

Characteristics of American Women Composers: Implications for Music Education

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"Generations of women have been taught that creativity is rare, nondomestic, and generally a male characteristic," wrote Liz Schwartz in a 1977 article. She went on to point out that women are often considered lacking creativeness in the arts, citing traditional barriers in music and architecture as examples. Schwartz believes, however, that role models, women who are engaged in creative occupations, can stimulate girls and young women to develop their own creativity.

This article offers a brief look at the careers of certain women composers who could serve as role models for girls and women who have an interest in a career in music and demonstrate characteristics of giftedness in the area of composition. I also looked for indications of musical inventiveness in the early lives of these women composers.

Granat (1979) noted that there have been few women composers of significance. She also mentioned the problem of American audiences' preference for music of European composers as compared to those of their own country. In fact, the average American's knowledge of European composers can be expected to exceed his or her knowledge of American composers.

A recent study conducted by Palmquist (1990) bears this out. University students (81 music majors and 215 nonmusic majors) and 215 high school students were asked to list as many composers as they could in an 8-minute period. Two of the categories in which the students were asked to list the composers were male classical composers and female classical composers. The only American male composer named was George Gershwin who was listed 12 times by the high school students and 16 times by the university students. The composers named most frequently by both groups of students in the male classical category were all Europeans: Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart. Under the category of female classical composers, only two high school students listed Clara Schumann, while one student named "Mozart's sister." No other women were listed in the female classical composer category by the high school students. Four university students mentioned Clara Schumann in this category. Five other women were listed, including Beverly Sills, who is not a composer, and Emma Lou Diemer, who is one of the subjects selected for the study described in this article.

Palmquist's findings may reflect a general belief among Americans that European composers are more worthy of serious consideration and study than are

their American counterparts. This attitude seems to date to the German Romantic period of the early 19th century when Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, and Vienna were centers of musical activity. Musicologist H. Wiley Hitchcock (1974) has written that Americans know less about their own music than about that of Western Europe. He also noted, however, that interest in American music has increased in recent years.

Method

For this study, I chose a group of composers who have what might be termed the double disadvantage of being both American and female. The 26 women included in the group have achieved national distinction in some area of serious composition, either art music, music written for educational purposes, or religious music. Some of them have attained international recognition in these areas.

To discover the musical, education, and socioeconomic characteristics of girls who later achieved success as composers, I studied the biographies of all 26 women. Other purposes of the study were to compare the musical, educational, and socioeconomic characteristics of the women born in the 19th century with those of the women born in the 20th century and to find composers who could serve as role models for young women in American schools.

American women composers of art music, music written for educational purposes, or religious music whose biographies were readily available were selected for the study. Details of their early lives as well as their career development and subsequent success were collected from a variety of published sources. For comparison, 13 of the women were born in the 19th century and 13 in the 20th century.

Composers Studied

The women composers born in the 19th century selected for study, listed chronologically by year of birth, are:

Constance Faunt LeRoy Runcie (1836-1911)
Emma R. Steiner (1852-1928)
Mary Salter (1856-1928)
Carrie Jacobs Bond (1862-1946)
Jessie L. Gaynor (1863-1921)
Abbie Gerish Jones (1863-1929)
Eleanor Freer (1864-1942)
Amy Marcy Cheney Beach (1867-1944)

Margaret Lang (1867–1972)
 Mary Carr Moore (1873–1957)
 Mabel Daniels (1879–1971)
 Mary Howe (1882–1964)
 Katherine K. Davis (1892–1980)

Those born in the 20th century are:

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953)
 Radie Britain (b. 1903)
 Louise Talma (b. 1906)
 Ellen Jane Lorenz Porter (b. 1907)
 Jean Elchelberger Ivey (b. 1923)
 Jane Marshall (b. 1924)
 Marga Richter (b. 1926)
 Emma Lou Diemer (b. 1927)
 Natalie Sleeth (b. 1930)
 Nancy Van de Vate (b. 1930)
 Pauline Oliveros (b. 1932)
 Victoria Bond (b. 1939)
 Barbara Ann Kolb (b. 1939)

Constance Faunt LeRoy Runcie was born into a well-to-do family in Indianapolis, Indiana. She studied harp and piano in Germany, where she became interested in composition. She started to compose at the age of 21 (Ammer, 1980). Runcie wrote the words and music for a large number of songs. She composed one opera, *The Prince of Asturias*. All copies of Runcie's music have apparently been lost (Tick, 1983).

