

Good afternoon. My name is Keiley Vieau and I am presenting this academic recital on the topic of female composers throughout history. We will discuss seven composers, all who have been underrepresented in the vocal music canon. The title of this thesis is Bridging the Gap. My hope is to showcase music by female composers as well as discuss the societal struggles faced by women in the field of composition.

Historically, women have been discouraged from participating in the arts by societal conventions. This is due largely to gender roles, the patriarchy, and social compliance. Marriage was one of the only economic options for women during pre-colonial times but also perpetuated prescribed gender roles. Society viewed men as the “bread winners” and women as the caretakers. Womens’ attempt to combat this began as early as the 12th century with Hildegard von Bingen. Becoming a nun gave her a venue to compose and showcase her work, but her use of unconventional melodic leaps eventually led to challenges by those who sought to assert their dominance over her creativity. Up to this point, women could compose but wouldn’t be published unless they used a pseudonym or only their initials. This is a form of impression management that continues to be utilized as a way for women to control society’s perception of them and bypass stereotypes.

The first piece you will be hearing is by Barbara Strozzi, a Baroque era composer born in Venice, Italy. The Strozzi estate house the *Accademia degli Unisoni*, or group of like-minded thinkers. It was here that she showcased her compositions for the public, singing and accompanying herself on lute. Unlike many female composers, she had her work published during her lifetime. These works consist of secular arias, madrigals, and cantatas, spanning eight volumes. She died in 1677 and continues to be considered one of the most prolific composers of secular music during Italy’s 17th century.

"Spesso per entro al petto" is characteristic of Strozzi’s style, containing virtuosic lines for the voice and intimate treatment of the text. Strozzi, unlike her fellow female composers, published under her own name. Society considered female composers to have poor morals because they would not confine to societal normalities. Anticipating backlash, she dedicated this piece to royalty, saying “...so that, under an oak of gold it may rest secure against the lightning bolts of slander prepared for it.”

Strozzi

Another avenue women have taken to further their compositional careers has been through forming and maintaining relationships with men in the field. The next two composers both maintained professional and private relationships with a male contemporary.

Romantic era composer, Clara Schumann, was born in Leipzig, Germany. She began studying the piano at a young age with her father, Frederick Wieck. Her future husband, Robert Schumann, also studied piano with her father, which is how they met, much to Frederick’s dismay. After a lengthy legal battle, they were married. Until this point, she had performed her own compositions, but marriage diminished her confidence in her own abilities. She didn’t want to neglect her role as a mother and wife, due to societal expectations, so she composed and performed less. She is quoted saying, “I used to think that I had creative talent, but I have changed my mind; a woman must not desire to compose...no one has been successful, so why should I expect to be?” It wasn’t until Robert’s death in 1856 that she returned to performing frequently. Clara died in 1896, five years after her final public concert. While many of her works

were never published, she contributed to modernizing piano playing technique and edited several works by her husband for publication.

“Ihr Bildnis”(1840) is one of her eighteen published lieder, telling the tragic story of losing a loved one. Schumann experienced loss when her eighth child died during infancy. She emphasizes the last line of text with an unresolved vocal line. The continuous eighth notes in the bass line drive the piece forward, only changing after the vocal line has ended. Her use of unconventional harmonies in the piano is typical of the romantic era, but her chord progressions move melodically, highlighting her skill and understanding of the piano.

Born into a cultured family of musicians, Fanny Mendelssohn grew up with her brother, Felix, in Hamburg, Germany. Both would go on to study music and composition. Fanny excelled at piano playing and would have gone on to do so professionally had it not been for societal limitations. She married a famous painter, Wilhelm Hensel, and took on the role as a wife. She continued to compose during her marriage, writing about 500 pieces including lieder, piano works, chamber music, cantatas, and oratorios. Her death in 1847 is believed to have contributed to her brother’s untimely death six months later.

Her connection to the composition field was her brother, Felix. While it benefited her to have support from two male artists, six of her songs were published under Felix’s name. I find it interesting that a majority of the articles I’ve read about Fanny introduce her by mentioning the skill of her brother, when he would consult her for advice due to her training and virtuosity on the piano.

Her piece, “Frühling,” comes from a text by Joseph von Eichendorff. In his typical poetic style, the text is set around spring time, and discusses the topics of nature and love. This sense of wanderlust and excitement for the prospect of love can be heard in the stepwise sextuplets of the piano accompaniment. Mendelssohn exhibits her understanding of the text by utilizing non-chord tones to accentuate words such as “love” and “miracles” in the second stanza.

Schumann and Mendelssohn

Today, women are still underrepresented in classical curriculum and performance. The justification behind this is that there weren’t women composing during these musical periods, when that isn’t the case. We simply do not see examples of their compositions because they weren’t allowed to be published. Despite the discouragement women have societally faced, many have sought to break these prescribed “rules” to inspire and normalize women in the field of composing. One of the greatest pioneers of this movement was Nadia Boulanger.

Nadia Boulanger was born into a musically successful family in 1887. Her father, Ernest Boulanger, taught voice at the Paris Conservatoire, where she began her studies at the age of ten. One of her most notable teachers was Gabriel Fauré, who taught her composition. She had won every award the Conservatoire had to offer, and even took second place in the Prix de Rome in 1908 with her cantata, *La Sirène*. She set the stage for her younger sister to be the first woman to win the Prix de Rome five years later. After Lili’s untimely death, Nadia halted her composing career and devoted herself to teaching and conducting. She taught composers such as Aaron

Copland and Philip Glass, as well as paved the way for performances of Baroque and Renaissance French music. People found it unorthodox that she never married and instead dedicated her life to composing, teaching, and conducting. Boulanger lived to be 92 and died in her hometown. She lives on in the hearts of several composers as one of the most influential teachers of music for the 20th century.

