system of aesthetics that allowed critics to evaluate a woman's compositions in terms of their appropriateness to her sex.

Pianist/conductor and writer on music Hans von Bülow (1830-94) expressed the view of many of his contemporaries, when he penned the following condemnation of female creative potential in music:

Reproductive genius can be admitted to the pretty sex, but productive genius unconditionally cannot. . . . There will never be a woman composer, at best a misprinting copyist. . . . I do not believe in the feminine form of the word "creator." ²

Writing in the early 1880s, German music historian Emil Naumann proclaimed: "Music is the most masculine of all the arts, for art essentially depends on the *creative* idea. All creative work is well known as being the exclusive work of

men." ³ In this terse statement of non-confidence in woman's creative ability, Naumann too was merely reflecting the prevailing belief of nineteenth-century society at large.

The prejudice against female composers recognized no national boundaries, nor was it confined to the writings of philosophers, educators, critics and music scholars. French novelist Guy de Maupassant echoed similar thoughts in his 1885 preface to the Abbé Prevost's *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*:

The experience of centuries . . . has proved that woman is, without exception, incapable of any true artistic or scientific work. . . . The attempt is useless, since we have not yet produced the female artist or musician, notwithstanding all the desperate efforts of daughters of 'concierges' and of all the marriageable young ladies in general who study the piano, and even composition. Woman on earth has two parts to play, quite distinct roles, both of them charming--Love and Maternity! ⁴

Implicit in such diatribes against female musical creativity is the notion that certain innate intellectual deficiencies render women incapable of achieving success as composers. To trace the genesis of this idea, one need only consult the works of early Romantic and German Idealist philosophers.

Complementary Intellectual Abilities

The theory that men and women

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are endowed by nature with separate but complementary intellectual abilities first appeared in the writings of Western philosophers around the middle of the eighteenth century.⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), generally thought to be the father of the Romantic movement, for example, believed that "a perfect man and a perfect woman should no more be alike in mind than in face."⁶

According to Rousseau, the complementary relationship of man and woman resulted in sex-differential styles of intellectual function. In Book V of *Emile*, his treatise on education, he tells us: "All the faculties common to both sexes are not equally shared between them, but taken as a whole they are fairly divided. . . . Woman has more wit, man more genius; woman observes, man reasons."⁷

It will prove instructive at this point to compare the above passage with the following short excerpt from Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert*, for it becomes immediately apparent that his scornful assessment of female creativity is inextricably linked to his theory of complementary intellectual abilities:

Women, in general, do not like any art, know nothing about any, and have no genius. . . . They can acquire science, erudition, talents, and everything which is acquired by dint of hard work. But that celestial flame which warms and sets fire to the soul, that genius which consumes and devours, that burning eloquence, those sublime transports which carry their raptures to the depths of hearts, will always lack in the writings of women; their works are all cold and pretty as they are; they may contain as much wit as you please, never a soul; they are a hundred times more sensible than passionate.⁸

Since Rousseau was convinced that "the search for abstract and speculative truths, for principles and axioms in science, for all that tends to wide generalisation, is beyond a woman's grasp,"⁹ it followed that

a woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young.¹⁰

In her recent critique of Rousseau's theory of female education, Jane Roland Martin draws attention to the fact that both Emile and Sophie, Rousseau's perfect man and woman, were born with a wide range of intellectual

abilities and talents. While Rousseau attributes to nature only those aptitudes and capacities that, in his opinion, should be nurtured, they are not the only ones that *could* be nurtured. In other words, Rousseau is unashamedly selective. He calls "natural," and chooses to develop, only those traits that fit the respective societal roles he has assigned to Emile and Sophie. In so doing, he ensures that Emile's education will equip him for his dual role as citizen and head of the family while Sophie's education will prepare her only for the subordinate role of wife and mother within the context of a patriarchal society.¹¹

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) also subscribed to the concept of complementary male/female modes of reasoning. In Section Three of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, he wrote:

The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime.

. . . Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and because of their rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration; but at the same time they will weaken the charms with which she exercises her great power over the other sex. . . . [Therefore,] the beautiful understanding selects for its objects everything closely related to the finer feeling, and relinquishes to the diligent, fundamental, and deep understanding abstract speculations or branches of knowledge useful but dry.¹²

Kant's theory of female education followed the general conventions of his era. Being a disciple of Rousseau, he believed that the only reason for educating a girl was to prepare her for the type of life she would be expected to lead both biologically and socially. Kant saw no purpose in developing her intellect; rather, he advised that educators should concentrate on the formation of her taste and feelings. To accomplish this, he recommended that girls study a little history and geography, and that they be given the opportunity to develop a "feeling for expressive painting and for music, not so much as it manifests artistry but sensitivity--[since] all this refines or elevates the taste of this sex."¹³

The mere thought that a female might aspire to become a composer would have caused Kant to recoil in horror. In his opinion, the woman who gave herself over to such intellectual pursuits "might as well even have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives."¹⁴ In fact, as the following passage from his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic*

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Point of View shows, Kant seriously doubted that there could ever be a truly scholarly woman: "As for the scholarly woman, she uses her *books* in the same way as her *watch*, for example, which she carries so that people will see that she has one, though it is usually not running or not set by the sun."¹⁵

Despite their negative views of the feminine intellect, neither Rousseau nor Kant regarded woman's alleged lack of genius and abstract reasoning power as a barren space in the female mind. Nature had compensated for the absence of the cold and analytical modes of thought in women by endowing them with other more appropriately feminine mental traits—feeling, taste, sensibility and practicality. Thus, according to Rousseau and Kant, the complementary characters of male and female together formed a single moral being.¹⁶ As Kant expressed it: "In matrimonial life the united pair should, as it were, constitute a single moral person, which is animated and governed by the understanding of the man and the taste of the wife."¹⁷

