

# Integration or isolation? Considering implications of the designation 'woman composer'

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**Background.** Since the 1980s, a growing number of musicologists have turned to examine the contributions of women composers to musical life. This 'singling out' of women composers has come under fire from some feminists as it is argued that it segregates the woman composer by investigating her music in an isolated context. Charles Rosen, on the other hand, recognizes that women have been 'harshly excluded from history and attempting to bring them uncritically and naively back into it neither does them posthumous justice nor acknowledge the difficult reality of their lives.'<sup>i</sup> Rosen is not suggesting that investigation of women's musical activities is futile, but rather he points to the need for a unique approach to these activities in order to reveal their unique achievements despite the struggles they faced. Marian Wilson Kimber, however, alludes to the problematic nature of research in the area and the risk of creating 'a discourse based on what women might have achieved,'<sup>ii</sup> while the importance of attempting to understand women's achievements in music 'in their own terms' has been highlighted by Marcia Citron.<sup>iii</sup>

**Aims.** This paper aims to probe some of the implications of the category 'woman composer' and interrogate some of the enduring ideologies that have surrounded women and musical composition. Musicological attitudes to current methodological approaches are also explored. The relevance of contemporary theory in regard to female composers in the nineteenth century is called into question: how can I, for example, apply these techniques in my research on the nineteenth-century Lieder-composer, Josephine Lang (1815-1880)?

Nancy Reich states that women musicians are becoming more 'visible',<sup>iv</sup> but the virtual absence of women in the stock anthologies and histories – despite a growing body of primary and secondary literature is something that should concern us. In this paper, I argue that the relative absence of women from music history has been brought about partly by the lack of a serious approach to their music. This paper therefore argues for the necessity of serious critical engagement with women's musical works together with a sociological understanding of the context of these works in order to lend permanence to women's musical traditions.

This paper is an endeavour to address some of the perplexing questions that face us in the realms of gender studies and music with regard to female composers. Does the examination of women's music isolate their music from the mainstream musical tradition for example?<sup>v</sup> Since undertaking a doctoral dissertation on the Lieder-composer Josephine Lang, I found myself constantly questioning my methodology in appraising her music and career. Lang composed numerous engaging settings of poetry by major German poets, yet one feels that a typical appraisal of her songs is not adequate to retell the whole story of her musical achievement. A great deal has been written on the topic of women's music and yet, it is difficult to decide on an approach to her music and career. This paper therefore seeks a viable methodology in appraising women composers of the nineteenth century. By sifting through the growing amount of

literature surrounding women composers, I wish to probe some of the implications and contradictions of the category 'woman composer' and explore the consequences of discussing women composers independently. After contemplating attitudes and recent approaches to scholarship on women composers of the nineteenth century, it is my aim to suggest possible solutions to the problems that confront scholars in the field.

## Implications of the category 'woman composer'

Many modern female composers prefer not to be grouped under the umbrella term 'women composers'. Why – in the twenty-first century – should women be separated from the mainstream musical tradition? Yet in exploring the achievements of a nineteenth-century woman composer, such as Josephine

Lang, one cannot claim that she was on an equal footing with her male contemporaries because of the virtual absence of a proper musical education in her formative years. In the nineteenth century, women composers were forced to cope with limitations placed upon them by society. Professional activities were seen as improper to their sex. Alongside this, there existed the widespread belief that women were not capable of creating art. Indeed, the term 'composer' in the nineteenth century, at least, seems to imply inherently 'male'. Lucy Green asserts that 'music delineates not only a masculine mind but also the notion of a male composer.'<sup>vi</sup> I would agree with this statement in the context of music as it is conventionally received and understood by the popular imagination. The music itself can be perceived as 'masculine' or 'feminine' but there is an underlying assumption that the producer of the music is male.