Emma R. Steiner composed tunes at age 7, piano duets at age 8, and operas at 11. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, she was a singer and opera conductor. She conducted more than 6,000 performances of at least 50 operas and operettas. She is said to have been the first woman to receive payment for conducting (Slonimsky, 1984). She wrote many songs and ballets and seven operas. Although Steiner never conducted at the Metropolitan Opera nor were any of her works performed there, she was honored with a special program at the Met in 1925 on the 50th anniversary of beginning her career (Ammer, 1980).

Mary Salter began composing after having become the mother of five children. She wrote more than 200 songs and choral works, about half of which were published. Salter was still composing at the age of 80 (Slonimsky, 1984).

Carrie Jacobs Bond is remembered as the composer of the songs "I Love You Truly," and "A Perfect Day," the latter having sold 7 million copies of sheet music and 5 million recordings. She began composing at the age of 32 to support herself and her young son after the death of her husband. A native of Peoria, Illinois, Bond opened her own printing business when publishers rejected her material (Ammer, 1980).

The piano teaching pieces of Jessie L. Smith Gaynor are still in use today. Born in St. Louis, Gaynor was known as a teacher and composer of children's songs, vocal quartets, children's piano pieces, and teaching materials. She was the piano and theory teacher of Katherine K. Davis, another composer included in this study (Ammer, 1980).

Born in Vallejo, California, in 1863, Abbie Gerish Jones had her first composition published when she was 18. A music critic as well as a composer, Jones wrote more than 100 songs, six operas, and several piano and violin pieces (Ammer, 1980).

Eleanor Freer was born in Philadelphia, studied in Germany, and taught singing at the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. She was the composer of nine operas, a song cycle, approximately 150 songs, and a number of piano pieces (Ammer, 1980).

The first American woman composer to hold her own with sophisticated composers of the 19th century, Amy Marcy Cheney Beach, was born in Henniker, New Hampshire and spent most of her early life in Boston. A concert pianist, she composed as Mrs. H. H. A. Beach. Beach wrote both the first symphony and the first mass to be composed by an American woman. She also wrote approximately 200 songs, a number of cantatas, chamber works, a piano concerto, and many other piano works. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this gifted woman's career was that she was entirely self-taught as a composer (Elder, 1976).

Margaret Lang, a Bostonian, wrote her first piece as a 12-year-old. The daughter of musicians, she studied in Europe and wrote the first orchestral work composed by a woman to be performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In addition to this work, *Dramatic Overture*, Lang wrote songs, choral music, and a small number of other orchestra works. Although she lived to be 104, she stopped composing before reaching 50 (Ammer, 1980).

Mary Carr Moore was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1873 but spent most of her life in California. She was the composer of six operas and several stage works. Moore also wrote many choral and instrumental works, including a piano concerto, 2 string quartets, a string trio, 3 piano trios, 67 piano pieces, and 220 songs (Slonimsky, 1984).

Born into a musical family, Mable Daniels of Swampscott, Massachusetts, studied piano at an early age and wrote her first composition at age 10. She was the first woman to have as many as three works performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Daniels was a graduate of Radcliffe College and received honorary degrees from four other schools (Ammer, 1980).

Mary Howe was born in Richmond, Virginia, but spent more of her life in Washington, D.C. The daughter of a prominent international lawyer, she was often a guest at the White House and played the piano at many Washington social events. Howe, a mother of three, studied at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore and wrote many orchestral and chamber works as well as a great deal of choral music. She was instrumental in raising money to start the National Symphony Orchestra, which later performed some of her compositions (Ammer, 1980).