Although this cumbersome arrangement was supposed to benefit both sexes equally, it seems clear that it was intended to be especially advantageous for males. However, as Martin's analysis of *Emile* demonstrates, a theory of education based on the notion of complementary intellectual abilities effectively deprives everyone of self-sufficiency. Educated under such a system, Man would ultimately be ill equipped to function as *paterfamilias* and civic leader because he would be obliged to allow himself to be manipulated by womanly wiles. Conversely, Woman would never be granted the independence of mind that might free her from playing this manipulative role.¹⁸ Moreover, while Rousseau and Kant claimed that their respective theories manifested their adulation of women, these theories were also used to mask conveniently the exclusion of females from many traditionally male professions.¹⁹ One such profession was that of musical composition.

Like his predecessors Rousseau and Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) also believed that females have little capacity for abstract thought. "As a result of their weaker reasoning power," he wrote, "women are as a rule more affected by what is present, visible and real than they are by abstract ideas."²⁰ Their intellectual limitations, Schopenhauer explained, are due to an innate immaturity which is peculiar to the female sex. To him, women were "big children, their whole lives long: a kind of intermediate stage between the child and the man, who is the actual human being, 'man'."²¹

Schopenhauer claimed that woman's aptitude for dealing with the present, the real, and the visible not only rendered her incapable of abstract thought, but it also prevented her from creating works of genius. True creative genius, which he defined as "nothing more than the most complete *objectivity*,"²² is found, according to Schopenhauer, exclusively among males, and then only rarely.²³ "Women," in Schopenhauer's opinion, "can have remark-

able talent, but not genius, for they always remain subjective."²⁴ In his essay "On Women," which is probably the most extreme example of misogyny in the whole of Romantic philosophy, Schopenhauer summed up his views on female creativity as follows:

Neither for music, nor poetry, nor the plastic arts do they possess any real feeling or receptivity. ... Nor can one expect anything else from women if one considers that the most eminent heads of the entire sex have proved incapable of a truly great, genuine and original achievement in art, or indeed creating anything at all of lasting value: ... the reason being precisely that they lack all objectivity of mind ... Women, taken as a whole, are and remain thorough and incurable philistines.²⁵

In light of woman's supposed intellectual inferiority, Schopenhauer advocated that the goal of female education should be to train young women to become good housewives: "What there ought to be is housewives and girls who hope to become housewives and who are therefore educated, not in haughtiness, but in domesticity and submissiveness."²⁶

Three major themes emerge from these writings of Rousseau, Kant and Schopenhauer: first, that women by nature lack objectivity, and hence both the power of abstract reasoning and the capacity for creative genius; secondly, that if a woman should possess these "masculine" intellectual traits, it is unwise to encourage their development, since they run counter to her nature (as defined by the aforementioned philosophers), and thus detract from her femininity; and finally, that because of woman's supposedly inherent intellectual frailty, the goal of female education should be to prepare women not for independence within the public sphere of professional life, but rather for subordination to the male within the private sphere of matrimony and motherhood. These three related ideas are deeply embedded in the fabric of Romantic thought. Together, they created a veritable obstacle course for any woman who hoped to make a career in musical composition.

Music as an Accomplishment

If the tenor of most nineteenth-century literature on the role of music in the education of young women is any indication, the influence of such philosophers as Kant, Rousseau and Schopenhauer cannot be dismissed lightly. One would be hard-pressed indeed to cite even one treatise dealing with female musical education that recommended tuition in music theory. Educational theorists believed that such instruction might tempt a girl to

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aspire to a career in composition, thus diverting her from the course of her "true destiny"--that of housewife and mother. Writing in 1842, Sarah Ellis, author of a widely read book of advice on etiquette and female education, expressed it this way:

So far as cleverness, learning and knowledge are conducive to woman's moral excellence, they are . . . desirable, and no further. All that would occupy her mind to the exclusion of better things, all that would involve her in the mazes of flattery and admiration, all that would tend to draw her thoughts from others and fix them on herself, ought to be avoided as an evil to her, however brilliant or attractive it may be in itself.²⁷

But, while music theory was not regarded as an appropriate subject for girls, learning to play the piano moderately well was encouraged as a worthwhile feminine "accomplishment."²⁸ "In the modern System of Female Education," wrote A. Burgh in 1814, "this fascinating accomplishment is very generally considered, as an indispensable requisite."²⁹ Educationist Johann Campe agreed that the acquisition of a modest degree of pianistic skill was an essential part of a young lady's education, but thought it necessary to warn women never to flaunt their ability to perform, and especially not when their housewifely tasks had been left unfinished.³⁰ Friedrich I. Niethammer, another educational theorist, also recommended the study of piano for girls, but was severely critical of "certain degenerate features in women's education," namely, that girls were sometimes being trained to become virtuosos.³¹ Mrs. Ellis held a similar view. She wrote: "[Piano playing] ought not to be cultivated as a medium of display, so much as the means of home enjoyment; not so much as a spell to charm the stranger, . . . as a solace to those we love, and a tribute of gratitude and affection to those who love us."³²

Judging from an 1883 article by George Eggleston in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, a tolerable level of piano proficiency was still considered an indispensable accomplishment for middle-class young women in the latter decades of the century. Significantly, in the passage quoted below, Eggleston chooses to equate "a knowledge of music" with a young woman's ability to play the piano--a skill that would later enhance her domestic life:

