

Composing the Music School: Proposals for a Feminist Composition Curriculum

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Prologue

1. As composers we are allocated a tiny spot in society, with almost zero function.
2. We defend a society that does not defend us.
3. We even take it as a challenge to live in a system hostile to the well-being of its members. If we end up doing well, retroactively we think we deserved it. As for the other composers, who therefore didn't get the job (so few), or the support (tiny), or the opportunities (scarce), we secretly think they didn't try very hard, weren't as exceptionally talented, there was always something about them we had never liked. . .
4. We strain to make it into the few cushy spots of this undesirable system. We spend years pushing upward; we spend our youth pushing upward. What alternative do we have? (We're smart, we're talented, we deserve to get those jobs!) Once in those cushy positions, the system doesn't look so undesirable any more. So that when composers talk about themselves, a business transaction is already taking place.
5. Thus the world of new music mirrors, unfortunately, the society in which it exists. Who composes the composer? Do we composers compose the world of new music composition? Do we compose our function in society?

The Project

The area I wish to explore, which I tentatively call "Composing the Music School: Proposals for a Feminist Composition Curriculum," comprises the articulation of connections between feminist ideas and the teaching of music composition.

The exploration has involved a process, and aims towards a product. The process has been to work with composing women, involving ourselves in discussions of our reactions and critiques of the current music

composition curriculum, and *then* to brainstorm ideas for a not-yet-existent but highly desired curriculum. The aimed-towards-product is to compile a handbook of some sixty to one hundred pages, presenting four or five different proposals for music composition curricula with a feminist orientation.

Background of Project

While the feminist movement has manifested itself in many academic and commercial areas over the past twenty years, it seems that in the area of music composition the influence of the movement has yet to be significantly felt. Women are *not* swelling the ranks of music composition departments; if they've found a voice, then they're not composing with it, but taking it elsewhere.

Research conducted in September 1992 shows that in the Top Ten universities few women are teaching music composition; of applicants to grad school in music composition, only an average of six per cent are women (and of these, half are from countries other than the US). A comparison between these figures in 1992 and of figures twenty years ago demonstrates little change in the "scene" concerning women (and racial minorities) in the composition departments of American universities.

The emphatic thud of these data—plus the experience of having lived it, being for three years one of two persons to use the women's bathroom on the composition floor of the University of Illinois—makes a curious person, curiouiser: why do music departments not attract young women to study composition? Why does music composition itself (and of the "art music" kind) not attract women, or at least repel them so strongly that women angrily decide to be composers, willy nilly? Are women seeking training in composition (in counterpoint, orchestration, voice-leading, instrumentation, et cetera) in other places—and if so, where?

A friend has proposed that women have long had the experience of seeing themselves as coordinators, moderators, arrangers—in short, of seeing themselves as "interior designers" in a system constructed by men, who (to carry the metaphor through) have acted as the designers and builders. Perhaps that's why there are so few women composers: we're happy to be arranging things in the living room, coordinating the blue of the carpet with the green of the curtains.

In response to the data's emphatic thud (and with the interior-designer metaphor making a terrible, non-composed tune in my head) I decided it's not sufficient to galvanize women to compose music pieces only. In addition, women must turn architect and educator and start composing the music *school*, themselves. The project "Composing the Music School: Proposals for a Feminist Composition Curriculum" takes women's criticisms and reactions to their educational experiences as a point of departure. In this project, the emphasis has been to go from criticism of the existent society into learning to articulate statements for a desired and different society. How do we move from our complaints about the present society's notions of how it wants to educate its composers, into making the premises, assertions, blueprints, and poetry of a desired society's way of educating its composers? The handbooklet hopes to trace the results of this query.

Methodology of Project

In the last three years, the project has gone as follows: eleven composing women in the Champaign-Urbana area were interviewed (also, some women who, in the process of being university-trained in composition, dropped out of this training). The women responded with their reflections on the overlapping and divided areas of being simultaneously a composer, a student in a musical institution, and a woman. Transcripts of interviews were made available to all participants.

At meetings held in spring and summer of 1992–93, the composing women discussed their reactions to each other's experiences. In the summer of 1993 smaller groups met to draw out of the reactions to the existent music curriculum, those ideas for a not-yet existent curriculum that would address our needs and desires. Other composing women joined the project at this stage, participating in discussions, analysis, and brainstorming. Tapes and lengthy notes on these discussions were made.

The next stage (not yet accomplished) is to create proposals for a feminist composition curriculum that would be gathered together in a handbooklet. We imagine that one proposal will be written in conventional academic format, while the others will use writing formats of a more playful kind: a dialogue, an opera-like libretto, a short play, a story told from many points of view.