When we refer specifically then to the sex of the composer we choose to study, are we somehow implicating them? What other meanings might be construed? McClary warns that 'different from' can indeed imply 'inferior to',<sup>vii</sup> suggesting that in identifying the sex of a composer as female, we potentially separate her from mainstream musical experience and this difference will imply that the quality of her work will not equal that of men. It must be remembered, however, that the inherent implications within the term 'woman composer' grew out of the persistent ideology of the designation 'composer' as male. If we attempt to allocate blindly female composers places within a male tradition, there lies the possibility of subjecting their work to criteria that is not compatible with women's experiences. Citron describes a possible consequence of such subjection, 'the new work becomes integrated into the canonic pantheon and as such is discussed in the same terms, according to the same paradigms and categories.'<sup>viii</sup> Therefore, it is not appropriate merely to try to slot women into the existing canon; instead we must try to adjust our own understanding and perception of how that canon is formed. Citron advocates a pluralistic approach to the canon where new members will 'enrich and not replace'<sup>ix</sup> while at the same time testifying that 'pedagogical canonicity can be elastic.'<sup>x</sup>

In challenging the method by which a canon is set up, Citron effectively highlights the need for a 'reconceptualisation' of history in order to challenge the type of dominion of men recognized by John Shepherd.<sup>xi</sup>

Within existing scholarship on women composers, it could, indeed, be claimed that a canon of its own is evolving. Alison Booth suggests the futility of this action by stating, 'if constructing supplementary canons of histories were an effective way to infiltrate dominant canons or histories, we would have long ceased to need such supplements.'<sup>xii</sup> Booth's comments reinforce the reality that there is still a dearth in representation of women in history. Consequently, there remains a deep need to argue for women's inclusion in history, not merely by adding women to the existing canon but by continuing to re-evaluate 'the canon'. Although the idea of the canon has been debunked since the 1970s, the issue of women's visibility in music history has not yet become a moot point: there is, still, the need to draw attention to the scarcity of women in music history.

The investigation of gender studies in music possesses the ability to attract criticism, especially among women composers. Jill Halstead states, 'many of them feel that any special examination of their position – that is, any study which highlights problems affecting women as a group – in some way 'excuses' those who lack sufficient talent and training.'<sup>xiii</sup> One can understand contemporary women composers' position on the matter but indeed for the nineteenth-century composer, an absence or at least deficiency in her musical training was a concrete problem for many women composers. Another possible reason for resistance to the label 'woman composer' is offered by Halstead, who supposes:

'Many people still question the need to single out women composers and musicians for special attention. It is often felt that women have more than sufficient encouragement and opportunity to become professional musicians and that therefore any 'artificial' segregation serves only to reinforce their position outside the mainstream. The belief that any music of quality will sooner or later be recognised as

such, no matter who composed it, is widespread.<sup>xiv</sup>

There is a problem, however, with this belief to which Halstead refers. Due to social and pedagogical limitations on women in the nineteenth century, their music has not made its way through to the public consciousness in the same way that men's music has. It is plausible that paying special attention to women's music might cause such 'segregation' of their music, and yet paradoxically such 'separate' consideration is essential to combat the enduring obstacles that prevent women's music from being heard today. Any possible effect of segregation is therefore valid and worthwhile although, in my opinion, the risk of actually bringing about isolation of women's music from the mainstream is small if scholars resolve to present a true account of women's experiences in music. Citron states that some female composers refuse to accept the term, 'woman composer' since 'any qualifier can imply specialness and therefore lesser competence but many consider it necessary for strategic and psychological reasons at least until 'composer' is gender-blind and works by women receive the same attention as men.<sup>xv</sup> In the past, such composers as Rebecca Clarke published their music under pseudonyms for this very reason. In Clarke's case, the music she published under the pseudonym 'Anthony Trench' received more critical attention even though she had established a solid reputation for herself as a serious musician. Women have, it seems, had to battle with the society's traditional perception of the designation 'composer' as male. Divergence from the norm can foster subconscious negative attitudes towards women's music; therefore we must keep such prejudices in mind when working to bring women's musical achievements to light.

Macarthur identifies an inherent implication in the category 'woman composer': she considers, 'the label 'women's music' is a problematic one, for it immediately conjures up the idea that it exists in a domain separate from men's music. In fact, it could be argued that the category 'women's music' has been brought about by the fact that men's music is simply music; women's music, to follow this

line of thinking, is understood as something else.<sup>xvi</sup>

Yet, her way of thinking need not necessarily be so problematic. The real problems surface when we think of women's music as 'men's music' and when it cannot cope with such a comparison. This is not to say that comparison with men's music is futile, on the contrary, we can learn much about women's music by comparing it with men's music. However, when embarking on such comparative studies, an awareness of the restrictions on women's compositional activities in the nineteenth century must be at the fore of our considerations. The same principle must be held when comparing the works of composers outside the canon with comparative works by canonical composers.