The study of music, and especially the acquirement of practical skill in making music, is . . . well recognized as a necessary part of a girl's education When we reflect upon the value of musical skill to a woman as a resource for her own entertainment, as a means of adding to the attractiveness of her home, and more than all, as a refining, softening influence upon

children, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that a knowledge of music is as necessary to a girl as an acquaintance with arithmetic is to a boy; and as no boy not an idiot is incapable of acquiring knowledge of arithmetic, so no girl with hands and ordinary mental capacity is incapable of acquiring skill in music.³³

In short, tuition in music (i.e., piano, and to a lesser extent singing) was thought to be a fundamental constituent of every middle-class girl's education, but for reasons other than the development of musical talent. Arthur Loesser explains:

Being "accomplished" generally was judged to render a girl a more valuable prize in the marriage gamble; her little singing and piano playing was not only an amorous lure, . . . it was also a way of confirming a family's gentility. A possible candidate for a young lady's hand was expected to feel pleased to ally himself with a family of such refinement.³⁴

It is readily apparent that the tradition of music as a feminine accomplishment--with its emphasis on preparation for marriage and child-rearing--was closely linked to the educational theories of Rousseau and his disciples.

Women Composers before 1880

The "modern system of female education" left its imprint on the musical style of many mid nineteenth-century female composers. Since the vast majority of musically gifted women had received no tuition in music theory, they were ill equipped to produce extended and complex works. They therefore had little choice but to direct their creative energies into writing parlor music, i.e., "semi-classical" piano solos and duets, religious songs and sentimental ballads, composed expressly for amateur performances in the home.³⁵ Ironically, although a number of women gained fame as composers of parlor music, their success in this field also helped to forge an image of the female composer as a dilettante who could write music according to the standards of feminine accomplishment, but not to those of serious art.³⁶

Ignoring the obvious inadequacies of female musical education, critics often cited the relative invisibility of women in art-music composition as proof of woman's innate creative inferiority. Eduard Hanslick was a case in point. Following in the footsteps of Rousseau, Kant and Schopenhauer, Hanslick claimed in 1854 that

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women, because of their greater emotional sensitivity, were too subjective to cope with the abstract nature of musical form:

The composer's activity is in its way plastic and comparable to the visual artist's. Just as little as the visual artist should the composer be dependently involved with his physical material, for like him the composer has his . . . ideal to set forth objectively to create pure form.

. . . Women, who are by nature pre-eminently dependent on feeling, have not amounted to much as composers. The cause of this lies . . . precisely in the plastic aspect of musical composing, which demands renunciation of subjectivity . . . And it is not feeling which composes music, but the specifically musical, artistically trained talent.³⁷

Clearly, Hanslick resorted to some rather complex mental gymnastics to arrive at his shortsighted view of woman's creative potential. On the one hand, he acknowledges that a talent for composition requires appropriate musical training to fulfill its promise, while on the other, he links the dearth of important female composers to innate intellectual deficiencies, thus conveniently bypassing the generally inferior musical education of women as the probable cause of their lack of high-level achievement.

Writing in 1861, John Stuart Mill interjected a note of common sense into the continuing literary discourse on the woman composer question. Mill, a great champion of women's rights, pointed out that the absence of female composers of the first rank was attributable to the fact that musically gifted women did not receive adequate instruction in music theory: "Women are taught music, but not for the purpose of composing, only of executing it. . . . Even . . . [a] natural gift [for composition], to be made available for great creations, requires study, and professional devotion to the pursuit."³⁸

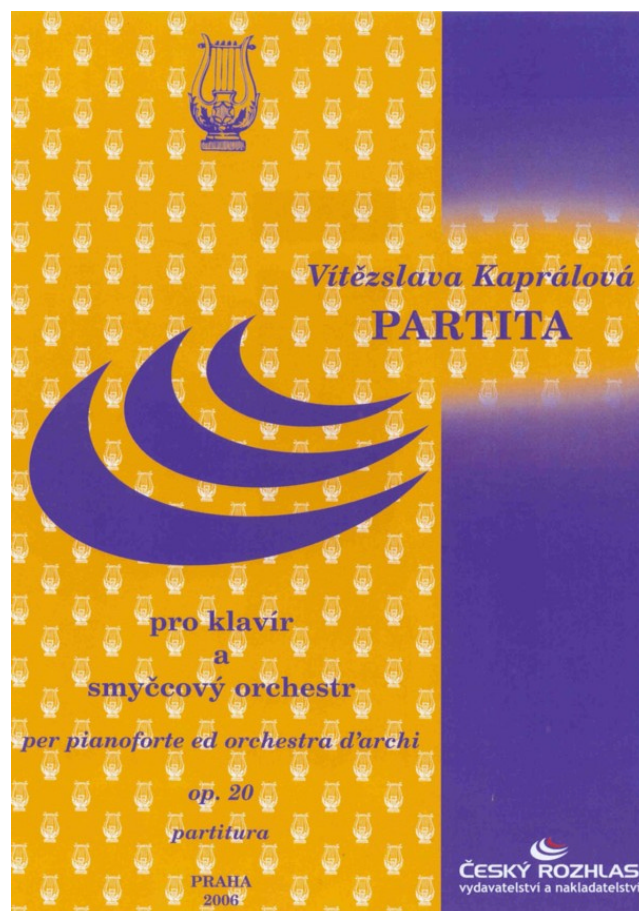
German composer, pianist and critic Luise Adolpha Le Beau (1850-1927) also spoke out against the impoverished state of female musical education in an 1878 article. Le Beau, whose prodigious musical talent had been nurtured by the finest teachers (she had studied piano with Clara Schumann, and composition with Franz Lachner and Josef Rheinberger), explained that the supposed lack of creative ability in females was due, not to inherent psychological or intellectual weaknesses, but (anticipating more modern feminist theories of education) to the "incomplete, often too late education of women."³⁹ She emphasized that until talented young girls were allowed to study music with the intensity that professional training demanded, it would never be possible to evaluate what women could achieve as composers:

