

# Why No Great Women Composers?

CARL E. SEASHORE

HOW MANY NAMES of women composers have appeared on programs of great and lasting music? Their absence is conspicuous. David Ewen in his recent volume *Twentieth Century Composers*, presents biographies of seventeen of the world's outstanding composers of the present century, and among these there is not one woman. Claire Reis, in the 1932 edition of *Composers in America* sketches the lives of 200 composers who have written "in the larger form" and of these only 5.5 per cent are women. The same author gives a supplementary list of 274 composers, presumably of the second order; of these, 11 per cent are women.

Many explanations of this disparity have been offered and urged vigorously. There is no single or simple explanation that holds universally; history, science, sociology, anthropology and the arts are involved. The problem is, however, fundamentally a psychological one and calls for analysis. As a psychologist I cannot offer a full or authoritative explanation, but let me list without elaboration some of the issues involved, proceeding by a process of elimination.

*Native Talent.* Great composers must be born with musical talent. Nature is prolific in this respect, but individuals, society, art and environment are wasteful with such resources. It is only rarely that such seed which nature has implanted comes to full fruition in creative music. Indeed such fruition is especially rare among women. But from every line of evidence now available it appears that boys and girls inherit musical talent in approximately the same degree, of the same kind, and equally diversified. Therefore, we cannot attribute the sex difference to differences in the inheritance of musical talent.

*Intelligence.* Of all musical pursuits, composition demands the highest order of intelligence,—both native capacity and cultivated power. This intelligence is fundamentally of the same order as scientific, philosophical or aesthetic intelligence in general, but its content is dominantly musical. Given artistic talent and a musical constitution, a good general intelligence may become a great musical intelligence. Girls tend to average better than boys in public school subjects. While inheritance may be developed in diversified types, present evidence indicates that boys and girls are approximately equal in this endowment. Therefore, the explanation cannot lie in the lack of native resources for musical intelligence.

*Musical Temperament.* Great composers are born with certain mental and nervous, often psychotic and neurotic dispositions, which, when cultivated, take on marked forms of artistic license, sometimes beneficent, sometimes noxious. To favor creative work, the composer must cultivate the beneficent aspect of temperament. But it is now generally recognized that artistic temperaments—the musical in particular—are inherited

approximately in the same way and to the same extent by boys and girls. Girls have this trait in a high degree. Women, therefore, cannot find an alibi in the supposed lack of this endowment.

*Creative Imagination.* Composition is an act of invention or creative imagination on a large scale and in diverse forms. It is admitted that women have rich and free imagination, but it is said to be of a less sustained order, while men's achievement in creative work is often attributed to favored native capacity for creative power. For this there is no clear support in genetics. The difference is probably due to environmental influences and should not be attributed to heredity.

*Musical Precocity.* The great composers have, as a rule, been precocious, often musical prodigies. Countless potential musical prodigies have been born, probably boys and girls in equal number, but only the "ships that come in" count for much in history and tradition. Since the great musicians are as a rule men, memories and records of their childhood tend to live. The girl prodigies are forgotten.

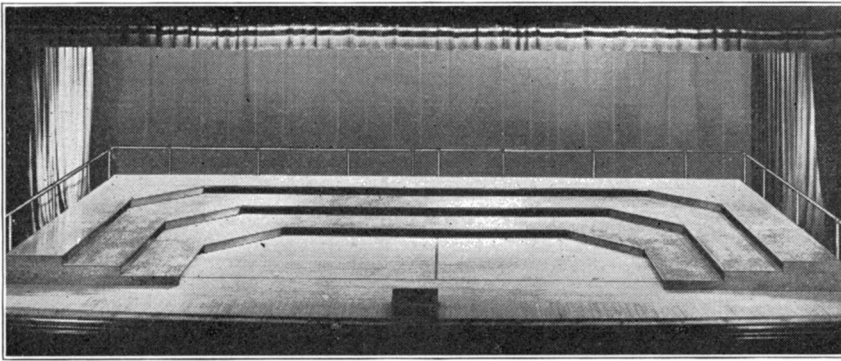
*Education.* Composition in the larger forms demands a high and intensive order of education. But most of the great composers have been self-educated, often, especially at the higher levels, in the face of most adverse circumstances. The power of genius for outstanding achievement cannot be taught. Teachers of great composers take but little credit for their prodigies. Throughout modern history music has been considered a feminine accomplishment. Many more girls than boys study music. As compared with the useful arts, the fine arts have for the most part been a realm open to women. Musical environment, criticism and admirers are among the most formative musical influences. These have been equally available for women and for men. Musical education at the higher levels is intensive—a natural solution of problems as they arise.

*Late Emancipation of Women.* It is often said that until recently women have not had a chance; they have not been free; modern women will come to the front in this field. Yet, in the Victorian period and later, women were the influential patronesses and promoters of music. They were in search of genius wherever it could be found. The salon was open to men and women on equal terms. The cropping out of genius is above social considerations. Will the emancipated woman who smokes, dons mannish attire and manners, takes marital obligations lightly, is athletic and competes freely with men in business, politics and professions, pave the way for great composers?

*Marriage.* In the graduate school I have observed that when a woman of marked achievement and fine personality is invested with the doctor's hood, there is a young man around the corner: we hear the wedding march, love's goal is reached, and the promising Ph. D. settles down and gets fat. We find no fault with that; but to the theory of the career-minded woman, it is often a

EDITORIAL NOTE: This is the twenty-fifth instalment in the series of articles and reports by Dr. Seashore dealing with various phases of the psychology of music.

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## Women Composers

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tragedy. Yet it need not be. It offers no true alibi. The bearing of one or more children should add to the normal development, and marriage under favorable circumstances occasionally brings to the wife more freedom for self-expression in achievement than the husband—the breadwinner—enjoys. A woman skilled in music is, as a rule, especially admired and sought in marriage; and marriage, as a career in itself, then invites music as an avocation and not as a fierce, all-demanding, time-consuming goal of composition. Seldom is either the husband or the woman willing to pay that price. Married women may not have produced great compositions, but they have produced their composers.

*Endurance.* The achievements of great geniuses came from work, work, work, according to Wizard Edison. It often involves excessive, even pathological strain. When we speak of the male as the stronger sex, we usually refer to muscular strength. The passionate intellectual and emotional drain and suffering through which the great composer arrives, is of a different order. Women can bear, suffer and sacrifice in such respects fully as much as men.

Summing up the above observations, we may say that the real explanation for the absence of women from the higher fields of achievement in creative music does not lie in any form of limitation by heredity, nor does it lie to any great extent in present limitations of opportunity, environment or woman's peculiar obligations. Woman is born with many distinctive feminine traits, but it is doubtful if we shall find any of these of critical significance in the present issue. Environmental factors of all sorts often determine types of development and achievement, but each of these may be laid to some other and more fundamental cause.

*Woman's fundamental urge is to be beautiful, loved and adored as a person; man's urge is to provide and achieve in a career.* There are exceptions; but, from these two axioms arise the countless forms of differential selection in the choice and pursuit of a goal for life. Education, environment, motivation, obligations, and utilization of resources, often regarded as determinants in themselves, are but incidental modes for the outcropping of these two distinctive male and female urges. They make the eternal feminine and the persistent masculine type. It is the goal that accounts for the difference. Man and woman both have their choice and both can take pride in their achievements.