Our understanding of music is continually changing. The reason that women's music tends to be viewed differently, as McClary and Macarthur have suggested, is because of the different relationship it has to art. If we could start thinking about art as gender neutral and the different ways that our activities intersect with that gender-neutral art, perhaps we can begin to increase our understanding of the reality of the situation.<sup>xvii</sup> In claiming this gender-neutrality for music, it becomes less impervious and more conducive to research on women composers.

According to Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, 'gender has been the most important factor in shaping the lives of European women.<sup>xviii</sup> This proves the poignant need for a methodology that deals specifically with women composers. Susanne G. Cusick refers to power that men's music of the past attained by separating itself from the feminine.<sup>xix</sup> Perhaps, by temporarily disentangling women's music from the wider musical tradition, we can, in fact, empower women's music. Bowers and Tick argue in *Women Making Music* that it is not just women who have been neglected in music history but the entire sociology of music.<sup>xx</sup> Such neglect is significant because it not only has consequences for the music of both sexes but it reveals a critical deficiency, namely a failure to appreciate women's role in history. Such deficits point to the foremost argument that has evolved out of the discourse on

women and music: namely that a critical approach to contemporary social and cultural ideologies of the period is essential to deepen our understanding of the role of women and their music in the nineteenth century. The different social positions of women and men in the nineteenth century and the adjacent impact this had on their art must relate to how we treat them in musicology today.

The results of exploring the music of women composers not only augments our knowledge of unknown talent but can have consequences for musicology on the wider stage. The need for a fuller expression of humanity, i.e. one which includes both sexes, has been noted by many critics. Liane Curtis considers, 'As the veil is lifted on women's musical activities, we are gaining a fuller and more accurate picture of the history of music.'<sup>xxxi</sup> In a similar way Citron considers that 'works by women can indeed play an important role. Not only do they introduce new questions for themselves, but they have the very real power of modifying the discourse for the entire canon so that a fuller range of human expression is being represented.'<sup>xxxi</sup> Margaret Mead states that 'when an activity to which each could have contributed is limited to one sex, a rich differentiated quality is lost from the activity itself.'<sup>xxxi</sup> This phrase can indeed be applied to both the art of music and the practice of musicology. In looking at Josephine Lang's Lieder, we learn more about the nineteenth-century German Lied tradition and its position within society.<sup>xxiv</sup>

While taking the contextual background into account, there are, however, several potential pitfalls that one must try and avoid when discussing the work of women composers. There is a danger of creating a dichotomy between the music composed by men and women in the process of examining women's music. Macarthur in fact tries 'to resist the temptation to create a dichotomy.'<sup>xxxv</sup> Indeed, dichotomies by nature possess the tendency to become a 'hierarchy',<sup>xxvi</sup> but in my research on Lang, the term dichotomy is not sufficient to describe my methodology when considering the issue of women and music. Certainly, I want to discuss Lang's music in the context of gender studies but I also see read her music as part of a wider tradition of German song and believe her contribution to

the nineteenth-century Lied to be unique. Rather than dwell on a split between the music of women and men, or consider women's music as the subordinate element of a hierarchical structure it is more fruitful to consider women's and men's music as constantly intersecting with a dominating structure that we could call 'music'. In the case of Josephine Lang, I can examine how she relates to the Lied tradition which incorporates comparison of her Lieder with both her female and male contemporaries.