Partita for piano and strings, op. 20

Czech Radio Publishing House | Prague 2006

The neo-classical *Partita for piano and string orchestra*, op. 20, the main achievement of Kaprálová's Paris studies with Bohuslav Martinů, occupies a rather unique place in the context of the composer's creative output. Kaprálová worked on this remarkable composition for more than a year: she began sketching it in March 1938 and finished it in June 1939. The work was premiered by Jan Erml with the Czech Radio Orchestra, under the baton of Břetislav Bakala, on 20 November 1941 in Brno. The composition was also much admired by the legendary Czech conductor Rafael Kubelík who performed it on several occasions with the Czech Philharmonic. It was first published by Svoboda, a publishing house based in Prague, under the title *Partita per pianoforte ed orchestra d'archi*, op. 20. This is its 2nd edition.

To order, contact directly the publisher at nakladatelstvi@rozhlas.cz



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Just do not limit, then, the training of girls. Rather, teach them the same things that are taught to boys. Grow accustomed to a system that has this same fundamental condition for every education, and then see what [girls] can do after acquiring technical skills and intellectual independence, rather than entrench yourselves against female capabilities by limiting the education of women!⁴⁰

But the words of Mill and Le Beau went unheeded for several years. The exclusion of women from classes in advanced theory and composition had become the norm in the great European conservatories; in most, this practice continued until near the beginning of the twentieth century.

Female Education in Nineteenth-Century Conservatories

With the establishment of the Leipzig Conservatory by Felix Mendelssohn in 1843, Leipzig became the world's leading centre for serious musical study. Students came from every corner of the globe to work under a faculty that included Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, Moritz Hauptmann, Ignaz Moscheles, Ferdinand David, and other renowned musicians of the day. All male students were obliged to attend classes in composition and related theoretical subjects; women, however, were taught only an abbreviated theory curriculum,⁴¹ and composition was omitted from their course of study. Although it is unclear exactly how long this policy was enforced, the autobiographies of Clara K. Rogers and Ethel Smyth, two composers who studied at the Leipzig Conservatory, provide some helpful clues. Rogers attended the Conservatory in 1857, but was unable to study composition, for, as she explained, "there was no composition class for my sex, no woman composer having yet appeared on the musical horizon, with the exception of Fanny Hensel . . . and Clara Schumann."⁴² Smyth was more fortunate; she was the first woman permitted to join Carl Reinecke's composition class in 1877.⁴³

The writings of female composers who studied elsewhere in Germany offer proof that other German conservatories excluded women from advanced theoretical instruction for an even longer period of time. Despite extensive previous training in the subject, Boston composer Mabel Daniels was the first woman to be accepted into a score-reading class at the Royal Munich Conservatory in 1902, and then only grudgingly.⁴⁴ In her memoirs, Daniels notes with incredulity that no advanced theory courses were open to female students in Munich until 1897:

You know that five years ago women were not allowed to study counterpoint at the con-

servatory. In fact, anything more advanced than elementary harmony was debarred. The ability of the feminine intellect to comprehend the intricacies of a stretto, or cope with double counterpoint in the tenth, if not openly denied, was severely questioned.⁴⁵

American journalist Helen A. Clark also drew attention to this problem in an 1895 article. She observed: "Even within the last decade, the writer has heard of German teachers who absolutely refused to teach women the science of harmony, because, as they declared, no woman could understand it."⁴⁶

As, one by one, conservatories throughout Germany began reluctantly to admit female students into theory and composition classes, conservative critics predicted that the presence of women in such classes would lower the standards of professional study. This would come about, it was said, because impressionable young men would be exposed to various seductive feminine character flaws, those most often cited being superficiality and physical and moral weaknesses.⁴⁷ The proponents of this view also maintained that the musical scene would be inundated with the inferior works of women, and that these defective compositions would serve as models for future generations of students.⁴⁸ Eugen Lünig, for example, in an article entitled "On the Reform of Our Music Schools," claimed that the admission of women to composition classes would lead to the feminization of music, and thus to a general deterioration of the art.⁴⁹

Educational opportunities for aspiring female composers, though not ideal, were less restrictive in America than in continental Europe. Women had complete access to the resources of all major conservatories in the United States, but when Harvard, Yale, and Columbia Universities added music degrees to their curricula in the late nineteenth century, enrolment was confined solely to male students.⁵⁰ The philosophy behind this discriminatory policy was stated as follows: "At its most glorious heights, music is a masculine art."⁵¹

Since neither Oxford nor Cambridge Universities granted degrees to women,⁵² London's Royal Academy of Music became a refuge for those English female musicians who were unable to study abroad. From its inception in 1822, the Royal Academy was coeducational; regardless of sex, all students received the same training.⁵³ Despite the occurrence of a marked deterioration in the standard of instruction around the middle of the century, the Royal Academy produced several highly competent female composers. Among them were Alice Mary Smith (1839-1884), Rosalind Frances Ellicott (1857-1924), Dora Bright (1863-1951), and Maude Valerie White (1855-1937)—the first woman to win the Academy's coveted Mendelssohn Scholarship in composition.⁵⁴

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From Accomplishment to Achievement

The last two decades of the nineteenth century marked a turning point in the extent and nature of women's involvement in musical composition. For the first time in history, significant numbers of female composers entered the traditionally male field of art music. This dramatic change was mainly due to the widening of educational opportunities for women in conservatories, i.e., increasing accessibility to theoretical instruction. A second important factor was the influence of the first feminist movement.