Current Results

So far, out of these discussions have emerged criteria, notions, and sketches—some held in common by us all, some the burning emphasis of one participant. They can be briefly described:

We composing women desire a curriculum that would incorporate the following subjects as part of the education of young people in music composition:

1. Interrogating imagery

Images of the role and function of composer and composition in society have been inherited from the nineteenth century, commercialized for the advantage of the few in the twentieth century, and passed on as natural and unchangeable to students of music composition in current years. Projects and courses are needed that would critique this imagery (with its ideological baggage of the composer as lone individualist struggling competitively) and stimulate discussion of other images that composers could invent, and then turn to, for ways of functioning desirably in society.

2. Investigating Language

One of the main mechanisms for producing and reproducing images and behavior is language—the language we speak, and that speaks us. In a field that—o absurdity!—prides itself on its verbal inarticulateness (again and again we're told that the composer is a person who expresses himself in music, not in language) the language used by composers is an inherited one—inherited from mass media, from the entertainment industry, from institutional reclaimings of past artistic inputs. We wish all courses in composition to be linguistically self-referential: at all moments the language used in the course be critiqued for assumptions and paradigms.

3. Creating community and service

Missing in the vocabulary of music composition departments are two words we find necessary to our happy and persistent survival as composing women: the words are “community” and “service.” We wish to function in our society, to be needed by it, and to need it. At present, the experimental music we write is maligned, allegedly in the name of our society, as being elitist or academic; our existence as composers is permitted (not supported or celebrated) and permitted only if we function within a small, circumscribed area. We insist that composers be taught skills in how to create a community and context in which what we do be seen as an offer, and in which the pleasure is not what we are “getting out of it,” but in what we are putting into it.

4. Designing imaginary, and real, spaces

The physical setting of the music composition department and the behavioral ramifications of those settings, needs to be addressed. Spaces (room shapes and sizes, concert hall designs, chair placements, availability of refreshments, distance from the community, from the home) and the behaviors they implicitly encourage, are socially, politically, artistically not neutral.

5. Seeing the composer as the Fool—and not the King or Queen—in the court

The permission for the composer to make spectacular mistakes, take unforgivable risks, plan and execute irritating tomfooleries—in short, to function as beloved fool or imp—has slowly been removed by society. The composer can no longer think of herself as explorer, adventurer, as something slightly dirty and irrelevant, greeted with both a grin and a sigh; rather, she is forced to account for herself along the lines of the expert, the knowing one, not the unknowing one. And she must be serious, because mass media has made the face of new music a serious one, so as to save the laughing, pleasurable face of Puck for popular culture. We wish to reclaim the Fool, and the reputation of the Fool, for ourselves. Wanting to contribute to society what hasn't been there yet—will the attitude of the serious expert really enable us to do so?

(The composing women involved in this project so far are: In-sook Choi, Bethany Cooper, Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner, Lucinda Lawrence, Jennifer Masada, Susan Parenti, Patricia Repar, Carla Scaletti, Sarah Wiseman, Sallie Wormer, Roseanne Yampolschi).

Theoretical Ramifications

What does it mean: “to act with a feminist orientation”? Marianne Brün once drew a distinction between “women’s lib” and “feminism” which we, in our discussions, have found useful:

“Women’s lib” starts with the observation that women have a lower place than men in our current society, and proceeds with the action of raising the position of women in this society;

“Feminism” also starts with the observation that women have a lower place than men in our current society, and proceeds by condemning this society for its “higher” and “lower” places, and attempts to instigate activities, language, and imagery that would lead us to create desirable social structures.

Practical Spin-Off:

When we composing women are asked, “Well, beyond making us aware of past women composers, and supportive of present-day women composers, what difference would feminists make to the field of new music composition?”—at that moment, none of us wants to be speechless. And indeed, in the past, many of us have found ourselves sputtering, filled with a spirit of rebellion that unfortunately got watered down by a language of mere complaint.

With the production of this handbooklet of proposals connecting feminism and the teaching of music composition, we imagine the situation could go differently. We imagine an atmosphere of audacity: the moment when we can take out of our purses (out of our knapsacks, our briefcases, our kitchen drawers, out of the pockets of our tuxedos) the handbooklet of proposals generated by our discussions, slap it on the table in front of our interlocutor, and answer, loudly, “Here, read this—this will give you an idea of what we want!”

We imagine the handbooklet to be a stimulant of discussions for other composing women, and, indeed, for all people interested in composing the function of the composer in relation to the society they see, and to the society they wish to see. We dream of five years hence, when friends come prepared to parties with handbooklets of their own tucked under their arms, eager to discuss with us their proposals, their audacious ideas and constructions.