Katherine K. Davis is best known as the composer of "The Little Drummer Boy," which she called "Carol of the Drum." She composed as many as 1,000 separate works, including both words and music. Davis wrote numerous songs for school music textbooks as well as hymns and sacred and secular choral works. Born in St. Joseph, Missouri, she began composing as a child. David graduated from Wellesley College and spent most of her life in New England (Boughton, 1974).

20th-Century Composers

The daughter and granddaughter of Methodist ministers, Ruth Crawford Seeger was born in East Liverpool, Ohio. She was the first American woman

composer to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. She married musicologist Charles Seeger and was known for her research in the field of American folk song. Seeger wrote a relatively small amount of serious concert music in her short lifetime, but it is highly regarded. Her music consists of a string quartet, piano and vocal works, and works for other assorted groups of instruments (LePage, 1980).

Born in Silverton, Texas, Radie Britain studied in America and in Europe. A graduate of the American Conservatory in Chicago, she has written many large orchestral works that have been performed by major symphony orchestras. Several of Britain's compositions reflect themes of the American West and bear titles such as *Canyon*, *Red Clay* and *Paint Horse and Saddle* (LePage, 1980).

Although she was born in Arcachon, France, Louise Talma has spent most of her life as an American. She is considered the dean of American women composers by many. Her mother, a singer, was her first music teacher. Talma studied at Columbia University and at New York University. She was the first woman to have an opera staged at a major European opera house, and the first woman elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (LePage, 1980).

Ellen Jane Lorenz Porter was born into a family that owns a publishing company. She served as editor for the family firm from 1932 to 1968. She is a graduate of Wellesley College and has a doctorate (which she received in 1978 at the age of 71) from Union Graduate School, then in Yellow Springs, Ohio (now known as the Union Institute and located in Cincinnati). The author of numerous books and articles, Porter studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and has written music for voices, organ, and handbells, as well as cantatas and operettas ("Introducing the Research Committee," 1977).

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Jean Eichelberger Ivey was born in Washington, D.C. A church organist by the age of 12, she has been a concert pianist and has taught at several American colleges and universities. Ivey holds a Doctor of Music degree from the University of Toronto. Although best known for her electronic music, she has stated that her preference is to compose for voice (LePage, 1980).

A Texas native, Jane Marshall received her master's degree from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where she later taught. She is a well-known choral conductor and clinician. When she was 3 years old, her parents, both amateur musicians, had to remove her to the back pew of their church because she had the distracting habit of conducting the hymns that were sung during services. Marshall had 100 choral anthems and hymns in print by 1980 (Campbell, 1980).

Marga Richter, who composes for orchestra, chorus, and a wide variety of solo instruments, was born into a musical family in Reedsburg, Wisconsin. She studied piano at age 3 and began composing when she was 12. Richter is a graduate of the Juilliard School of Music in New York.

Emma Lou Diemer was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and began making up piano pieces when she

was seven. She had written several piano concertos by the age of thirteen. She was a Fulbright scholar and received a Ph.D. in composition from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Diemer is an organist and has taught at a number of colleges and universities. She has written a considerable amount of music for choral groups, orchestra, band, organ, and other solo instruments, as well as for chamber groups. She has also composed electronic music (LePage, 1980).

Natalie Sleeth, another graduate of Wellesley College, began to compose again after spending fifteen years as a homemaker and mother of two. Sleeth writes her own texts for her choral pieces. Her music has become immensely popular in American schools and places of worship. In 1978, her "Jazz Gloria" had sold over 280,000 copies and her "Gaudeamus hodie," more than 268,000 copies (Quigley, 1978).

Nancy Van de Vate, who received her doctor of musical arts degree from the Florida State University, was born in New Jersey. She composes in a variety of musical forms and is a leader in organizations for women composers. She lives in Hawaii and has been a professor at colleges throughout the United States. She has also written a number of articles on women in 20th-century musical life (LePage, 1980).

