

I Believe...
Women Composers Have A Lot to Offer
By Rhett DeVelay
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I believe...most people have never heard of the following women: Bertha Jakobs, Marie de France, Li Qingzhao, Cecile Chaminade, Isabella Leonarda, or Florence Price. Yet, those women and thousands more are that seemingly most rare of birds: Women Composers. The Encyclopedia of Women Composers lists 6,196 women dating from the 9th to the 21st Century. Who knew? I certainly didn't and I'm a composer (but then again who's ever heard of me, either?)

In researching this article online I was astounded at the number of websites when I entered WOMEN COMPOSERS into the search engine. Hundreds of sites popped up with more information than I could possibly use but it was also heartening that women are being recognized for their unique contribution to writing music. In this day and age with wonderful songwriters such as Peggy Lee, Carole King, Carly Simon, Alanis Morissette, Alicia Keyes, and Norah Jones, we tend to forget that, only recently, have women been encouraged by the male dominated classical and film music establishments to try and stand on Mt. Olympus with their male counterparts.

Being a huge classical music and movie fan I've admired the music film work of David Raksin (*Laura*), Bernard Hermann (*Psycho*), Jerry Goldsmith (*Lion in Winter*), Elmer Bernstein (*The Magnificent Seven*), John Barry (*Dances with Wolves*), Danny Elfman (*Batman*), Howard Shore (*Lord of the Rings Trilogy*), and Rachel Portman. Who?

Rachel Portman first came to my attention in the 1993 film *Benny and Joon* with her lovely, lilting, quixotic score to the charming and tender film. From then on I kept an ear open for her scores and was never disappointed. She has such a distinct style that I could always spot her work which always supported and heightened any film she wrote for. She and John Barry are two of my all time favorites.

Little by little, women composers are getting heard through the movies notably Lisa Gerard (*Whale Rider*) and Shirley Walker (*Turbulence*). I even found information on a sole woman who, in 1949, wrote the film score to the Marx Brothers film, *Love Happy*: Her name was Ann Ronell.

Especially in classical music, there are very few relatively well-known women and if their names are recognized it was only because of other talents or they were the sisters of famous composers: Clara Wieck Schumann was a very famous pianist in her day, she was the wife of Robert Schumann (she championed his compositions in her concerts), and she composed. Fanny Mendelssohn was the sister of Felix Mendelssohn and a composer. Maria Anna Mozart was the sister of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and a composer. But, they were overshadowed by the genius, and apparently the testosterone, of their famous husband or brothers. However, classical recording companies are finally rediscovering the works of these and other worthy women and classical music stations are playing them. I have a terrific CD of piano works by the French composer Cécile Chaminade and it's as wonderful as anything written by Schubert or Schumann.

An even more rare species is the black, woman, classical composer. Florence Price (née Smith) was the first recorded black woman to write symphonies. Born in Little Rock AR in 1887, she was taught the piano by her mother and, while still in high school, had her first compositions published. Over the years she was taken seriously and won the Wanamaker Prize in composition in 1932 and her Symphony in E Minor was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Frederick Stock, at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. She was the first black woman to have a work performed by such a prestigious orchestra. If you want to experience some of Price's

piano works you can find them on a 1993 CD on the Cambria label performed by the great pianist, Althea Waites.

In 1990, I took an extension course at UCLA in orchestration. The class had twelve students of which seven were women. There were three women whose works were terrific (I admit I didn't care for the others), but of the five men in the class I only liked the compositions of one of them (besides my own, of course). So the ratio was about the same. Thus, it stands to reason the ratio would be the same in the professional musical world, yet women are woefully under represented.

Part of the pleasure of writing this column is the hope of sharing information that would not normally be available. I encourage those of you who are adventurous to check out the online CD venues or go to your local CD store and, other than pop, buy a classical CD by women composers: They have a lot to say that's beautiful and worth hearing.

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