The professional activity of female composers escalated steadily throughout this period, and by the 1890s, major performing organizations on both sides of the Atlantic were presenting the large-scale compositions of women to the concert-going public.⁵⁵ Reporting on the growing visibility of women in this sphere of creativity, American critic Rupert Hughes observed: "All over the world the woman-mind is taking up music. . . . A publisher informs me that where compositions by women were only one-tenth of his manuscripts a few years ago, they now form more than two-thirds."⁵⁶

The era of the parlor-encased "lady composer" had at last come to an end. It was with justifiable pride in the recent achievements of her sex that Fanny Morris Smith, a writer for *Etude*, proclaimed in 1901 the coming of age of the woman composer:

The first practical entrance of women into music as composers has been within the last twenty-five years. . . . Within this time . . . women dentists, lawyers, clergy, physicians, scientists, painters, architects, farmers, inventors, and merchants have all made their advent. Side by side with them has arrived the woman composer. She has come to stay.⁵⁷

But no matter what advances women made in the realm of composition, the majority of European composition teachers, their perceptions clouded by prejudice, held fast to the belief that nature had not endowed females with the ability to equal males as creators. Since all of the opinions recorded below date from the 1880s and 1890s, it is clear that they represent a protest to the recent "intrusion" of women into the male sphere of art-music composition. Carl Reinecke, chief composition teacher at the Leipzig Conservatory from 1860-92, and official director of that institution from 1892-1910, declared that in female composition students he found "scarcely any progress comparable to that of the intelligent and poetic male student."⁵⁸ Similar views were expressed by Norwegian composer Johan Svendsen (1840-1911), and Niels Gade (1817--1890), composition

teacher at the Leipzig Conservatory and co-founder of the Copenhagen Conservatory.⁵⁹ Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1931) claimed that women, in their misguided attempts to imitate and compete with male composers, allowed their music to become too boisterous.⁶⁰ Anton Rubinstein (1829-94), founder of the Imperial Conservatory of St. Petersburg, stated that women composers "lack depth, concentration, the power of thought, breadth of feeling, [and] freedom of stroke."⁶¹ It was also Rubinstein who, in the most telling statement of all, remarked to the sister-in-law of composer Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944): "I hear your relative publishes compositions of her own. She ought not to do that!"⁶²

Why Are There No Great Women Composers? Some Turn-of-the-Century Theories

No matter how irrational, firmly entrenched prejudices seldom die easily. Many prominent critics responded to the increasing activity of female composers with hostility and alarm. Believing that this trend would inevitably lead to a weakening of standards in composition, they developed theories to perpetuate the myth of women's innate creative inferiority.

George Upton, music critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, was among the first to do so. His influential book *Woman in Music* was written in 1880; by 1899 it had passed through six editions. The publication of this work gained Upton many followers, but as edition followed edition, the storm of protest from feminists grew in intensity. The controversy raged for nearly forty years, during which time scholarly journals and popular magazines were replete with articles on the much vexed question of women in musical composition.⁶³

Upton formulated his theory around a major contradiction in nineteenth-century thought. Since music was a language of the emotions, and females were known to be more emotional than males, it followed logically that women should excel at composition. But according to Upton, women had failed to create important and enduring musical works because their innate lack of objectivity prevented them from translating emotion into musical form.⁶⁴ Music consists of far more than just emotion, he explained: "[It is] mercilessly logical and unrelentingly mathematical. . . . It has every technical detail that characterizes absolute science in its most rigid forms. In this direction woman, except in very rare instances, has never achieved great results."⁶⁵ Men, who Upton claimed were more emotionally controlled than women, had, as a consequence, the greater ability to channel emotion into the abstract and logical formal structures of music:

To treat emotions as if they were mathematics, to bind and measure and limit them within the rigid laws of harmony and counterpoint, and to

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express them with arbitrary signs, is a cold-blooded operation, possible only to the sterner and more obdurate nature of man.⁶⁶

From the excerpts cited above, it is obvious that a major part of Upton's theory hinges on the assumption that composition is essentially a mathematical process. However, this supposition has no factual basis, nor has any evidence been found to suggest a link between musical and mathematical abilities.⁶⁷

In addition to their lack of objectivity, Upton claimed that other deficiencies in the female psyche prevented women from equalling men as musical creators:

Another phase of the feminine character which may bear on this problem is . . . the inability of woman to endure the discouragements of the composer, and to battle with the prejudice and indifference, and sometimes with the malicious opposition, of the world. . . . Such fierce struggles and overwhelming discouragements, such pitiless storms of fate and cruel assaults of poverty, in the pursuit of art, woman is not calculated to endure.⁶⁸

While he conceded that the demands of house-keeping and child-rearing left women with no time for "the theoretical application which composition requires," Upton discounted this as a possible explanation for the absence of female composers of the first rank. History had shown that "[woman] has not succeeded [at composition] when she has had the opportunity."⁶⁹ He therefore concluded: "It does not seem likely that woman will ever originate music in its fullest and grandest harmonic forms. She will always be the recipient and interpreter, but there is little hope she will be the creator."⁷⁰ As if it somehow compensated for her supposed inferior capacity to create, Upton added that woman's unique gift was her ability to function as a muse to the genius of male composers:

It is no exaggeration to claim that without her influence many of the masterpieces which we now admire might not have been accomplished at all; that the great composers have often written through her inspiration; and that she has, in numerous instances, been their impulse, support, and consolation.⁷¹

Edith Brower, a writer for the *Atlantic Monthly*, added fuel to the debate with the pronouncement that men were more emotional than women, and that this accounted for the lack of important female composers. The following is a compilation of excerpts from Brower's article:⁷²