Born in Houston, Texas, Pauline Oliveros devotes much of her composing effort to electronic music and mixed media. She says that as a child she was interested in acoustical phenomena of all kinds and enjoyed listening to the sounds of her grandfather's crystal radio, to telegraph keys, and to a wind-up Victrola. A prolific composer, she is a graduate of San Francisco State College and resides in California (LePage, 1980).

Victoria Bond's mother and all four grandparents were professional musicians. Bond, who was born in Los Angeles, California, began to play the piano as a 3-year-old and was composing song variations when she was in elementary school. A turning point occurred in her life when, as a teenager, she was invited by her music teacher to conduct one of his community orchestras in Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. She was the first woman to be awarded the doctorate of musical arts degree in orchestra conducting at Juilliard, and she has written many compositions in a variety of musical media (LePage, 1980).

Barbara Anne Kolb was born in Hartford, Connecticut, into a family in which the father was a musician. Kolb received her master's degree from the Hartt School of Music of the University of Hartford and was the first American woman to be awarded the Prix de Rome in composition, one of many awards and commissions she has received (LePage, 1980).

Conclusions

The musical characteristics considered by the study were family background (whether the composer was born into a musical family) and efforts in musical composition at age 16 or younger. These variables were considered for the group as a whole without a comparison of differences between the composers born in the 19th century and those born in the 20th century. Of the 26 composers, 11 were born into what might be termed musical families, with one or both parents either engaged in music as a profession or having been

accomplished amateurs. Nine of the composers began composing early—at age 16 or younger (see Table 1). In a similar study done by Isaacs (1979) of the biographies of 57 male composers, “most of the composers were not perceived as genius-level talents while children, or at least most of the history of their early lives failed to so indicate” (Isaacs, 1979, p. 169). The same can be said of the female composers in this study.

TABLE 1
Musical Characteristics of American Women Composers in This Study Born in the 19th and 20th Centuries (N = 26)

Born into a musical family	Not born into a musical family	Started to compose by age 16	Started to compose later than age 16
11	15	9	17

A comparison was made of the education levels attained by the composers born in the 19th century with those born in the 20th century. By examining biographies of the women born in the 19th century, I found that only four had completed a four-year college or conservatory education. The trend for women musicians at that time, however, was toward study with private studio teachers only. Four of the women in this group studied in Europe, reflecting another 19th-century trend for all musicians.

Of the 13 women born in the 20th century, all had received a bachelor's degree with two of the women having earned master's degree and six having completed doctorates. All of these women had additional private study not included in their degree programs (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Comparison of Educational Levels of American Women Composers in This Study

	19th century	20th century
Total	13	13
Four-year degree	4	13
Graduate degree (one or more)	0	8

All 26 women in the group were born into families of middle or upper middle socioeconomic status. Each family was able to provide private music lessons for its daughter while she was young.

I concluded from this study that creative musical ability may not reveal itself before the late teens or early adulthood. It also seems that a bachelor's degree in music is a minimum requirement for women composers working today in the areas of art music, music for educational use, or religious music. Because school systems seldom provide either one-on-one

musical training or classes in theory and composition, students need to enter professional music study at the college level, it would seem that composers generally come from the middle class and above.

An effort needs to be made in American schools to seek out and nurture the creative musical talents of all children, particularly those of the economically disadvantaged. Without early intensive training in music through the school system, children whose families cannot afford private study will, in all certainty, be unable to follow the career that may be indicated by their talents and interests.

Although the women composers selected for this study could provide excellent role models for girls and young women of the middle class, there seem to be no such models in the field of musical composition for girls who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Unless efforts are made to change this pattern, it will doubtless continue into the 21st century.

The work of many women composers has gone unnoticed through the ages. School systems and educators today have an opportunity to help eliminate the inequities of the past. Teaching young people about creative women in the arts will serve to provide role models for young women and to help both sexes to accept the natural talents and abilities unique to each individual.

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