Age is also viewed differently among genders in the field of composition. In a study of 225 female composers, over half of them reported losing credibility after the age of 30. It is speculated that this is related to the “gender role” woman are expected to serve as mothers and after 30, women’s likelihood of reproduction goes down. Men seem to gain respect as they age, and women’s usefulness does not seem to pass beyond their visible youth. Boulanger, at the age of 52, was the first woman to conduct both the New York and Boston Philharmonic. When asked for her reaction to being the first female to accomplish this feat she responded, "I've been a woman for a little over 50 years and have gotten over my initial astonishment." By minimizing her reaction to a gendered question and speaking about women in the arts in such a normalized way, she acknowledges gender but doesn’t focus on it.

“Cantique” (1909) is set to text by poet Maurice Maeterlinck, discussing love as a pure feeling without sin. The calm nature of the text is furthered by the simplistic and repetitive rhythm in the piano. It only diverts from straight quarter notes when the text reads “Its tears will find me and not go astray.” While the rhythm is straightforward, the harmonies utilize non-chord tones and cluster chords to highlight words such as “stars” and “grace.”

The second piece in this set, “Le Couteau,” is one of the few pieces Boulanger published after the death of her sister. The lyrics liken the feeling of heartbreak to that of a knife being driven into the heart. Her own feelings of despair and hopelessness after losing Lili are believed to be the motivation behind this composition. The unusual harmonies in the piano not only demonstrate her understanding of the instrument, but her progressive attitude toward the use of non-chord tones and unconventional voice leading. The uncertainty of chord resolution highlights the protagonist’s reluctance to let go of their love.

Augusta Holmès is considered a French composer, although her lineage is Irish. She was born in Paris in 1847 and later brought to Versailles to receive a better education. Holmès served as a nurse during the Franco-Prussian War and gained French citizenship shortly after. Her musical studies were furthered in 1875, when she joined César Franck’s group of composition students. These teachings, along with the influence of Wagner, shaped her compositional style. Up until this point, she had written mostly songs, but slowly transitioned to larger works including operas, orchestral, and choral works. One of these works for choir and orchestra was premiered at the Paris Exposition of 1889. She composed and wrote poetry up until the year of her death in 1903.

“À Trianon” (1896) is one of Holmès’ 130 composed songs. She wrote both the music and the text as a parody of 18th century French music. This can be heard in both the vocal and piano lines with grace notes and sixteenth note embellishments. The text most likely refers to the Petit Trianon, a house outside the main building at the Palace of Versailles. Queen Marie Antoinette and her court would come here to play out living the life of a peasant. Holmès’ text builds in anticipation at the third stanza, and the music follows suite by changing to the relative minor. The original key returns for the last stanza as the protagonist encourages Marquise to give in to his love.

Boulanger and Holmes

Liza Lehmann is considered an English composer and vocalist. She grew up living in Germany, Italy, and France with parents who were both artists themselves. Her education began in London where she studied voice with Alberto Randegger and Jenny Lind. After gaining acclaim as a soprano voice, she spent nine years traveling Europe and the United States as a recitalist. Clara Schumann was a large supporter of Lehmann's career. After her marriage to Herbert Bedford, a painter and composer, she moved away from the stage and focused composing. She died of cancer at the age of 56, shortly after finishing her memoirs.

"There are fairies at the bottom of our garden" (1917) is one of Lehmann's most well-known songs. She wrote several for children, some more satiric than stern. This piece is sometimes performed seriously, and other times interpreted as a caricature of childish fantasies. Regardless of portrayal, the text is heightened by the slight melodic variations between each verse.

Amy Beach was born into a wealthy family in 1867. They moved from her hometown of Henniker, New Hampshire to Boston when she was eight years old. By this time, Beach had memorized over forty songs on piano and composed simple hymns and waltzes. Noticing her talent, her mother encouraged her to study piano, but Amy preferred to be self-taught. This allowed her to experiment with classical forms and create her own style. She did receive formal training from Junius W. Hill in counterpoint and harmonies for a year. Until her marriage to Dr. Henry Beach, who discouraged her public performances, she enjoyed a career of traveling, performing, and composing. He supported her interests in music and encouraged personal study of composition to retain her creativity. His death in 1910 led to the continuation of her performance career. World War II forced her to move back to the United States permanently, where she lived out the rest of her life in New York and died of a heart disease in 1944.

"Ah, Love, but a day!" is the second in a set from *3 Browning Songs, Op.44*, set to poetry by Robert Browning. Browning's poetry often contains dark themes and provides social analysis through analogies. The line "Wilt thou change too," takes the changing social climate and compares it to his love. His poetry is often hailed as the beginning of social discourse in Britain and the United States during the 1880s.

Lehmann and Beach

Of the study conducted on female composers, 20% reported concealing their identity, either through initials or through pseudonyms. This management of identity is done to maintain credibility that isn't given when audiences realize the composer is a woman, and to create opportunities that may not be readily available. Nowadays, it is harder to hide one's identity because of the internet and contractual obligations faced by some composers. This dichotomy between wanting to not just be a "token female composer" in a male dominated field, and feel the authenticity in one's work so that is recognized for skill and beauty rather than stereotypes and misconceptions, can lead to isolation. Ultimately, the decision is yours on whether or not you like a piece of music. Music is subjective to the interpreter by nature. It is my hope that this recital brings an awareness to both the issues faced by women in composition and highlights work by female composers throughout history. I ask everyone, musician and non-musician alike, to keep in mind our micro biases that are constructed through societal expectations and view

music with an open mind when listening to and analyzing work by those who are underrepresented. Rather than accept this lack of representation, we must ask ourselves why these social identities are marginalized.