Because woman, as the lesser man, is comparatively deficient in active emotional force, she cannot for this reason produce that which, at its best, is the highest and strongest of all modes of emotional expression. . . . (p. 334) Much of what passes in women for true emotion is mere nervous excitability Hence, . . . however fine her mental equipment, aided by education, may be, she must come out behind man in the long run, when matched against man in the highest spheres of attainment; at least, in those spheres in which the greatest amount of emotional force is required, such as music. For music is emotion; its conception, its working out, demand concentration not of the intellect alone, but of the very forces of the soul. Women cannot endure this double strain. (pp. 335--36) Woman is not at home in the abstract. . . . [Her] aptitude . . . for dealing with the concrete makes her a good housekeeper and manager of a family . . . (p. 338) It appears highly probable that, unless her nature be changed, . . . she will not in any future age excel in the art of musical composition. (p. 339)

Amy Fay, the distinguished pianist and teacher, was among the many female musicians who voiced their protests against such theories. While Upton, Brower, and other like-minded writers had attributed the dearth of great women composers to innate psychological and intellectual deficiencies, Fay argued that the explanation was to be found in the differential socialization of the sexes. A feminist, she was little taken with the concept of woman as muse. She wrote:

Women have been too much taken up with helping and encouraging men to place a proper value on their own talent, which they are too prone to underestimate and to think not worth making the most of. Their whole training, from time immemorial, has tended to make them take an intense interest in the work of men and to stimulate them to their best efforts. Ruskin was quite right when he so patronizingly said that "Woman's chief function is praise." She has praised and praised, and kept herself in abeyance.

But now, all this is changed. Women are beginning to realize that they, too, have brains, and even musical ones. They are, at last, studying composition seriously It has required 50,000 years to produce a male Beethoven, surely one little century ought to be vouchsafed to create a female one!⁷³

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The Double Bind of Sexual Aesthetics

Most late nineteenth-century critics were not prepared to grant that "one little century." Instead, they developed a system of sexual aesthetics--the critical double standard. Based on the Romantic ideology of complementary male/female intellectual and psychological traits, through which men were defined as objective, logical and active and women as subjective, emotional and passive, sexual aesthetics enabled critics to discuss the form, style and emotional range of women's musical compositions in terms of their appropriateness to her sex.⁷⁴

According to the proponents of sexual aesthetics, "feminine" music, which women were expected to compose exclusively, was delicate, graceful, sensitive, melodic, and confined to the smaller forms, i.e., songs and piano pieces. "Masculine" music, on the other hand, was powerful, lushly orchestrated, and intellectually rigorous both in formal structure and in harmonic and contrapuntal innovation. Operas, symphonies and other large-scale works belonged to this realm.⁷⁵ As more and more women began to compose in the larger forms, they were attacked by critics for venturing beyond their supposedly innate sexual limitations, and their allotted space--the parlor.

The following two excerpts from reviews of Cécile Chaminade's music demonstrate the insidious nature of this form of gendered criticism:

[The Concerstück is] a work that is strong and virile, too virile perhaps, and that is the reproach I would be tempted to address to it. For me, I almost regretted not having found further those qualities of grace and gentleness that reside in the nature of women, the secrets of which she possesses to such a degree.⁷⁶

[Her music] has a certain daintiness and grace, but it is amazingly superficial and wanting in variety. . . . But on the whole this concert confirmed the conviction held by many that while women may some day vote, they will never learn to compose anything worthwhile. All of them seem superficial when they write music.⁷⁷

Clearly, sexual aesthetics placed the woman composer in a no-win situation. If she produced music that was strong and rhythmically vital, her work was criticized for lacking feminine charm, and was condemned for its false virility. On the other hand, when she composed delicate, lyrical music, she was accused of not measuring up to the artistic standards of her male colleagues. In short, sexual aesthetics effected not only a double standard but

a double bind.⁷⁸

As I have attempted to show in this overview of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought on women composers, philosophers, educators and critics, imbued with the sexist attitudes of their day, presented a decidedly biased view of female musical creativity. While the lot of women composers has improved significantly in recent years, there are still obstacles to be overcome. Vestiges of the old debate linger on, and the legacy of sexual aesthetics continues to operate in subtle ways.⁷⁹ There is still a great need for further progress.

NOTES

1. See Mrs. Crosby Adams, "Musical Creative Work among Women." *Music* 9 (January 1896): 263-72.
2. Quoted in Pamela Susskind, Introduction to the score, Clara Wieck Schumann, *Selected Piano Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1979), p. vii.
3. Emil Naumann, *The History of Music*, trans. F. Praeger, 2 vols. (London: Cassell, [1886]), 2:1267. Original German edition published 1880-85.
4. Quoted in James Parsons, "Emerging from the Shadows: Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann," *Opus* 2 (February 1986): 27.
5. Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 75.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1984), p. 322.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 327 and p. 350.
8. *Idem*, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 103.
9. *Idem*, *Emile*, p. 349.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
11. Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 41-48.
12. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 78-79.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 80-81.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
15. *Idem*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 171.
16. Lloyd, p. 76.
17. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, p. 95.
18. Martin, pp. 64-65.
19. Lloyd, p. 76.
20. Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Women," in his *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 83.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
22. *Idem*, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), 1:185.
23. *Ibid.*, 2:384.
24. *Ibid.*, 2:392.
25. *Idem*, "On Women," pp. 85-86.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
27. Mrs. [Sarah] Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in*