Wilson Kimber argues that there is a great hazard of creating a discourse based on what women *might* have achieved.<sup>xxvii</sup> This is a valid point which, I believe, poses a very significant question, namely: how does one handle the issue of one's unrealised potential? This is a grey area but, nevertheless, an extremely significant one to scholarship concerned with female musicians of the nineteenth century, since more often than not, these women were denied educational and performance opportunities that were available to men. In the case of Josephine Lang, she showed prodigious talent from an early age (some of her best Lieder originate from her teenage years) but was denied the opportunity to study with Zelter in Berlin, a figure who was central to nineteenth-century music.<sup>xxviii</sup> Who is to say what Lang might have achieved if she had been given this opportunity? When faced with such creative tragedies, scholars must also be particularly careful not to distort the truth and create the story which they want to tell.<sup>xxix</sup> Wilson Kimber addresses many of these crucial issues in her article 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: Rethinking Feminist Biography'<sup>xxx</sup> arguing that in order for 'feminist biography and women's history to have any validity, they must not abandon a historical method that believes in evidence and replace it with fiction.'<sup>xxxi</sup> Firstly Wilson Kimber points out that traditional positivist methodologies are very useful in unearthing the music of women composers but at the same time they are insufficient to tell the whole story of their achievement which leads me to arrive at one of my central arguments: namely the attempt to remain true to women's work must also materialise itself in paying serious attention to their musical works and avoid becoming engrossed in

retelling a version of their lives that ignores the musical material.

### **Women's music – towards a methodology**

In a similar vein in *The Romantic Generation*, Charles Rosen expresses his view that it would be erroneous to attempt to bring women composers 'naively and uncritically into music history without discovering the real tragedy of their lives.'<sup>xxxii</sup> Here, Rosen points to one of the dangers involved in study of women composers, namely that their music should not be mindlessly uncovered without acknowledging the pedagogical limits on women of the nineteenth century. Whitney Chadwick points to the tendency of historians to avoid serious criticism of women's works because of an idealist desire to see the work materialize in the public domain.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In the same vein, McClary observes that 'the problem with much of the work on women's music to date, is its failure to deal critically with actual music.'<sup>xxxiv</sup> Similarly, in a review of *New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, Judy Tsou criticises the volume for a dearth of technical description of these composers' music.<sup>xxxv</sup> All of these opinions endorse one of my central conclusions: If we are to be *serious* about women composers, we must indeed be serious about their music. However admirable the desire to revive women's music and see it revitalised in the current musical climate, the foundation on which this kind of research is built is simply not strong enough to lend permanence to a tradition. Such methodology fails in its efforts to achieve awareness of women's musical works by treating these works as 'special'<sup>xxxvi</sup> and beyond the possibility of serious criticism. In pursuing this path, a certain weakness in women's music is, albeit unintentionally, implied. In Lucy Green's opinion, we must judge the music for if we do not, how are we to learn anything of the musical substance of the work?<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, this said, in any critical appraisal of women's musical works, the scholar must be acutely sensitive to the composer's circumstances. Through a heightening of understanding these circumstances, we can appreciate women's music for no less and no more than what it is. There are important social and cultural factors

that one must take into account when exploring women's music. Marcia Citron, for example, points out that 'women composers might also resist the temptation to be innovative and stand out; patterns of socialisation predicted on community and conformity might guide such a response.'<sup>xxxviii</sup> In the light of such social pressures – not to mention the educational context – it would be duly unfair to criticise women's work for a lack of ingenuity, for example. Josephine Lang's compositions indeed ranged from more sophisticated Lieder to stylistically simple songs and she composed predominantly within the genre of the Lied, for example.

There is an unvoiced fear among some scholars, I suspect, that the music we are exploring may not be of good quality. This has resulted in a fear of discussing women's music critically. However if such discrepancies do occur in the music of nineteenth-century women composers, it only strengthens existing findings in nineteenth-century music pedagogy, namely that having been denied the same opportunities as their male contemporaries, women's music was severely affected. In musicological discourse on women's music, it is absolutely essential to stay faithful to the music and not distort the reality in an attempt to disguise women's music in order to prove its scholarly worth. It is also important that women's music is heard in performance. Since much of women's music was composed for the salon, an awareness of the performance context is required so as not to distort the music or create unrealistic expectations for the audience. In many cases, we must learn to appreciate it for what it is.

In the light of this historical context – how do we examine the music itself? While it is not my main venture to search for a feminine aesthetic in Josephine Lang's Lieder, I can look at deviations from the given aesthetic as an expression of her femininity. Lucy Green points to the need for 'comparative analytical work' on both the music of women and men<sup>xxxix</sup> which can provide further insights into the musical landscape of men's and women's music. Bearing in mind nineteenth century pedagogical limitations, comparison with men's music plays a crucial role in erudition of women's music. It acts as a

useful yardstick to evaluate a composer's musical style, formal and harmonic progressiveness, and use of the piano in the Lied, for example.

Marcia Citron stresses the importance of trying to understand women composers 'in their own terms'.<sup>xli</sup> If we do not attempt to attain this understanding we will, as Rosen argued – ignore the real 'tragedy' of many of their situations. Consequently, I wish to move away from the antiquated practice that Lucy Green describes as talented women becoming acknowledged as 'honorary men'<sup>xlii</sup> and instead recognise women's achievements as important in their own right. That tradition of designating exceptional women as 'honorary men' does nothing to encourage the investigation of women's music. Instead, it pushes the investigation of women's music into a deeper position of isolation.

## Conclusion

Women composers were not permitted to enjoy fully the status of 'professional' composers in the nineteenth century. In a letter to Mendelssohn, Josephine Lang finds it 'amusing' that she has now become a housewife,<sup>xliii</sup> for example, when she obviously felt that her true calling was to be a composer. The reality is that she was indeed a professional composer, who, despite a limited musical education, succeeded in becoming one of the most widely published Lieders composers of the nineteenth century. Consequently, an understanding of the gendered ideologies and the pedagogical limitations placed on women of the nineteenth century is crucial if we are to expand our knowledge of women's musical activities. In striving to combine a serious critical engagement with women's music with an acute appreciation of the social context, our knowledge of musical life in the nineteenth century can be deepened considerably.

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xxix Wilson Kimber (2002) p. 126

xxx Wilson Kimber (2002)

xxxi Wilson Kimber (2002) p.126.

xxxii Rosen (1996) p. xi.

xxxiii Chadwick (2007) p.11.

xxxiv McClary (1999) p. 79.

xxxv Tsou (1996). pp. 423-425.

xxxvi Marcia Citron discusses the prospect treating women's music as 'special'. See Citron (1993) pp.77-78

xxxvii Green (1997) p. 114.

xxxviii Citron (1993) p. 207.

xxxix Green (1997) p. 115.

xl Citron (1993) p. 43.

xli Green (1997) p.144.

xlii Lang to Mendelssohn, 10 June 1844, cited in Krebs & Krebs (2007) p. 127.

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i Rosen, (1996) p. xi.

ii Wilson Kimber (2002) p. 126.

iii Citron (1993) p. 207.

iv Reich, (1993) p. 125.

v Jill Halstead (1997) p. vii.

vi Lucy Green (1997) p. 89.

vii McClary quoted in Macarthur (2002), p. 4.

viii Citron, (1993) p. 222.

ix Citron (1993) p. 197.

x Citron (1993) p. 200.

xi Shepherd (1990) p. 153.

xii Booth (1999) p. 258.

xiii Halstead (1997) p. x.

xiv Halstead (1997) p. vii.

xv Citron (1993) pp.77-78.

xvi Macarthur (2002) p. 2.

xvii I am aware of current musicological writing that argues conversely that music is encoded with gendered meanings but for the purpose of this paper, I wish to refer to music as a gender-neutral entity. For discourse on gendered music, see McClary, S. (1991) *Feminine Endings*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press and Kallberg, J. (1992) 'The Harmony of the Tea Table: Gender and Ideology in the Piano Nocturne,' in *Representations*, no. 39 pp.102-133 and the chapter entitled 'Music as a gendered discourse' in Citron (1993), pp. 120-164.

xviii Anderson & Zinsser, vol. 2 (1990) p. xii.

xix Cusick (2001) p. 473.

xx Bowers & Tick (1986) p. 3.

xxi Curtis (2002) p. 266.

xxii Citron (1993) p. 222.

xxiii Margaret Mead, quoted in Briscoe (1986) p. xi.

xxiv Citron (1983) p.594

xxv Macarthur (2002) p. 3.

xxvi Citron (1993) p. 192.

xxvii Personal Narratives Group (ed.), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 286. quoted in Wilson Kimber (2002) p. 126.

xxviii Byrne Bodley (forthcoming)