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- Society, Character and Responsibilities* (London and Paris: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1842), pp. 97-98.
28. Other feminine accomplishments included singing, playing the harp or guitar, embroidery, needlework, drawing, making artificial flowers, cutting out paper ornaments, and painting flowers on china buttons. The ability to speak a few phrases in French was also valued as an accomplishment. Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), pp. 267-68. On feminine accomplishments in mid nineteenth-century Germany, see Henry F. Chorley, *Modern German Music: Recollections and Criticisms*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1854), 1:234-35. For a discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and American sources on music as an accomplishment, see Judith Tick, *American Women Composers before 1870* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983), pp. 13-31. On the musically accomplished woman as portrayed in Victorian novels, see the following: Mary Burgan, "Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nine-teenthCentury Fiction," in *The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 42-67; Loesser, pp. 267-79.
 29. A. Burgh, Preface to his *Anecdotes of Music, Historical and Biographical, in a Series of Letters from a Gentleman to his Daughter* (London, 1814); reprinted in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), p. 335.
 30. Johann Campe, *Väterlicher Rat für meine Tochter* (Braunschweig: Schulbuch-handlung, 1789), p. 120, as discussed in Eva Rieger, "'Dolce semplice'? On the Changing Role of Women in Music," in *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker, trans. Harriet Anderson (London: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 141.
 31. Friedrich I. Niethammer, *Der Streit des Philanthropismus und Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungs-Unterrichts unserer Zeit* (Weinheim, 1968; a reprint of the 1808 edition), p. 351, as discussed and quoted in Rieger, p. 141.
 32. Ellis, p. 107.
 33. George Cary Eggleston, "The Education of Women," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1883, p. 294.
 34. Loesser, p. 268. See also Rieger, p. 141.
 35. Nineteenth-century parlor music is discussed in detail in the following: Dereck Hyde, *New Found Voices: Women in Nineteenth Century English Music*, 3rd ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 65-84; Tick, *American Women Composers*, pp. 72-142 et passim. Even within the domestic sphere of parlor music, societal forces conspired to render women's activity as composers invisible. Having been inculcated with the belief that "a lady does not allow her name to appear in the newspapers except when she is born, married or carried to the grave," many women felt a conflict between their roles as private lady and public composer: when a woman published her compositions she drew attention to herself, and ladies of genteel breeding were not expected to indulge in "immodest" displays of self-assertion. Ibid., pp. 74-75. Some resolved this conflict by publishing their music anonymously; others used either male or female pseudonyms. Numerous parlor music compositions were published simply as the work of "A Lady." Among those who used female pseudonyms were English composers Charlotte Allington Barnard (1830-69) and Ellen Dickson (1819-78); they appeared in print respectively as Claribel and Dolores. Mrs. W. J. Rhodes (1858-1936), however, chose to publish her ballads under a male name: Guy d'Hardelot.
 36. Tick, *American Women Composers*, p. 76.
 37. Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. from the 8th German ed. by Geoffrey Paysant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 46.
 38. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986), pp. 78-79.
 39. Luise Adolpha Le Beau [L. B.], "Über die musikalische Erziehung der weiblichen Jugend," *Allgemeine Deutsche Musik-Zeitung* 5 (1 November 1878): 366, quoted in Judith E. Olson, "Luise Adolpha Le Beau: Composer in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany," in Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 298. Long before the so-called second wave of feminism beginning in the 1960s, certainly as far back as Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft, feminists have argued that women's apparent mental deficiencies were the result of inadequate (or perverse) education. See Ruth Roach Pierson, "Two Marys and a Virginia: Historical Moments in the Development of a Feminist Perspective on Education," in *Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective*, ed. Jane Gaskell and Arlene McLaren (Calgary: Detsleig Enterprises, 1987), pp. 203-22.
 40. Le Beau, p. 366, quoted in Olson, p. 298.
 41. Leonard Milton Phillips, "The Leipzig Conservatory: 1843-1881," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1979, p. 128.
 42. Clara K. Rogers, *Memories of a Musical Career* (Norwood, Mass.: The Plimpton Press, 1932), p. 108, quoted in Tick, *American Women Composers*, p. 271, n54..
 43. Ethel Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1919), 1:164.
 44. Mabel Daniels, "Fighting Generalizations about Women," [excerpted from her *An American Girl in Munich* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905)], in Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, rev. ed., (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996) pp. 219-22.
 45. Ibid, p. 220.
 46. Helen A. Clark, "The Nature of Music in its Relation to the Question of Women in Music," *Music* 7 (March 1895): 459.
 47. Similar arguments were used to justify the exclusion of women from full-time study in German universities until the first decade of the twentieth century. For a discussion of nineteenth-century German attitudes toward women in higher education, see Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, Vol. 1: *Education of the Senses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 220-25. See also James Albisetti, "Women and the Professions in Imperial Germany," in *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History*, ed. Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres and Mary Jo Maynes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 94-109.
 48. Olson, p. 291.
 49. Eugen Lünig, "Über die Reform unserer Musik-Schulen," *Allgemeine Deutsche Musik-Zeitung* 5 (11 and 18 October 1878): 341-43 and 349-51 respectively, as described in ibid.
 50. A. H. Levy, "Double-Bars and Double Standards: Female Composers in America 1800-1920," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 6 (March/April 1983): 168-69.
 51. Ibid., p. 169.
 52. Evelyn Alice Sharp and Emily Ross Daymond, Oxford's first two female graduates, received their degrees in 1921. Elsie Baron Briggs, though she had fulfilled the requirements for the Cambridge B.Mus. in 1915, was not granted the degree until 1927. For an account of women's struggle to acquire university degrees in nineteenth-century England, see Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, "Women and Degrees at Cambridge University, 1862-1897," in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp.

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53. Jane E. Bernstein, "'Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!' Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer," in Bowers and Tick, *Women Making Music*, p. 307.
 54. For an account of White's involvement in the Mendelssohn Scholarship competition, which she won in 1879, see her *Friends and Memories* (London: Edward Arnold, 1914), pp. 70-81.
 55. The following are but a few examples of the successes of women composers in the 1890s. Two orchestral works by Ethel Smyth, the four-movement *Serenade in D* and her *Overture to Anthony and Cleopatra* were performed at the Crystal Palace in 1890. Smyth's *Mass in D* was sung at London's Royal Albert Hall by the Royal Choral Society in 1893, and *Fantasio*, the first of her six operas, was produced at Weimar in 1898. Dora Bright, another English composer, had two works performed by the London Philharmonic in 1892--a *Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra* (the first woman's composition ever played by the Philharmonic), and her *Second Piano Concerto*. Three compositions by Rosalind Frances Ellicott, a compatriot of Smyth and Bright, were given at the Gloucester Festival: her cantata *The Birth of a Song* in 1892, an orchestral *Fantasia in A Minor* in 1895, and another cantata, *Elysium*, in 1889. Ellicott's *Dramatic Overture* was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1893. German composer Isabella von Grab's opera *Schön Karen* was produced at Breslau in 1895, and again in Copenhagen four years later. Another opera, *Atala*, by the Belgian composer Juliette Folville was given a successful premiere at Lille in 1892. The symphonic poem *Geraint's Bridal Journey*, the work of Holland's *Cornelia van Oosterzee*, was added to the repertoire of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1897. The Paris Grand Opera mounted a lavish production of French composer Augusta Holme's four-act opera *La Montagne noire* in 1895. The Boston Symphony Orchestra programmed Margaret Lang's *Dramatic Overture* in 1893--the first orchestral performance in the United States of a work composed by an American woman. Later that same year, the Chicago Symphony played Lang's overture *Witchis*. Mrs. H. H. A. Beach's *Mass in E flat* was presented by the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston in 1892. Four years later, her *Gaelic Symphony*--the first symphony known to be composed by an American woman--was performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.
 56. Rupert Hughes, *Contemporary American Composers* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1900), p. 425.
 57. Fanny Morris Smith, "The Record of Woman in Music," *Etude* 19 (September 1901): 317.
 58. Quoted in Louis C. Elson, *The History of American Music* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971; a reprint of the 1925 edition), p. 293.
 59. Ibid.
 60. Camille Saint-Saëns, *Harmonie et mélodie*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1885), p. 228.
 61. Anton Rubinstein, *A Conversation on Music*, trans. Mrs. John P. Morgan (New York: C. F. Tretbar, 1892; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo, 1982), p. 118.
 62. Quoted in Elson, p. 293.
 63. For a sampling of opinions (both pro and con), see the following: Stephen S. Stratton, "Woman in Relation to Musical Art," *Proceedings of the Musical Association* (7 May 1883), pp. 112-46; Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, "Woman in Music," *American Art Journal* 48 (17 October 1891): 1-3; Florence Sutro, "Woman's Work in Music," *Vocalist* 8 (May 1894): 161-65; Henry T. Finck, "Woman's Conquest of Music," *Musician* 7 (May 1902): 186; George Trumbull Ladd, "Why Women Cannot Compose Music," *Yale Review* 6 (July 1917): 789-806.
 64. George P. Upton, *Woman in Music*, 6th ed. (Chicago: McClurg, 1899), pp. 18-23.
 65. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
 66. Ibid., p. 24.
 67. See especially the following: Edwin Gordon, "Intercorrelations among Musical Aptitude Profile and Seashore Measures of Musical Talents Subtests," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, (Fall 1969): 262-71; G. Revesz, *Introduction to the Psychology of Music*, trans. G.I. C. de Courcy (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953), pp. 13-14; Rosamond Shuter-Dyson and Clive Gabriel, *The Psychology of Musical Abilities*, 2nd. ed. (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), pp. 66-91; Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 126-27.
 68. Upton, pp. 26-28.
 69. Ibid. p. 29.
 70. Ibid., p. 31.
 71. Ibid. p. 32.
 72. Edith Brower, "Is the Musical Idea Masculine?," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1894, pp. 332-39. References to specific page numbers appear in parentheses within the text.
 73. Amy Fay, "Women and Music," *Music* 18 (October 1900): 506. The quotation from Ruskin is found in his "Of Queen's Gardens"--an 1865 essay on the complementary natures of the sexes, and the education of women. An abbreviated version is reprinted in Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robert L. Sheets, and William Veeder, "John Ruskin and 'Of Queen's Gardens,'" in their *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837-1883*, Vol. 1: *Defining Voices*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 77-102.
 74. Judith Tick, "Passed Away is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870-1900," in Bowers and Tick, *Women Making Music*, pp. 336-38. See also idem, "Women as Professional Musicians in the United States, 1870-1900," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 9 (1973): 111.
 75. Neuls-Bates, p. 223.
 76. "Quatorzième concert populaire," *Angers Revue* [late February 1889], quoted in Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 186.
 77. "Music and drama: Mme. Chaminade's concert," *New York Evening Post* (26 October 1908), p. 7. Quoted in Citron, p. 187.
 78. For a more in-depth discussion of sexual aesthetics, see Eugene Gates, "Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth," *The Kapralova Society Journal* 4 (Spring 2006): 1-5. For further examples of sexual aesthetics in music criticism, see also Neuls-Bates, pp. 223-27.
 79. See, for example, Eugene Gates, "Women Composers: A Critical Review of the Psychological Literature," *The Kapralova Society Journal* 3 (Fall 2005): 6-11.

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ISSN 1715 4146